

*The Wiltshire Farm Institute remembered -
the first female students, 1952-3*

In 1952-3 the recently formed Wiltshire Farm Institute, at Lackham, had female students studying for the first time. Details of Lackham at the time are rare but one of the members of that initial group has shed light on the period in correspondence with the current embodiment of the Institute, the Lackham campus of Wiltshire College.

Now in her eighties Rosemary Vellender, who was Rosemary Thomas when she was at Lackham, contacted the author ¹ to tell him of her time there. Her letters are quoted, with her permission, in this paper.

The "five girls - the first to be admitted - were Wendy Woods, Shirley Spreadbury, Jill (or Gill) Jonas, Iris Pontin ² and myself Rosemary Thomas"³ Enclosed with Rosemary's second letter ⁴ were several fascinating photographs, one of which, a group photograph taken just outside the House on the Top Terrace, shows all of "the girls" together - they can be seen "in the middle row and are, left to right, Wendy Woods, Iris Pontin, Gill Jonas, Rosemary Thomas and Shirley Spreadbury"⁵.



Fig 1 Students and Staff 1953

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² Letter 5 suggested that she was "Joan Pontin"; the name used in the newspaper cutting (Fig 4) suggests this was actually the case and so is used hereafter.

³ Letter 1 dated 19 Jan 2016

⁴ Letter 2 dated 15 February 2016

⁵ There is a copy of this photograph in the collection of "Year Photographs" in the Wiltshire Archives (hereafter WA) at the Wiltshire & Swindon History Centre, Cocklebury Road Chippenham, WA F8/760/19/1BW, in the smaller of the two envelopes

Rosemary was able to name some of those shown in the photograph:



Fig 2a

A number of those named signed the back of Rosemary's photograph



Fig 2b
Signatures on the back of the photograph

All of the female students were from Wiltshire, with the exception of Gill Jones who was also the only female student who didn't live in College. Rosemary recalled that "she had lodgings with an elderly 'hunting', horsey lady in Lacock" ¹⁶

"One or two of the older (probably ex forces) students were only known as Mr - & I never did know their first name."⁷ "Most of the students in 1952 were teenagers- they had to have one year's practical experience. There were approx. 6 older men - one or two ex-Army"⁸ and these older men, "years older than us", kept themselves to themselves and did not mix with the younger ones. The girls were always called "Miss" by the Staff and one or two of the students. Of the staff Mr Watkinson was the Vice Principal, JO Thomas (not related to Rosemary) was the Principal. Mr Maddox taught Sheep and Rosemary recalled that the flock were Cluns. "Miss Shabriole taught the girls Poultry" and she may be the lady third from the right in the front row.

Rosemary also remembered that "Mr Bell and a lady 2nd in command - quite young - taught Horticulture I remember there were a few glasshouses in the large walled garden"⁹ so

⁶ Letter 3, dated 14 April 2016

⁷ Letter 2

⁸ Letter 1

⁹ Letter 2

Horticulture was part of Lackham from very early on. There were indeed some, very large, glasshouses in the Walled Garden at the time.



Fig 3 Photograph taken from the top of the water tower looking north west ¹⁰ towards Lackham House

*"The lecture room was beyond the main house. Also the machinery Lecture room & a small collection of old farm implements"*¹¹

Rosemary and Joan Ponting appeared in the *Wiltshire Gazette* in January 1953 ¹² when they were pictured being shown a chicken by the Poultry lecturer Miss LF Chaborel

¹⁰ WA F8/760/19 The photographs contained in the earliest album date from 1945 to 1952. This photograph is on p12, number 57 and is undated but probably 1949, Available online at http://www.lackham.co.uk/history/Lackham_Photos.ppsx, slides 27-28

¹¹ Letter 2

¹² *The Wiltshire Gazette*, Thursday January 29, 1953 no 8053 Chippenham, Calne and Corsham edition p7 "The Farm School's Place in Wiltshire - Lackham House is "Good Investment" for every Farmer" in WA F8/760/18 Lackham Photograph album, p45



Fig 4 From *Wiltshire Gazette* article

In this article the non-academic lives of the students were discussed:

"A description of Lackham would not be complete without mention of the social life of the students. Great importance is placed upon teaching the students how to use their spare time profitably, not necessarily in the sense of worldly goods but by the encouragement of responsibility, thought and action calculated to make them worthy citizens of this country

Christianity is not forgotten. The school is undenominational and every opportunity is given for students to attend their sectarian Church on Sunday morning. On Sunday evenings a friendly school service is held in the Common Room under the direction of either the Vicar of Lacock or a Non Conformist Minister. Every Thursday there is either a talk by an expert speaker or a session of the Discussion Club. On Saturdays there is usually a dance around the nucleus of the girl students and the female members of the staff. Squash is played quite a lot and every facility given to students to follow their own bent and feel at home during their leisure hours.

This is Lackham. Not a place for the wealthy to idle away a year between school and work but an intensely practical Institution where those who will benefit from it, and can afford the time, may attend. If their parents have not the means then County Council help can be obtained. It is a very great pity that more interest is not taken in Lackham by the County. The school is created principally to enable our farmer's sons and daughters to tie up modern science and practices with their own ideas and knowledge. A year at Lackham is a good investment for any farmer "

Once or twice a term "nursing students who lived almost opposite the main entrance from the road, were brought in when there was a dance - held in the large dining room. We were given ballroom dancing lessons by Mr Skinner - whos nickname was 'bunny' " ¹³

Rosemary said that " The girls area for sleeping was a small part of the house (from the drive, looking at the front of the house - on the left - upstairs)"

One activity the newspaper report did not mention was that "Once a week the girl students went on a small "mini-bus" to Trowbridge County Council Offices to do Rural Domestic Economy - all sorts of cooking & preserving, cutting up half a pig carcus & salting it etc I cannot remember who taught us"

Rosemary recalled that during her time at Lackham the "Farmers Weekly" did an article on the College but this has not been located so far.

