

Letters from Clarence Bicknell to Ellen Willmott between 1902 and 1916 – Boccanegra gardens

Susie Bicknell, December 2016

Carolyn Hanbury (who lives at the top of the Hanbury Gardens at la Mortola near Ventimiglia) and Ursula Salghetti Drioli Piacenza (whose Boccanegra house and gardens are in Ventimiglia, nearby) informed Susie and Marcus Bicknell about a collection of letters from Clarence Bicknell to Ellen Willmott who created the Boccanegra gardens. The letters are found in the archive of Berkeley Castle near Stroud in Gloucestershire (www.berkeley-castle.com). The castle dates from 1153 and the formal garden features on a map of 1543. The Castle terraces were planted by Lady Georgina Fitzhardinge in the 1880s, followed in the early C20 by Major Robert Berkeley, who also developed the plant collections at Spetchley (Worcestershire). His aunt was Ellen Willmott of Warley Place (Essex, qv) (d 1934), one of the most famous gardeners of her time, while among visitors to Berkeley were Gertrude Jekyll (d 1932) and Vita Sackville-West (d 1962). Ellen Willmott is not known to have done any work at Berkeley Castle gardens but the archive there contains about 20 letters from Clarence Bicknell. On 30 November 2016, Susie Bicknell travelled to Berkeley Castle and, thanks to the archivist David Smith and his colleague Karen Davidson, was able to examine the letters and photograph all of them. Here is Susie's assessment of the letters.

By the time this correspondence starts, Ellen Willmott (1858-1934) (*photo, right*) was already a celebrity in the world of horticulture. She was the fourth generation of a family who were “amateur gardeners of distinction”. Her parents owned Warley Place (*photo, below right*) in Essex which had 33 acres (130,000 m²) of grounds. For her 21st birthday in 1879, Ellen was given permission by her father to build a rock Alpine Garden; it was one of the first in this country to be built on a grand scale. The great Swiss Alpine specialist, Henri Correvon gave her garden high praise in his 1895 book “*Les Plantes Alpines et de Rocailles*”.

Ellen became a member of the Royal Horticultural Society in 1894, and only three years later received the RHS Victoria Medal of Honour inaugurated that year to celebrate the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee Year. She, along with Gertrude Jekyll, were the only two women of 60 recipients to get the award. She was also elected to the coveted RHS Narcissus Committee, and over the years won numerous RHS Orders of Merit, and also gold medals particularly for her various groups of rare daffodils. In 1904, she had the honour of being one of the very first women to be elected a fellow of the Linnaean Society. She had over 60 species named either after herself (for example the *Rosa Willmottiae* pictured, right) or after Warley Place.

In 1888, Ellen became a very wealthy woman when her godmother, Countess Tasker, died leaving Ellen £140,000, the rough equivalent today of £5 million. Then followed years of profligate spending. In 1890, she bought a chateau at Tresserve near Aix-les-Bains in France and established a second garden to develop her love of the Alpine



genre. It wasn't until 1905 that Ellen bought Boccanegra¹, the house and hanging garden close to the Hanbury Gardens, near Ventimiglia, Italy, from Giuseppe Biancheri.

Ellen Willmott reputedly always carried seeds of *Eryngium giganteum* around and sowed them in the gardens she visited, hence the name Miss Willmott's Ghost (a recent photo, right).



There is no indication in these letters from Clarence Bicknell as to when and how his friendship with the formidable Ellen Willmott started. Clarence was corresponding with her (2nd February 1902) about rare bulbs and plants she did not have.

"I wish I could send you something? Can I not? Some dried plants for your Herbarium? Some uncommon bulbs? Is there nothing you do not possess?"

