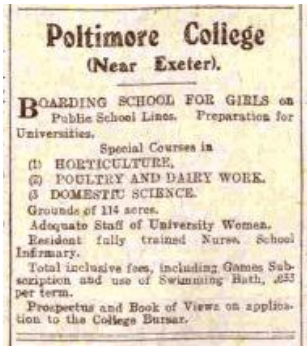
Poltimore College

A 1920s Experiment in Girls' Education

Julia Neville

Figure 1: Poltimore House in use as a girls' school[1]

In August 1923, a series of advertisements appeared in the scholastic columns of Devon newspapers (see Figure 2). They announced the opening of a new boarding school for girls. The advertisement stood out at once from those for other girls' schools featured in the column. Unlike them, it did not refer to being 'high class' or for 'the daughters of gentlemen', nor did it mention 'music' and 'drawing'. Its emphasis was on preparing girls to earn their own living, either by qualifying them to take university degrees or for careers in the more practical disciplines of horticulture, animal husbandry and domestic science.



Poltimore College
(Near Exeter).

BOARDING SCHOOL FOR GIRLS on Public School Lines. Preparation for Universities.

Special Courses in
(1) HORTICULTURE.
(2) POULTRY AND DAIRY WORK.
(3 DOMESTIC SCIENCE.

Grounds of 114 acres.
Adequate Staff of University Women.
Resident fully trained Nurse. School Infirmary.
Total inclusive fees, including Games Subscription and use of Swimming Bath, £33 per term.
Prospectus and Book of Views on application to the College Bursar.

Figure 2: Poltimore College advertisement, 1923[2]

[1] Devon Heritage Centre, Poltimore College Album, 7274Z/1.
[2] *Devon and Exeter Gazette (DEG)*, 2 August 1923.

Miss Wontner, the principal, had explained to a reporter when the news first broke that she had leased the house for a school that the girls she was looking for were:

> The children of professional men – Navy and Army officers, clergymen and doctors – many of whom are unable to pay very high fees, and who desire their girls to leave school, say at the age of 18, with knowledge that will enable them to earn their own living.[3]

Her assessment of the appeal of such a school was probably a shrewd one. Wartime inflation had eaten away at the income of many middle-class men, but they still felt unable to lower their own expectations and send their daughters to state-supported schools. There was a new spirit abroad too, as legislation opened up new opportunities to women to fulfil their potential and to serve the Empire. This school was intended not only to provide for academic study but also to prepare girls for practical occupations.

Wontner had taken a lease that spring on Poltimore House and Park, the mansion and grounds five miles outside Exeter that had up until the First World War been home to the Bampfylde family, Lord and Lady Poltimore. She had run the Grange School in Soham before the First World War and given it up, it was said, to work for the Red Cross during the war.[4] In command of a group of VADs she regretted their lack of 'practical versatility', and determined that the new school she planned to found should prepare the girls of the new generation more effectively for any situation they might meet in life.[5] This lack of 'practical versatility' was something that Dame Georgiana Buller had found too: she told the Crediton Girls' High School prizegiving audience in December 1915 of her experience of interviewing girls who wanted war work. 'It had struck her as rather sad', she said, 'that there should be so many people who, now that they wanted to help, were so incapable of helping.'[6]

After the war she had moved across country to Somerset and set up a Newport School at North Curry, and its success had led her to venture on this more ambitious project to which she hoped to attract 200 pupils. She brought with her a number of the teaching staff from Newport School, including the music teacher who had in fact been on the staff of the Soham school before the war. Particularly significant for the school were her allies, the wealthy widow Mrs Cecily Wilson and Miss Muriel Hall MA, who, as an Oxford graduate, assured parents of the school's academic credibility.

