

Mary Crowley: Beginnings of the Career of a Pioneering Modern Movement Architect in Britain before 1945

Mary Crowley (1907–2005) was an exceptional Modern Movement architect yet her contribution is largely unrecognised and overlooked. This article looks at her pre-war background, training and early works. Mary grew up in the utopian Garden Cities at Letchworth and Welwyn when they were being established. She trained at the Architectural Association (AA) in 1927, just ten years after the school allowed women to join. After graduating in 1932 she became an associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in 1934. Her early works include a group of three houses for her family influenced by Scandinavian Modernist ideas. She worked with other Modernist architects including Ernö Goldfinger and Maxwell Fry and was involved in the British Pavillion of the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Techniques dans la Vie Moderne Paris 1937* designed by Oliver Hill. After 1945, she worked at the newly formed Hertfordshire Architects Department and at the Ministry of Education's Architects and Building Branch.

Keywords: Mary Crowley, Medd, schools, Modern Movement, Sewell's, Hertfordshire

Utopian Beginnings

Mary Crowley was born in Bradford in 1907¹ into a Quaker family rooted in the idealism and utopian experimentation of Quaker industrialists, Joseph and Seebohm Rowntree and Ebenezer Howard, and their concept for garden cities. These ideas initially shaped the 150 acre site model village at New Earswick near York and then the Garden Cities in Letchworth and Welwyn where Mary grew up and lived.² Parker and Unwin were commissioned to design New Earswick and two years later they started work in 1903 on the first Garden City at Letchworth.³

Ebenezer Howard's Garden City⁴ movement was a reaction to the overcrowding and industrial pollution of Victorian cities. He drew on Quaker precedents at Port Sunlight, Bournville and Robert Owen's 'Vision for a new society', which envisioned 'a happy home for many generations of children where they will be brought up amid surroundings that will benefit them spiritually, mentally and physically'.⁵

Mary's father, Ralph Crowley 'became one of the pioneers of the Garden City Movement and at the heart of this utopian idealism was the education and social welfare of children. Ralph Crowley believed that, as he wrote, 'a doctor cannot fulfil his more specific function of treating bodily diseases, if he is indifferent to the patient's environmental conditions and his mental and moral welfare.'⁶ Following Ralph's recruitment to the Board of Education in London in 1908, the family

1 Louise Brodie talking to Mary Medd, August 7, 1998, British Library, National Life Story Collection: Architects' Lives, National Life Story Collection: Architects' Lives, British Library C467/29, Medd, Mary, Part 1 of 11, <http://sounds.bl.uk/Oral-history/Architects-Lives/021M-C0467X0029XX-0001V0> (accessed July 6, 2017),.

2 See respectively Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty, A Study of Town Life* (London: Macmillan Publishers 1901); Ebenezer Howard, *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co 1898); Joseph Rowntree Foundation, "History of New Earswick," <https://www.jrht.org.uk/community/new-earswick-york>, accessed 4 January, 2016.

3 Walter Creese (ed.), *The Legacy of Raymond Unwin: A Human Pattern for Planning* (London and Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press 1966), 1.

4 Howard, *To-morrow*.

5 Alan Powers, *Hovels to Highrise: State Housing in Europe Since 1850*, (London: Routledge 1993), 175.

6 "Obituary, Ralph Crowley MD Lond FRCP," *The Lancet*, October 10, 1953, 785.

moved from Bradford to the newly founded Garden City in Letchworth, Hertfordshire and then in 1920 to the recently established second Garden City in Welwyn.⁷

When the family moved to Welwyn Garden City in 1921 Mary was sent to Bedales,⁸ a pioneering co-educational school founded by John Haden Bradley, which offered an alternative model to traditional English Public Schools. Mary found expression for her talents in drawing, music and art and spent many hours sketching in the (now Grade 1 Listed) Arts and Crafts Library with its double height timber structure dramatically top lit like a cathedral clerestory designed by Ernest Gimson.⁹ After she left Bedales she spent a few months with a Swiss family in Lausanne to improve her French in 1926 before enrolling at the Architectural Association (AA) in London in 1927.¹⁰

Education and Social Change

Mary was training for a profession at a time of great political and social change. It had only been 10 years since the suffragette Ruth Lowy persuaded AA Council to consider allowing women to be educated at the AA. Mary was not even eligible to vote until she entered her second year at the AA when Parliament passed the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act on 2 July 1928. In this same period, political tensions in Germany saw waves of émigrés flocking into London, including architects and designers Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, Erich Mendelsohn, Ernö Goldfinger, Arthur Korn and László Moholy-Nagy, and the Russian architects Serge Chermayeff and Berthold Lubetkin.¹¹

AA records show that Mary was a highly conscientious student who managed to get consistently high marks. She took full part in student activities including a stunning role in the Finale of the 1929 AA Pantomime with the choreography by Carmen Dillon (Fig. 1).¹² Mary was the only student to have won the AA's Travelling Studentship four years running in her second, third, fourth and fifth years. She also had her work published in the AA Journals and won the fiercely competitive



Fig. 1. AA Pantomime 1929, Mary Crowley far right. Courtesy of Architectural Association Photo Library.