Then in September that year, he sends her a card offering her, one supposes, a rare *allium* bulb, but is worried that he has the wrong address. Clarence may be a little star-struck, as he adds, in relation to the address:

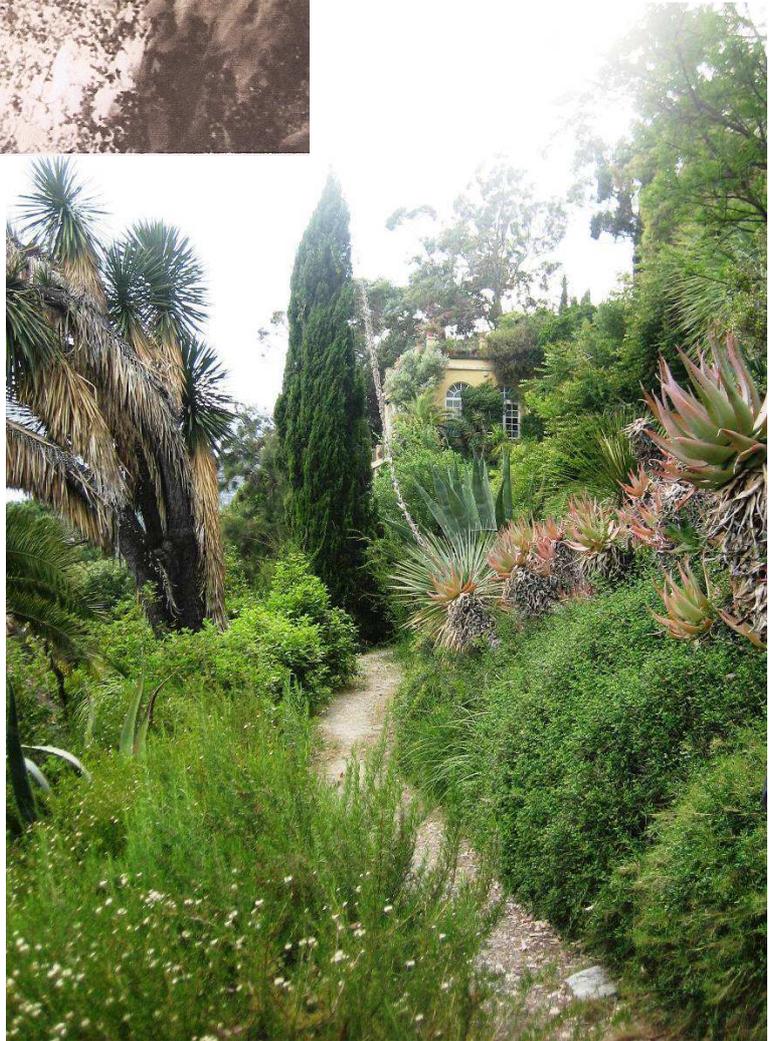
"I imagine 'England' would be enough for anyone of worldwide fame".

Perhaps Clarence advised her on the new Boccanegra property which she had bought "...at a cost of 12,950 lire. For her new gardens at Boccanegra, she bought considerable stock from the Hickel Brothers at Beaulieu-sur-Mer whom she used as landscape gardeners as well. She also bought from local suppliers, buying what flourished in the region, spending £2,000 between 1905 and 1909 alone. She also furnished the house, hired a gardener and caretaker, Clodoveo (employed 1909-1920), and usually only stayed there twice a year until the early 1920s."²



¹ As for the name of the estate, Simone Boccanegra, who died 1363, was the first Doge of Genoa.

² Audrey le Lièvre, Miss Willmott of Warley Place: Her Life and Her Gardens, London: Faber Finds, 2008.



Boccanegra is now owned by the Piacenza family who are painstakingly restoring the garden. The site is much steeper down to the sea from the house than it is at nearby La Mortola. To help guests get up and down, a mini-cable-car (photo, right) was installed by Mario Sertorio³ in 1965.



By 1907, Ellen was finding herself in financial difficulties. Besides maintaining three large properties, she had also funded plant-hunting expeditions to China. In addition to plants, Willmott also spent a lot of her money on antiques, chain-driven motor cars, clothes, food, jewellery, rare botanical and madrigal books, silverware and subscriptions and donations to various national, regional and local societies. Her situation got worse when the chateau at Tresserve burnt down in 1907

By 1913, she was trying to let Boccanegra to reduce her costs.

