

Was she such an evil spirit?

The horticulturist Ellen Willmott's nightmarish reputation persists to this day, but a more balanced view of her is now emerging, says Ciar Byrne

The only story most people know about Ellen Willmott is that she was a curmudgeonly old spinster who used to keep seeds of a particularly prickly sea holly in her pockets to sprinkle in the gardens of anyone she didn't like. Hence the plant named after her: *Eryngium giganteum* 'Miss Willmott's Ghost'.

What is less well known is that Miss Willmott, who was born in 1858, was one of the leading horticulturists of her day. In 1897 she became one of only two women – the other was Gertrude Jekyll – who were awarded the inaugural Victoria Medal of Honour by the Royal Horticultural Society. The other 58 recipients were men. Today there are about 60 plant species that are named after her or her gardens.

Fabulously wealthy, but with no clue about managing her money, Willmott poured her fortune into three extravagant gardens: at Warley Place in Essex, Tresserve, near Aix-les-Bains in France and Villa Boccanegra, near Ventimiglia on the

Italian Riviera. In later life, as her finances spiralled out of control, she was forced to sell the properties in France and Italy, and after her death in 1934 Warley Place was sold to pay her debts. The garden fell into disrepair and the house was demolished in 1939.

Journalist and writer Sandra Lawrence grew up about two miles from Warley Place. Few people were aware that there was a once-famous garden there because it had become so overgrown. Then, in the late 1970s, a volunteer group started uncovering it. By the early 1980s they had started opening it to the public on occasional days. This was when Lawrence first visited with her parents and sister.

'I was a child, and I just fell in love,' she says. 'It was basically Frances Hodgson Burnett territory. There was a walled garden and broken hop

houses, a shattered conservatory and mysterious holes.' When she asked who used to live there, she was told: 'Oh, it was this old woman, but she wasn't very nice.'

However, Lawrence's interest wasn't properly piqued until many years later, when she was researching an article about gardens and was shown around by one of the Warley Place volunteers. He showed her some old photographs and told her about Willmott's reputation.

She read the only existing biography of Willmott, written in 1980 by Audrey Le Lièvre, and the seed of an idea for her own book was sown. She found a publisher, who suggested a picture book might be the way to go. Lawrence started researching, but was told her to not bother trying to view Willmott's personal archive because she wouldn't be allowed to look at it.



Ellen was the oldest of Frederick and Ellen Willmott's three daughters (one of whom died in childhood). Her father was a successful solicitor and her mother was related to the extremely wealthy Tasker family. Ellen's childless godmother, Countess Helen Tasker, showered gifts on her and her sister Rose, and when she died left them each a gift of £140,000 – about £18 million today.

Rose married into an aristocratic family, the Berkeleys, and after Ellen's death her vast archive was sent to her nephew at his country house, Spetchley Park in Worcestershire. During the Second World War the house became a hospital for American soldiers, and Ellen's effects were moved into a cellar and forgotten.

Then Lawrence had a stroke of luck. A new archivist at Spetchley, Karen Davidson, got in touch to say a lot of new material had been discovered. If she could wait 18 months until it had been catalogued, she could come and have a look.

Lawrence spent the intervening period finding out everything she could about her subject. Unlike Willmott's first biographer she had the internet to help her, and soon realised there was far too much material for a picture book. She now had a much more in-depth story in mind.

Then the current owner of Spetchley decided his Palladian mansion needed completely renovating. When the archivist went down to the cellars she found another stash of trunks



'She could get species to grow that no one else could'

containing material from the Willmott archive, and asked Lawrence for help.

'There were papers, photographs, bills, receipts, plant lists, you name it,' she says. 'We had four days to clear the lot because the builders were waiting to come in. We put on head torches and boiler suits because it was pitch black in there. We scooped



Clockwise from opposite page: Ellen Willmott in 1907. Early colour photographs and illustrations made by Willmott of narcissi, roses and an orchid

up armfuls of stuff, complete with mouse droppings and mould, and dumped it into boxes so we could work on it later. That's what I've been doing ever since.'

The result of her as-yet-unfinished research is Miss Willmott's Ghost: the Extraordinary Life and Gardens of a Forgotten Genius, which was published last year and has just come out in paperback. Her aim was to reveal the real Ellen, the energetic and talented horticulturist behind the legend of a prickly spinster.

