

Gumley House Cemetery and Miss Willmott's Ghost

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A while ago when visiting Gumley House I was reading the inscriptions on the headstones in the Convent burial ground when I spotted a stone in memory of Ada Mary Willmott who died 15th February 1872 in her eighth year. This posed a mystery to me - had she perhaps been a boarder at Gumley House Convent School while her parents were abroad? Enquiries did not get a reply - the answer was not forthcoming.



Some time afterwards a friend gave me some old newspaper cuttings and items relating to local history which she thought might interest me. In with these papers was a book list from an *Open Day* held at Kew Gardens in 1981 listing "recent" botanical literature which included *Miss Willmott of Warley Place: Her Life and Her Gardens* by Audrey Le Lievre (Faber 1980). My friend had noted from the book that three sisters, Ellen, Rose and Ada Willmott had lived at 52 The Grove and attended Gumley House. With this added information I had to continue my search for "Ada".

By chance one summer's day I was looking at second hand books on Kew Green and saw a catalogue from Sotheby's on "*The Glory of the Garden*" a Loan Exhibition in Association with the Royal Horticultural Society which took place 2nd - 28th January 1987, with a splendid illustrated article on Ellen Willmott, and her gardens at Warley Place in Essex. From



this I learnt that "Miss Ellen Ann Willmott (1857(sic) -1934) was one of the greatest gardeners of her time. Ellen Willmott's main interest was plants, especially roses.

She travelled extensively, establishing magnificent gardens at her two homes, Warley Place in Essex and at Tresserve, near Aix-les-Bains on the edge of the French Alps. The garden at Warley Place contained "a hundred thousand species and was tended by one hundred and four gardeners". This only made me determined to find out about her little sister Ada, who had died so young, especially as they had lived locally in their childhood.

Next I managed to borrow a copy of Audrey Le Lievre's book which I found fascinating to read and can thoroughly recommend to anyone, especially if you are interested in horticulture. Most of the following information is gleaned from the book.

Ellen Fell, daughter of James Fell, a prosperous lace merchant of Aylesbury married Frederick Willmott, Solicitor of Southwark, on 15th May 1856 at the New Roman Catholic Church of Holy Trinity, Brook Green; they were married from Helen Tasker's house "Kendal Villa" in Hammersmith. Following their marriage Ellen and Frederick moved to "Vernon House", 52 The Grove, Osterley and it was there that on 19th August 1858 the Willmott's first child was born, a daughter named Ellen Ann, after her Mother and her Godmother (Helen Ann Tasker). Ellen was christened in the Shrewsbury Roman Catholic Chapel Isleworth, by the Parish Priest, Father Francis Weld: Ellen was followed by Rose born 29th September 1861 and Ada Mary born on 2nd June 1864.

The three girls went to Gumley House, Isleworth, a Convent School run by the Sisters, Faithful Companions of Jesus. From the age of seven Ellen received a cheque of £1,000 on her birthday from her Godmother. In later years Rose too received a similar present.

Early in 1872 Ada complained of fever and a sore throat. She had diphtheria which she fought for six weeks but died of kidney failure on 15th February 1872. Her family were devastated; in fact it was the maid, Emily, who registered the death. The Willmotts, perhaps saddened at Ada's death, moved to Warley Place, Essex, in 1876 and it was at Warley that Ellen came to build her famous garden.

"Vernon House was demolished in 1975 to make way for a small block of flats, but Henry Davies's plan of 1852 together with an aerial photograph taken in the 1920's record its appearance and its yellow brick wall is still standing. Double-fronted, with three storeys, a basement, and a built-in coach-house, it faced, across a tree-lined road, the wooded grounds of Spring Grove House. In front, a carriage drive from each of the corner gates curved past lozenge-shaped flower beds and met at the front door. Behind the house, a formal garden of about three-quarters of an acre..."

Perhaps it was here in Isleworth that Ellen's love of gardening began.

"It is said that in the gardens Ellen visited she scattered pinches of seed here and there to remind the owner - in a way which may not always have been entirely welcome - of her visit. Her favourite plant for this purpose was *Eryngium giganteum*, which came to be known as "Miss Willmott's Ghost": and indeed the tall grey-white stems stand out at dusk against the deepening shadows, branching out into great candelabras of grey-green flower heads, sometimes thirty or forty to a plant, spectral and strange in the twilight..."

I note from a gardening book that *Eryngium giganteum* is a form of sea holly. How strangely my research came about - first the gravestone of Ada - then the book list from Kew Gardens and then the Sotheby's Catalogue. I am glad I have uncovered the identity of Ada Mary and in consequence discovered such interesting facts about the Willmott family, especially Ellen Willmott. [Read more](#) about Warley Place and the Willmott family.



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