However, Clarence dropped in at Boccanegra from time to time, even when she wasn't there, on his way to or back from La Mortola. Clarence and Ellen collaborated with Alwyn Berger who was curator of the Hanbury Gardens from 1897 to 1914. In his 1912 catalogue, Berger thanks Clarence for helping him compile it, and that "*the Western and Southern Mediterranean plants were contributed by Miss Willmott, Mr. C. Bicknell of Bordighera and M. Henri Correvon of Geneva*"⁴. Berger was perhaps not the easiest man to work with. Ellen must have complained about him for in an undated 21 January letter, (probably 1914/15 after Berger's departure from La Mortola), Clarence says

"I had not heard of Berger's insolence, but he had good qualities but could see below the surface his conceit and "Germany overall" feelings".

In the same letter Clarence says he is going to La Mortola to

"loot plants for garden and family to eat and cheer up the Benbows and to advise him to stick to gardening and not open a drinking shop...Mrs B comes over here regularly to work for the wounded"

³ Mario Sertorio married Emilia Rolla Rosazza sister of Baby Rolla Rosazza, wife of Enzo Piacenza.

⁴ From Clarence Bicknell and Botany by Graham Avery, May 2016, published on www.clarencebicknell.com >downloads

In an earlier letter, also undated, Clarence tells Ellen that Berger considers her to be “*the most wonderful woman in the world*”.

Most of Clarence’s letters to Ellen concern seeds, and clearly he found her a bit of a poor correspondent. In 1913, Ellen was completing her great work “*The Genus Rosa*”, and in the 4th November 1913 postcard (reproduced recto verso below) Clarence writes...

“*M. Burnat has twice written to me to ask about your Preface to the Roses, some sheets if I remember right he sent to you for some information. He does not say exactly what he wants to know, but he feels you have vanished. Perhaps he has written to you; I might let him know you are not a famous scribe. Did any of Luigi’s mountain seeds come up? I hope your garden is no stopping for the war. Will you come out here? There is hardly anybody. All best wishes. Yours truly. C. Bicknell*”



Four days later, in his 8th November 1913 letter⁵, Clarence he asks her if Pollini's seeds that he had so conscientiously collected for her in the mountains had arrived:

"I suspect they have, but that with all your business, you are not in the habit of writing" adding that Pollini *"will have wished he'd sent them to Prof. Vaccari who thanked him at once"*.

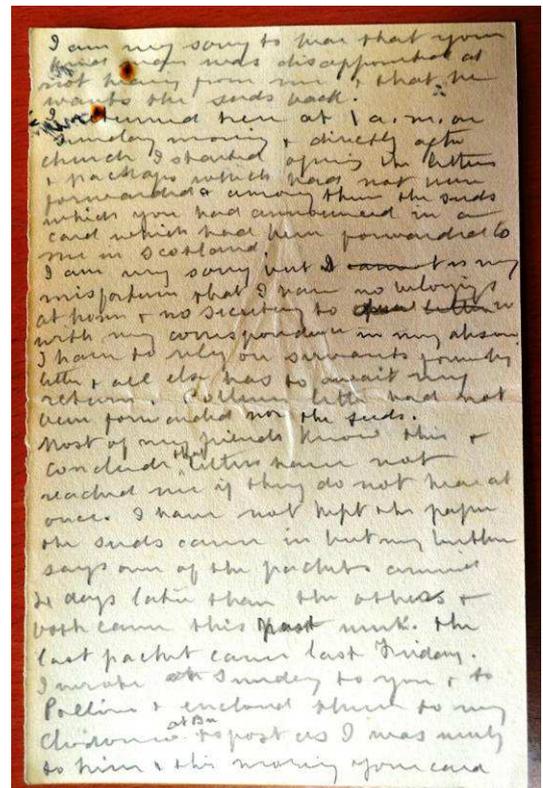


Could it be that Bicknell's relationship with Willmott was so warm that he could permit himself to be so chiding, in writing, to Willmott. Certainly these words read better if one thinks that Clarence's tongue was firmly in his cheek... almost, in today's vernacular, having a laugh. The piercing eyes and impish smile on Willmott's face, (*pastel portrait, left*) tell of a lady perfectly capable of absorbing with a sense of humour the apparent barbs from the Bordighera botany buff.

