

A SUSSEX GUIDE

SUSSEX WOMEN



ANN KRAMER



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DEDICATION

To Sarah Kramer, my Sussex-born daughter

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VANESSA BELL

1879 - 1961

CHARLESTON, FIRLE



Vanessa Bell is one of the 'big names' linked with Sussex. She was a leading 20th-century artist and one of the first British artists to work in an abstract style. She will always be associated with the Bloomsbury set and with Charleston, the farmhouse near Firle.

Daughter of literary critic Sir Leslie Stephen, Vanessa was born in London. She had a sister Virginia (later Virginia Woolf, *see p.91*) and two brothers, Thoby and Adrian. Vanessa studied art and in 1901 became a student at the Royal Academy in London.

Following the deaths of their parents, Vanessa, Virginia and their two brothers moved to 46 Gordon Square in Bloomsbury. Free from constraints, they adopted an unconventional approach to life. In 1905 Vanessa founded the Friday Club to provide a venue for artists, and their house became the focal point for various writers, artists and intellectuals, including Lytton Strachey, Maynard Keynes, Leonard Woolf, Roger Fry and art critic Clive Bell, the notorious Bloomsbury set.

In 1906 Thoby died suddenly from typhoid fever; the following year Vanessa married Clive Bell. They had two sons, Julian and Quentin. Sexual freedom and open relationships were hallmarks of the Bloomsbury set, and in 1910 Roger Fry fell passionately in love with Vanessa and they had an affair. Until now Vanessa Bell's paintings had been fairly conventional, but – influenced by her husband and by Fry, who hosted the famous exhibition 'Manet and the Post-Impressionists' in London in 1910 – she began to adopt a bolder and more abstract approach. By 1914 she was painting in an entirely abstract style and producing decorative work for Fry's Omega Workshops.

By this time Vanessa had begun an affair with the artist Duncan Grant. Despite his homosexuality, they maintained a close and lifelong partnership, living and working together. They had a daughter, Angelica, but kept her paternity secret from her. Vanessa remained married to and friendly with Clive Bell, who brought Angelica up as his own daughter.

Vanessa was a pacifist, as were other members of the Bloomsbury set. When World War I broke out, she and her children, together with Duncan Grant and his then lover, David Garnett, left London for Sussex so that Grant could escape conscription. They rented Charleston Farmhouse, which was to be their country home for many years.

Vanessa and Duncan set up studios at Charleston and some of her finest work dates from this period. The two also decorated Charleston: over the years they painted walls, fireplaces and furniture in their distinctive post-Impressionist style. Fabrics, ceramics and screens from the Omega Workshops were incorporated into the decor, as were their paintings and those of their friends. Vanessa's paintings became more representational: she believed 'nature was more interesting' and painted still lifes, landscapes, interiors with figures and occasional portraits.

During the interwar years Vanessa based herself in London and exhibited frequently. She also travelled, but in 1939, with the outbreak of World War II, she returned to Charleston and a time of personal tragedy. Fry had died in 1934, Julian was killed in the Spanish Civil War and Virginia committed suicide in 1941. Vanessa was also estranged from Angelica, who by now knew her paternity. Her work fell out of favour, but she continued painting and living at Charleston until she died.

Vanessa Bell's Top Places

- ① *Charleston Farmhouse, Firle: now renovated and managed by the Charleston Trust*
- ② *Berwick church: murals painted by Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant*
- ③ *Firle churchyard: burial place of Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant*
- ④ *National Gallery, London: portraits by Vanessa Bell of Virginia Woolf, 1912 and Aldous Huxley, 1929-30*

Vanessa Bell's Top Works

- ① *Studland Beach, 1916*
- ② *Interior with Two Women, 1932*

BARBARA BODICHON

1827-91

WHATLINGTON



The mid-19th century saw the emergence of the first-ever organised women's movement in Britain, sometimes known as first-wave feminism. Small numbers of corseted, long-skirted and determined middle-class 'ladies' began to challenge Victorian sensibilities and convention and demand rights for women. The leading light, and by all accounts a remarkable powerhouse, was

Barbara Bodichon, who during her long life was a feminist, social reformer, philanthropist and artist.

As Barbara Leigh Smith, she was born in Whatlington, near Battle. Her paternal grandfather had been active in the anti-slavery movement and her father, Benjamin Leigh Smith, was an enlightened and active man, who served as MP for Norwich and a magistrate in Hastings. Barbara's mother, Anne Longden, was a milliner and they had five children, of whom Barbara was the second eldest, although they never married. The reasons are unclear, but perhaps it was a protest against the forced dependence imposed on women through marriage. Either way, their unmarried status was considered scandalous, particularly by some of the Leigh Smiths, including Barbara's first cousin, Florence Nightingale.

Barbara spent most of her early life living in Pelham Crescent, Hastings. Her mother died when she was seven and her father brought up the family, dividing their time between Hastings and his London house. Believing that girls should have the same opportunities as boys, he provided a series of tutors who gave Barbara an excellent education. In 1848, when Barbara reached 21, her father gave her investments that brought in £300 a year, giving her an independence and freedom almost unheard of for women at that time. This enabled her to do exactly as

she wished, and by 1849 she was studying art at the newly opened Bedford Ladies College, London.

