

Saving Selsdon Wood

In the early 1920's Selsdon was on the brink of changing from farm and field to housing and golf course. In nature's corner was a core group of 5 called the 'Selsdon Wood Preservation Society'. The five were Mr Lawrence Chubb, Miss AM Bonus, Mr EA Earl, Miss WM Hudson and Mr MG Sharpe. The group ran a very successful media campaign as well as directly targeting famous and respected supporters/influencers. The campaign took 10 years to raise the funds necessary. *What do we know of these people to whom we owe a debt of gratitude?* We can assume that they were tenacious, resourceful and generous with their time. As with most volunteers it is likely that they were helping other causes or working at their careers at the same time. Thanks to internet I have managed to find out a little about some of these. This month I will start with Miss AM Bonus (if you know more about her please get in touch) and two extraordinary members of her family who may also have played a part.

A 'Bonus' for Selsdon

Miss **Alice Mabel Bonus** (1873-1938) was 51 years old in 1924 when she became joint treasurer of the '**Selsdon Wood Preservation Society**'. Her name is in the lease when it was finally transferred to the National Trust thereby saving it forever (the NT land/properties are 'inalienable' which is a unique ability in law to be untouchable by future governments and councils for any land grab).

Alice was single, independently wealthy, highly educated and well connected. She was one of 8 children. She was orphaned early and she and her sisters were raised in Croydon as 'wards'. No photo of Alice but (thanks to ornavernum.org.) I have found family information and some photos of her parents, Charles and Mary.



One of her childhood addresses was a school in Croydon where perhaps she also worked as a teacher. One of the benefits of her inherited wealth was that she did not have to follow the conventional path expected of women of her generation.

Furthermore she had the rather extraordinary example of her aunt (Anna Kingsford) to show what a clever and determined woman could do if she put her mind to it.

Anna (Annie) Kingsford (nee Bonus) 1846-1888 was an acclaimed author, womens' and animal rights campaigner, Doctor, vegetarian ambassador, famed occultist, and visionary mystic.

Excerpts of her books and biographies can be seen online. She was famous in her day and mixed in the highest circles. A published writer since her teens, she forced her parents acceptance of her choice of husband. With his blessing and leaving behind her daughter, at the age of 27 she went to Paris for 6 years to study medicine. Her intention of taking the qualification being to give her the legitimacy and authority to speak publicly on matters. She was one woman amongst a hundred male medical students and her strong anti-vivisectionist stance making this particularly difficult. She persevered and returned to the UK as one of the first few female Doctors in the UK.



Her life story would make a fascinating film and has been most recently discussed in 'Anna Kingsford and the Intuitive Science of Occultism' by Christine Ferguson 2021. It is noted that

her last letter to the press, dated September 14, 1887, was on the subject of “**Fur and Feathers.**” The title of this letter may be a coincidence, but this was the name of the female Croydon based society that began two years later and was to become the **RSPB** and which her Croydon based nieces were likely members. The RSPB were early supporters of the Save Selsdon Wood Campaign to create a “bird sanctuary”.



Alice's younger sister was (Mary) **Isabel Bonus** 1875-1941. She was also independent and unconventional. She grew up with Alice in Croydon at Woodford House School Dingwall Road and attended a local church which may be where she met May Ethel Muir (**M.E.M**) **Donaldson**. They were long term collaborators, and likely life partners. Isabel moved to Scotland with May perhaps attracted by the famous Glasgow school of Art. As a successful illustrator she provided the bookplate illustration for a 1904 edition of William Morris' poetry book 'The Defence of Guenevere'.

MEM Donaldson achieved great and lasting acclaim for her beautiful books including her own photography on Scottish life and heritage. May's first book, Isles of Flame, with watercolour illustrations by Isabel, was published in 1913. They continued to work together on the books that followed.

In the preface of one of her books she wrote:

“It is my greatest regret, that owing to the prohibitive cost of reproductions in colour, it has been impossible to illustrate the book with the exquisite water-colour pictures of my friend, Miss Isabel Bonus, with whose rare talent, readers of my previous books, and other people's, are familiar. “



They built a house in Scotland which after Isabel's death was left to ruin. It is likely that Isabel would have supported her sister's campaign for Selsdon Wood's preservation amongst their wealthy and influential friends in Scotland because the triumph of the saving of Selsdon Wood was noted in the 'Scottish Times'.

Janet Sharp