The only letter from Ellen to Clarence in this Berkeley Castle collection is what must be a draft reply (undated) to this chiding letter from Bicknell. She is very apologetic, saying she has no secretary to help her. The formal tone of the writing scotches the idea that she took Clarence's criticisms as humour:

"I am very sorry to hear that your man was disappointed at not hearing from me and that he wants the seeds back. I returned here at 1 a.m. on Sunday morning and directly after church I started opening the letters and packages which had not been forwarded and among them the seeds which you had amassed in a card which had been forwarded to me in Scotland. I am very sorry but it is my misfortune that I have no employees at home and no secretary to deal with my correspondence in my absence."

Ellen was clearly very busy. She corresponded widely, and did try to organise herself. As she only visited Tresserve and Boccanegra twice a year, usually for a month, she "kept in constant contact with the head gardeners at all three gardens through the clever use of a series of pre-



⁵ Postmarked 13th November

printed addressed postcards which were left with the gardeners so that

*“they may instantly communicate’ with her when needed”*⁶

Ellen Willmott had a talent for making plants survive that had been collected from far afield and also for germinating seeds. As late as probably 1915 or 16, Clarence is pressing her to let him know if Luigi’s seeds have germinated. He is planning to go up to the mountains:

“I say that every year, but of course the time will come when I shall not be able to crawl about or be tied onto a mule. Perhaps then I shall collect seeds more carefully”.

In another undated letter, he offers to collect seeds for her saying he is

“Off in a nice little party, leading a free wild and healthy life, four hours from anywhere..... what a long letter. You will never read it all. Did you swear and you would certainly swear at me for wasting your precious time and asking you to waste more”.

Ellen and Clarence corresponded on other subjects. He asks where he can get the medicine to rid his drawing cardboard of a fungus (Undated 19 June), and thanks her for sending him a type of pin (for attaching herbaria samples) but after 3 pages admits that Burnat’s are better...

As in his correspondence with Baroness von Taube, it is surprising that Clarence only makes one reference to the rock engravings to which, after all, he devoted so much time and energy: in a letter undated of 19 June, he tells her he won’t visit Boccanegra this summer as he is off to study

“the rock incisions which interest me”.

He kept botany and archaeology compartmentalised. It is also interesting that on the one hand the tone of his letters to Ellen is slightly ingratiating and yet on the other, he feels he can reproach and make demands on this extremely busy woman.

Ellen became a rather sad and impoverished figure towards the end of her life. Financial difficulties forced her to sell her French and Italian properties, and eventually her personal possessions. She was increasingly eccentric, booby-trapped her estate to deter thieves, carried a revolver in her handbag and was arrested on suspicion of shoplifting in 1928 (later acquitted).

She died of atheroma and embolus of the coronary artery in 1934, aged 76... that was 16 years after Clarence. Warley Place was sold to pay her debts and the house was demolished in 1939.

The Boccanegra house and her gardens on the Italian Riviera live on today, in total splendour, tended by the Piacenza family.



⁶ Audrey le Lièvre, Miss Willmott of Warley Place: Her Life and Her Gardens, London: Faber Finds, 2008.

In the gardens of Boccanegra during our wonderful visit of 20th May 2014, from left to right, Christopher Chippindale (Cambridge University expert on archaeology and on Clarence Bicknell), Helen Blanc-Francis (Clarence Bicknell Association, garden and estates expert), Ursula Salghetti Drioli Piacenza (Boccanegra) and Susie Bicknell (Clarence Bicknell Association and the author of this article)



Recent photos of Boccanegra by Marcus Bicknell, Copyright © 2014

2 period photos of Boccanegra gardens looking west are Copyright © Ursula Salghetti Drioli Piacenza

Updates and corrections to a draft of this article were provided by Ursula Salghetti Drioli Piacenza from Boccanegra on 12th December 2016, whom we thank warmly. She also wrote “After reading your article I feel very proud that Clarence Bicknell walked in the garden of Boccanegra, and this will be very important for the story of Boccanegra that I am trying to prepare. It is incredible what the love for plants and gardening can do!!!” She adds some useful dates in the story of Boccanegra:

- John Tremayne purchase Boccanegra from Ellen Willmott in 1923, i.e. 11 years before she died.
- Mario Sertorio purchase Boccanegra in 1956 from John Tremayne

More on Ellen Willmott at <http://www.oxoniangardener.co.uk/ellen-ann-willmott-8446/>

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