The school at North Curry had apparently been so successful that Miss Wontner was looking for larger premises. Poltimore House certainly provided that. It had been initially advertised as 'replete with every modern convenience… electric light, also oak floors, central heating; superb suite of entertaining rooms, great hall and double-winged staircase, eight bath rooms, about 50 bedrooms'.[7] The grounds that surrounded it provided the scope that Miss Wontner needed for her plans to teach horticulture, dairying and poultry keeping. There was a walled kitchen garden with extensive greenhouses (shown in Figure 3) and orchards. The large aviaries where once Lord and Lady

[3] *Western Morning News (WMN),* 19 April 1923.
[4] There are various references to the Grange School, Soham, in the *Cambridgeshire Independent Press* of the period, and to Miss Wontner as its principal. The Red Cross database of First World War volunteers does not hold the names of Wontner, Wilson or Hall, but it is known to be incomplete, and there were in any case a number of private enterprises that provided hospital care for wounded soldiers. 'Red Cross' is sometimes applied to all such organisations. The information that they met during the war comes from Rosemary Manning, an early pupil at the college, who mentions it in her autobiography *Corridor of Mirrors* (The Women's Press Ltd, 1987).
[5] Ibid. p. 56,
[6] *DEG*, 2 December 1915.
[7] *The Times*, 29 January 1921.

Poltimore's collection of exotic birds had been housed were perfect for poultry keeping and, though the original Home Farm and its model dairy had been sold, the spacious former stables accommodated a small herd of cows (see Figure 4).

Figure 3: Poltimore college girls at work in the Early Peach House[8]

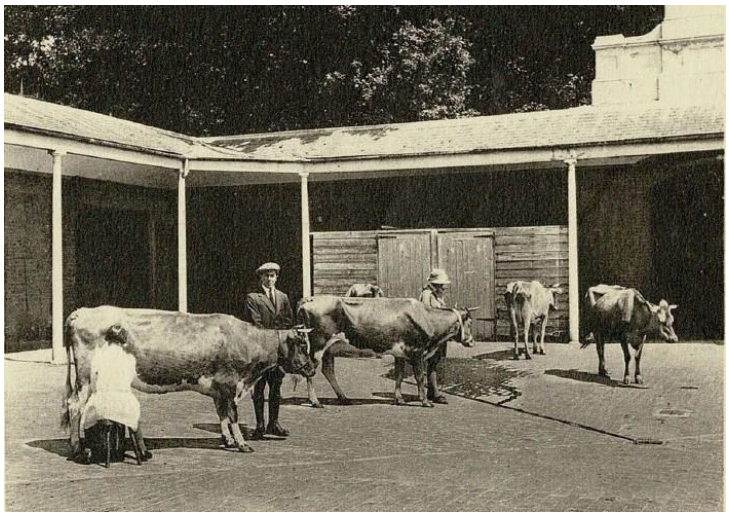


Figure 4: Poltimore College girls milking under instruction[9]

[8] Devon Heritage Centre, Poltimore College Album, 7274Z/1.
[9] Ibid.

The accommodation within the house required more adjustment. The spacious entrance hall was retained, but the saloon initially became a form room: 'rows of inked and mutilated desks ranged beneath a gorgeously rich plaster ceiling, where doors were adorned by swags of carved wooden fruit and leaves, reputed to be by Grinling Gibbon'.[10] Later, the room was more appropriately the school library (see Figure 5). Other reception rooms became form rooms and the dining rooms.

Figure 5: The saloon at Poltimore College, used as the school library[11]

The senior staff had their own 'sets' of sitting room and bedroom. The upstairs rooms became dormitories and resident staff lived, like Poltimore servants in earlier generations, in a wing on the top floor. The Poltimores had never had a separate chapel but had always attended the parish church. Wontner built a large single-storey building to the west of the house, which served both as a chapel and a venue for large school events such as dramatic productions. The rector of Poltimore was not invited to take services there. Instead Miss Wontner took them herself, relishing the dramatic opportunity to preside or, when an ordained cleric was required, brought in a retired canon.

Twice a year the house replayed its past. The Edwardian ballroom had been noted as having the best dancing floor in the county, and Miss Wontner allowed it to be used for the Devon County Ball, a major social event, once in the New Year and once in the summer, in the school holidays. The house was then decorated with flowers by the organisers; the estate staff attended to the lighting and car parking; outside caterers and bands were hired in. The ball was always a smart social occasion, attended by house-parties arranged by local gentry in the east of the county. Reporters were permitted to attend and filled their columns with accounts of the dazzling costumes of the ladies.