Barbara's initial ambition was to be a professional artist. Her closest friend was poet and feminist, Bessie Rayner Parkes, and she also knew artist Mary Howitt, and Ann Samworth. She met some of the Pre-Raphaelites, helped to set up the Society for Female Artists, petitioned for the Royal Academy to accept women students and was a close friend of Gertrude Jekyll. She continued painting for most of her life, producing vivid landscapes of scenes in Britain and abroad.

She is best remembered, however, for her political work. A few women, such as Quaker Annie Knight, had begun to talk about the unthinkable – namely, votes for women – but Barbara was initially concerned to highlight and reform laws relating to women, particularly those to do with property. At that time, in the words of Sir William Blackstone, 'husband and wife are one and that is he'. Married women had virtually no legal status. On marriage, their property, goods and body became the property of their husbands; they did not even have rights over their own children. In 1854 Barbara Leigh Smith published *A Brief Summary in Plain Language of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women*, in which she pointed out how major laws concerning marriage, divorce and property discriminated against women.

The pamphlet was widely read and was used to lobby the Law Amendment Society with a view to reforming the laws. To this end, Barbara organised a back-up petition, obtaining 26,000 signatures in support of legal changes. With the help of male MPs, known to feminists as 'friends in the House', a Married Women's Property Bill was put before the House of Commons, but although a minor change was achieved, it came to a dead-end in favour of another reforming Bill to do with marriage and divorce. However, the wheels had been set in motion and, largely through Barbara's efforts, married women gained rights over their property in 1882.

Barbara now turned to women's work. By this time she had met and married a French doctor, Eugene Bodichon, who lived in Algiers. She had considered not marrying, but her new husband supported her feminist

views and, in typically unconventional style, she spent the winter in Algiers with him and the remaining six months free and independent in England. She designed and built a house, Scalands Gate near Robertsbridge, where she entertained many friends, including the Rossettis and Marianne North (see p. 70). Gertrude Jekyll designed the garden.

The right to work was a major issue, particularly for middle-class women. While working-class women laboured long hours in factories and mills, their middle-class sisters suffered lives of enforced idleness. For them, marriage and motherhood were virtually the only acceptable professions. For Barbara Bodichon this state of affairs could not be allowed to continue. In a pamphlet, 'Women and Work', she stormed:

Fathers have no right to cast the burden of the support of their daughters on other men. It lowers the dignity of women and tends to prostitution, whether legal or in the streets... Adult women must not be supported by men if they are to stand as dignified, rational beings before God... Women must have work if they are to form equal unions.

In 1859 Barbara and others set up the Society for the Promotion of Employment for Women in offices in Langham Place, London. Being a lowly governess was the only accepted paid occupation for single women of Barbara's class, so the 'Ladies of Langham Place' trained and encouraged women to seek work as printers, bookkeepers, clerks and shop assistants. They also set up the first business school for girls. Barbara took over a genteel newspaper, *The Englishwoman's Journal*, and, with Bessie Rayner Parkes, turned it into a campaigning mouthpiece, firing off articles on the situation of women, and demanding work and higher education for girls. No cause, if it improved the lot of women, was too insignificant. And, as Ray Strachey enthusiastically observed, at the heart of each new initiative was Barbara Bodichon, her 'golden hair and untiring enthusiasm' inspiring everyone around her.

In due course Barbara turned her attention to the cause of women's suffrage. Victorian feminists relied on male MPs to put their case in the House of Commons, and the most sympathetic was John Stuart Mill. Typically Barbara threw herself behind his election campaign, hiring a

carriage plastered with posters and galloping around Westminster encouraging voters; and, despite or because of this, J.S. Mill was returned. Barbara Bodichon formed a committee and co-drafted a petition in support of women's suffrage, gathering nearly 1,500 women's signatures. She wrote and circulated pamphlets, thousands of which were printed, and another petition was circulated, collecting 3,000 or so signatures. But the time was not yet right: J.S. Mill's motion for female suffrage was defeated.

Barbara financed many projects close to her heart. She founded a progressive co-ed school in London, made funds available for a girls' college that later, in 1873, became Girton College, Cambridge, and took up philanthropic causes in and around Hastings. In 1877 Gertrude Jekyll designed a reading room at Scalands Gate that became an evening school for local men who were illiterate. Barbara became friends with, and promoted the work of, George Eliot, who, it is said, modelled her heroine Romola on her.

In 1877 Barbara Bodichon suffered a stroke that left her a semi-invalid. She died at Scalands Gate on June 11th 1891 and was buried in Brightling Church. She has never quite achieved the same fame as, say, the charismatic Pankhursts, which is a shame because she effectively founded the British women's movement, and women today owe her a great deal. In 2000 Hastings historian Helena Wojtczak celebrated Barbara's achievements by organising a blue plaque to commemorate them.

Barbara Bodichon's Top Places

- ➊ 9 Pelham Crescent, Hastings: blue plaque
- ➋ Scalands Folly, near Robertsbridge: formerly Scalands Gate
- ➌ Hastings Museum and Art Gallery: some of Barbara Bodichon's paintings, including *The Pier Rocks* (painted in Hastings) and *Algerian landscapes*

Barbara Bodichon's Top Works

- ➊ *A Brief Summary in Plain Language of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women*, 1854
- ➋ *Married Women's Work*, 1857