'There are loads of stories about her, some of which are true and some of which aren't,' says Lawrence. 'She won many prizes for her plants, could get species to grow that no one else could and helped to fund plant-hunting expeditions. She was phenomenally wealthy but was never taught how to use her money, so by about 1910 she was virtually broke, and died pretty much bankrupt.'

Warley was Willmott's family home, where she became famous for growing 'hardy bulbs among the shrubs', according to William Robinson's magazine *The Garden*. After she received her inheritance she bought a house with a garden in Tresserve in south-east France. This small town near Aix-les-Bains had become popular after Queen

PICTURES: ALAMY; BERKELEY FAMILY AND SPETCHLEY GARDENS CHARITABLE TRUST; SANDRA LAWRENCE

Great gardeners

Victoria bought some land there. The English aristocracy had followed and land prices soared, but an intransigent local woman refused to sell a plot that would have connected up the Queen's parcels of land and she eventually gave up on her plan.

Willmott remained, turning the garden into a showcase for alpine plants, for which there was a craze at the time.

Ellen became great friends with Henry Correvon, a Swiss seller of alpine plants who advised her on her plantings. He was one of several married men with whom she had close, non-sexual relationships. Another was a daffodil enthusiast, the Reverend George Engleheart, whose wife Mary was not a fan of either narcissi or her husband's close friendship with Willmott. Rubbing salt in the wound, Engleheart named a favourite new cultivar *Narcissus* 'Ellen Willmott', but despite naming more than 700 plants didn't call any of them 'Mary'.

While it helped that Willmott was independently wealthy thanks to her rich godmother, her passion for plants went well beyond that of a spoiled dilettante. After the gardens of Hampton Court Palace were turned over to growing vegetables and crops during the First World War she was part of the committee that helped to restore them.

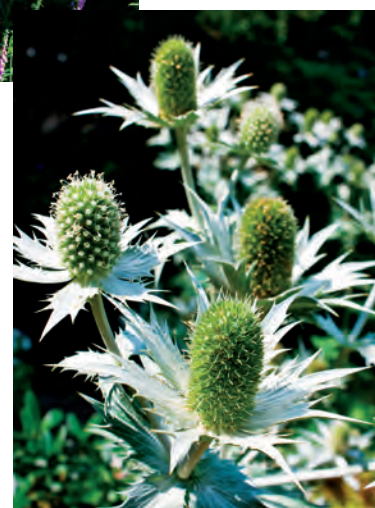
It was already known that Willmott helped to design the gardens of New Place in Stratford-upon-Avon. What has only recently come to light is that she singlehandedly designed the gardens of Anne Hathaway's cottage.

Willmott was a contemporary of that other great late-Victorian female gardener, Gertrude Jekyll. 'Ellen was 15 years younger than Gertrude, but they started gardening at about the same point,' says Lawrence. 'They had an interesting relationship – they were initially quite wary of each other but then became good friends.'

Lawrence admits there are conflicting ideas about what her subject was like on a personal level. 'If you were a friend of Ellen Willmott you would stick by her through thick and thin, and you loved her almost to the point of obsession. If you didn't



From above: Willmott's home, Warley Place, in 1890 and the conservatory as it is today; *Epimedium x warleyense*, which was named after the house, and the sea holly 'Miss Willmott's Ghost'



like her, it was the exact opposite. She did have a bit of a reputation for being difficult. One of the first things I did when I started writing the book was to get everybody and anybody to send me any bad stories they had ever heard about her.

'I made a giant spreadsheet, which I called "Bad Miss Willmott". I went through each accusation forensically, working out what really happened. Some were true, some were not.'

One of the revelations of the book is about why Miss Willmott didn't turn up to the awards ceremony in London to receive her Victoria Medal of Honour, choosing to stay instead in Tresserve (I won't give the reason away).

Back at Spetchley Park, there are still new discoveries being made. Even

though her book has been published, Lawrence has been well and truly bitten by the Willmott bug, and helping the archivist catalogue her papers is now a passion project.

'I spend about two days a month recovering stuff very slowly, sweeping it off the best I can, photographing it. I'm doing it just for love. I'm the only one who knows what I'm looking at now. We call it the Willmott tombola – I get a box, put my hand in and pull something out. It could be absolutely anything. It might be a 100-year-old chocolate bar, a dead mouse, or a previously unseen letter from Gertrude Jekyll.'

◆ *Miss Willmott's Ghosts: the Extraordinary Life and Gardens of a Forgotten Genius* by Sandra Lawrence is published by Bonnier, price £10.99