Nothing of that atmosphere of luxury spilt over into the everyday life of the school. Rosemary Manning, the novelist who was an early pupil at the school, has left a record of the regime both in her autobiography, *Corridor of Mirrors*, and as the setting for a novel, *The Chinese Garden.*[12] She was sent to the school just before she was 12. Her father was a GP, and he and her mother went to

[10] Manning, *Corridor of Mirrors,* p. 60
[11] Devon Heritage Centre, Poltimore College Album, 7274Z/1.
[12] Rosemary Manning, *The Chinese Garden* (*Brilliance Books*, 1962) and *Corridor of Mirrors* (1987).

inspect it in 1924, a year after the college had moved in. They liked it because 'it was inexpensive, uncompromisingly dedicated to open windows and cold water, and the Headmistress was persuasive.' Manning remembered the strict quasi-military discipline and 'spartan regime of wide open windows, cold washing water and dreadful food' and the way in which any form of 'slackness' was to be weeded out.[13] There were compensations, however, in the chance to enjoy the surroundings of the house: the deer still roamed in the park; garden areas such as the lime avenues, the shrubberies, the rosery and the Chinese garden, though no longer maintained, were accessible for exploration; a little bathing place had been created by damming a stream across the park; and the girls could keep their own horses.

This was a time when secondary education for girls was changing. Legislation after the First World War emphasised the expectation that more pupils would stay on after the official leaving age of 14 and would receive a secondary education that gave them the opportunity to make the most of their chances in life. Miss Wontner's vision of vocational coursework alongside academic education was echoed by publications such as the contemporary *Women's Year Book*, section on Education which stated that, '[t]he conditions of our time encourage large numbers of girls to earn their own living or, if they do not need to earn, to adopts some definite career of usefulness.'[14] The same book contained a section from the headmistress of a well-known girls' boarding school at Southwold, in which she praised the 'simplicity, beauty and dignity' of life in a girls' school, where girls had 'the fullest opportunity for open air and sunshine, for responding… to the appeal of Nature in all her moods'. She emphasised the importance of ready access to playing fields to develop 'elasticity and vigour… joie de vivre… and skill and swiftness' and praised the opportunities available for school societies, which helped the girls realise the capacity of their minds.[15] All this Miss Wontner hoped her school could provide for her girls.

There were a range of teaching staff and instructors, some of whom, as described above, had come with Wontner from her previous school. No formal records of the college in the 1920s remain so information about the staff is piecemeal, drawn from the electoral registers, newspaper references and memories provided by former pupils. A small group of staff, some of whom had degrees or qualifications to teach, taught the girls to a level that enabled them to sit for the School Certificate, and afterwards, if required, to prepare them for Higher School Certificates and university entrance. There are references to some of the staff who taught the practical courses, such as the 'lady gardeners' who, it is believed, occupied the former bothy.[16] and to a woman chauffeur who taught the motor courses, using Miss Wontner's own car.[17] Miss Wontner's factotum, Harold Lane, who had moved with her from Somerset, taught poultry keeping and dairying was taught by local men, again probably supervised by Harold Lane. Miss Wontner also believed in creating opportunities for self-directed learning, and Manning remembers that, having expressed an interest in the trees in the park, she was 'seconded to the bailiff's department where I was taught to swing an axe and work at one end of a two-handed saw'.[18]

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[13] Manning, *Corridor of Mirrors,* p. 55.
[14] Evelyn Gates (ed.), *Women's Year Book, 1923/4* (Women Publishers Limited, 1923), p. 254.
[15] Ibid., p. 255.
[16] Reported by Jill Fox of Poltimore, 2019, remembering what her father had said.
[17] Isabella Dillon-Browne, a woman chauffeur, appears on the electoral registers ERs Spring 1924 to Aug 1925.
[18] Manning, *Corridor of Mirrors,* p. 57.