She also described the farm -

The dairy and farm yard was down a drive a few hundred yards from the house, There was a large herd of British Friesans (small compared to the large herds of today)¹⁴

In one photograph two of the female students, Wendy Woods and Shirley Spreadbury are seen sitting on the balustrading running down the steps between the Top and Lower terraces at the east end of the house



Fig 5 Wendy Woods and Shirley Spreadbury in the Terrace Gardens at Lackham

¹³ Letter 3. This was Notton House - once in the ownership of Lackham and sold by Edward Montagu to John Awdry in 1766. The history of Notton House as a Nursing College remains unclear.

¹⁴ Letter 1

Towards the end of the academic year, in June 1953, the students at Lackham took part in the Chippenham Carnival to celebrate the Coronation of Elizabeth II ¹⁵. They appeared under the heading "Ancient and Modern". Rosemary very kindly supplied three photographs of the student's contribution "I rode my own horse "Sailor" and John Brinkworth rode his "Lady" - dressed as a woman riding side saddle".



Fig 6 "Left on horseback John Brinkworth Right (horseback) Rosemary Thomas Girl on left Wendy Woods" (Text: Rosemary Thomas)

Another, (Fig 7, below), is inscribed on the back, in Rosemary's handwriting:
"Chippenham Carnival June 1953 2nd Prize

"Ancient and Modern"

We had ancient 1900 tractor and new Ford Major, 1922 motor bike & modern one, Penny Farthing & racing bike, Lady riding side saddle & a modern one"

¹⁵ 2 June 1953



Fig. 7 Rosemary Thomas and John Brinkworth on "Sailor" and "Lady"

The 1900 tractor is shown in the final photograph of this event



Fig 8 "Ancient" tractor

This is the Overtime tractor ¹⁶ seen in a 1949 photograph in the Lackham Photograph Album ¹⁷.

In a photograph (not included here) in another album ¹⁸ the same machine is seen side on in the Stable Yard at Lackham, next to what is now the Estates Carpentry Workshop. In the background the stables show in their unconverted condition. The information slip for this photograph says " *Overtime Tractor imported from America during World War I, 1916. Two cylinders moving horizontally and petrol driven
Three million acres of old pasture were ploughed up with the help of tractors*"



Fig 9 Overtime Tractor

The Wiltshire Times reported the Coronation Carnival week

"Vast crowds see two processions"

¹⁶ Desmond Keenan "Post-Famine Ireland: Social Structure - Ireland as it really was" [Bloomington, XLibris, 2006], 139 "The twenty-four-horsepower American Overtime tractor was advertised: the new motor tractor is light and versatile and can be used in quite small fields and for driving threshers, corncrushers, chaffcutters, pulpers etc; it does the work of six horses (pulper for pulping roots, fruit etc). it had two cylinders of robust construction, with a speed fixed at 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ miles per hour, and would run on petroleum or paraffin. As these farm machines were belt driven a small wheel, corresponding to the flywheel on a steam locomotive, was attached to the engine"

¹⁷ WA F8/760/19 The photographs contained in the earliest album date from 1945 to 1952. This photograph is on p16, number 63 and is dated July 1949, Available online at http://www.lackham.co.uk/history/Lackham_Photos.pptx, slides 35-36

¹⁸ WA F8/760/18, p7

Carnival week at Chippenham

"Fine weather has favoured Chippenham Coronation Carnival Week which started on Saturday. Vast crowds watched the children's fancy dress parade and the main carnival procession on the first day, since when there has been a continuous round of entertainment.....

That the main Carnival procession was over an hour late mattered but little for both in size and in quality it beat all records. Over 40 lorries, four bands and many pedestrian entries took part, and the crowds lining the streets were larger than ever before"¹⁹

But the Farm Institute only featured in the reports on the prize winners:

"The non-advertising tableau class for the Community Centre Cup produced some of the best entries. First was the Chippenham School of Dancing's representation of "Peace" with Helen Woodward, Sandra Hooker, Rosalie Hart, Susan Wicks and Anne Hooker. Lackham Students did well with an "Old and New" theme".

and

"Tableau for Young Farmers' Clubs and Wiltshire Association of Dairy Students : 1 Chippenham YFC (The Archers) 2 Lackham School of Agriculture Students (the £2000 students) "

A film of the procession ²⁰ has two brief views ²¹ of some of the Lackham "float" but nothing of the horses unfortunately.

At the end of the academic year there was "a prize giving Ceremony " and Rosemary was "thrilled to be awarded the Dairy Prize" which was one of the major awards of the year, open to all students and surely well deserved.

A year later there was one of the regular re-unions at the College and Rosemary "was the only one of the 5 [girls] to attend". She can be seen in the front row with some of the men from her year behind her and JO Thomas, with his ubiquitous pipe, third from the right

¹⁹ The Wiltshire Gazette Thursday June 11 1953 no. 8072 p5 Chippenham, Calne and Corsham edition

²⁰ At <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W8BIEQd0lWI>

²¹ From 4.29-4.31 and 6.06-6.10



Fig. 10 Lackham Old Students Reunion 1954

Thanks to Rosemary we have a clearer view of the very start of mixed gender agricultural education at Lackham, a better understanding of how the Farm Institute operated and how it was seen by its *raison d'être*, then as now, the students.

I would like to express my very sincere thanks to Rosemary for her kindness in writing to me, answering my questions and so willingly providing her recollections and the photographs. Our correspondence, and the photographs, have been deposited in the Wiltshire Archives at the Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre, Chippenham [WA reference 4355/62].

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