Figure 6: Miss Wontner, staff and pupils outside the main entrance to the college (courtesy of Poltimore House Trust)

A number of men were still employed on the estate: the bailiff himself, men to assist in the management of the woodlands (most of which remained in Lord Poltimore's ownership) and the gamekeeper. Wontner leased not just the house and the park but six cottages, the bothy and the New Lodge together with, it appears, at least part of the allotments. Enough men were employed by the college at least to form a cricket team for what became an annual match against the college girls.[19]

Although she was reluctant to let the girls have much to do with the village, Wontner did take on some of the roles the Poltimores would once have performed. In 1924, she paid for a Christmas tea for pensioners, and one for the school and Sunday-school children.[20] She was co-opted onto the Parochial Church Council and invited to become a vice-president of the Pinhoe and Poltimore Cottage Garden Society.[21] Some of these commitments, however, required money to pay for the teas or give the subscription expected of a vice-president. Wontner's commitment faltered once she found herself in financial difficulty. She was limited to supporting village enterprises through the activities of the girls, encouraging them to undertake the character-building activities of fundraising for Sunday-school treats and church repairs.[22]

Wontner was good at attracting parents to send their girls to the college, though numbers never seem to have exceeded 100. She was, however, hopeless at financial management and apparently never saw the need to employ a bursar to take on those responsibilities. She had taken on the 21-year lease on Poltimore and spent money on alterations, extra furniture and equipment, and on building the chapel in the grounds. She had built up debts in Somerset, where she had failed to disencumber herself of the school buildings before she moved. She bought herself a motor car. Yet she had to keep the fees low, and parents were charged only £33 per term. Within two years of the move she was declared bankrupt, and her examination reveals how she had borrowed large sums of money initially from friends and subsequently from moneylenders in order to keep the school

[19] *DEG*, 29 July 1927; 20 July 1928; 20 July 1929.
[20] *Western Times (WT)*, 11 January 1924.
[21] *WT*, 2 May 1924; *DEG*, 5 August 1924.
[22] *DEG*, 8 October 1926; *WT*, 9 August 1929.

going.[23] She was forced to sell her interest in the school to her colleague, Mrs Wilson, and the school's management passed into the hands of a board of governors who turned it into a limited liability company.

This change does not seem to have made a significant difference to the way the school operated, even if Miss Wontner seems herself to have withdrawn a little from village life after that point. A copy of the prospectus (together with the 'book of views' from which the illustrations in this essay are taken) survives from 1930 and makes it clear that the 'special courses' continued, albeit with minor changes. Five courses were offered as an extension of tuition beyond the age of 16, singly or in combination. They comprised the original horticulture (now expanded to cover market gardening), poultry keeping and dairy work, and domestic science (cooking, housewifery, laundry and needlework), together with the short course in motor driving. There was one entirely new course called commercial training, instituted probably in response to the growing opportunities for women in office jobs.

It is hard to tell how successful this venture in practical education proved to be, as it is easier to trace academic successes. Public examination results were reported in local newspapers and usually contain those of a handful of girls from Poltimore College. A small number of girls went on into university education, like Rosemary Manning, who read Classics at Royal Holloway College. Copies of the Poltimore College Annual Report from the mid-1930s have survived and the news of old girls may reflect what was happening to some of the 1920s alumni. None of them, however, refer to careers in horticulture and the closest reference to work in animal husbandry is a reference to someone working in the kennels at Powderham Castle. There are, however, several references to old girls working in commercial and secretarial positions, so it would appear that the opening of a commercial training course had proved a success.[24]

By the mid-1930s, Poltimore College was failing. There are accounts from old girls about having to undertake even more of the domestic work of the college, presumably because there was not enough money to pay the staff. It was a sad end for a venture on which Miss Wontner and her colleagues had embarked with such high hopes. The 1920s was a decade full of educational experimentation. Some of these ventures, such as that of Dartington School in Devon, are well known. Many, like Poltimore College, rose and died almost without a trace. Exploring its history adds to our understanding of the way in which pioneers of the 1920s were seeking to extend the way in which a formal education system could offer girls access to opportunities on a par with those available to boys.

[23] *WT*, 14 May and 4 June 1926; *DEG*, 8 July 1926.
[24] Poltimore House Archive, Poltimore College Annual Reports, 1936 and 1937.