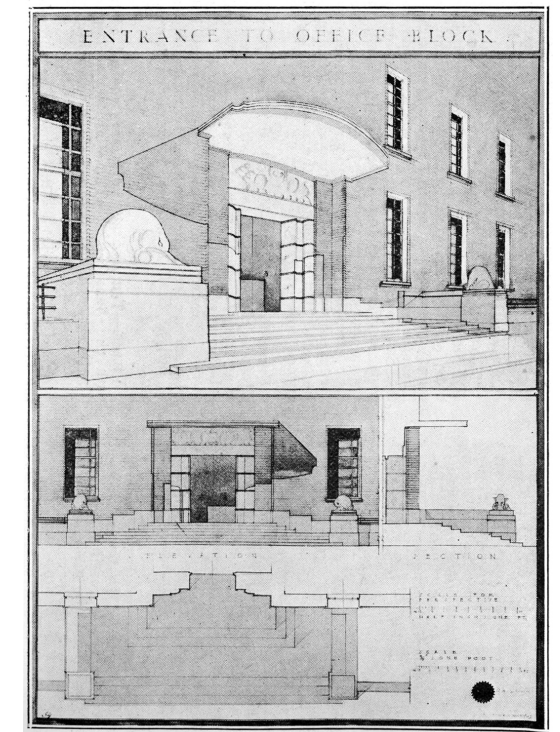


Fig. 2. Pottery Offices Entrance illustrated in *The AA Journal* 46, no. 522 (August 1930), 88. Courtesy of Dennis Sharp Archive.

and much coveted final year prize in 1932. The 1930 issue of the AA Journal includes Mary's third year project- a Modernistic rendering of an entrance to an office block (Fig. 2). The article shows a range of styles that were being explored from classical *An Application of the Orders* (Second Year, P. Cornit) to modern expressionism *Esquisse for an Island Belvedere* (Third Year W. P. Dyson).¹³

Her professional training at the AA and Travelling Studentships enabled her to travel to Scandinavia and Europe with her peers including Oliver Hill, Norah Aiton and others who pioneered Modernism in Britain. The trip to Scandinavia in 1930 was to be one of the most formative experiences of her student life. Organised by F.R. Yerbury, a group of 93 students and staff set off from St Pancras on 16 July 1930 a few days after she was presented the Third Year Course AA Travelling Studentship for £31.10s. Travelling by train and boat the group spent two days in Gothenburg, five in Stockholm and four in Copenhagen.¹⁴ Photographs of the buildings visited were exhibited at the AA from 24 November to 20 December 1930 and a detailed account of the trip was published in the December issue of the *AA Journal* (Fig. 3).¹⁵ The trip included visits to a number of new innovative schools in Gottenburg by Arvid Bjerke and Gunnar Asplund, and in Stockholm the group saw a new school by

⁷ Frederic James Osborn, F.J., *Green-belt Cities* (London: Faber & Faber, 1946), 36.

⁸ John Haden Badley, *Bedales: A Pioneer School*, (London: Methuen 1923).

⁹ Historic England (March 16, 1954, updated August 11, 1968) List Entry 1278033, Bedales Memorial Library, Lupton Hall and Corridor, <http://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1278033> (accessed November 3, 2015).

¹⁰ Louise Brodie talking to Mary Medd, September 7, 1998, National Life Story Collection: Architects' Lives, British Library C467/29, Medd, Mary, Part 2 of 11, <http://sounds.bl.uk/Oral-history/Architects-Lives/021M-C0467X0029XX-0001V0> (accessed July 6, 2017).

¹¹ Charlotte Benton, *A Different World: Émigré Architects in Britain 1928–1958*, (London: RIBA 1995).

¹² HMSC, "AA Pantomime 1929," *The AA Journal* 45, no. 515 (January 1930), 280–283. Carmen later won an Oscar in 1949 for the Best Art Direction-Set Decoration for the 1948 Olivier version of *Hamlet* and was nominated for a number of BAFTA's and won an Emmy Award in 1975. Ronald Bergen, "Carmen Dillon: Oscar winning art director setting the scene for great British films," *Guardian*, April 21, 2000.

¹³ Frederic Etchells, "Exhibition of Students' Work," *The AA Journal* 46, no. 522 (August 1930), 82–92.

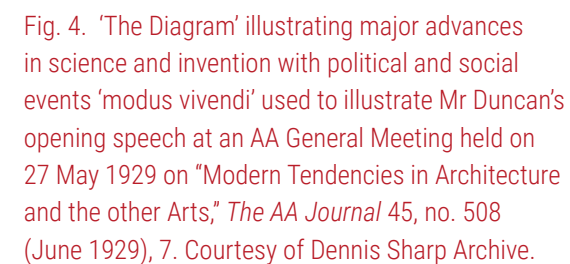
¹⁴ A. A. "Excursion to Sweden and Denmark, 1930," *The AA Journal* 46, no. 526, (December 1930), 179–95; "The A.A. Visit to Sweden and Denmark," *The AA Journal* 46, no. 522, (August 1930), 104–6 and 81.

¹⁵ Ibid.

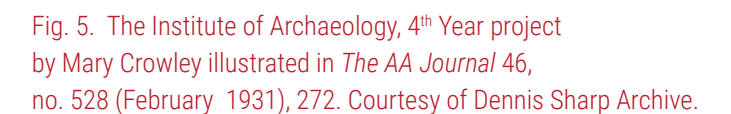


After the 1930 trip Modernism could no longer be ignored and Goodhart-Rendel's address to the AA General Meeting on 23 February 1931, when Mary was in her fourth year, gives an insight into the debates around stylistic attitudes:

16 Dennis Sharp, *A Visual History of Twentieth Century Architecture* (London: Heinemann 1972), 114.



in some parts of Scandinavia and Germany a modern real style that has evolved naturally from changing practice in construction and changing fancies in ornament. ...In more backward countries the modern style is conceived of as a style of pure negation, its aesthetic weakness bolstered up by mechanical theory or unintelligible philosophy (Fig. 4).¹⁷



Mary's fourth year project from 1931 for An Institute of Archaeology, published in the February issue of the *AA Journal*, (Fig 5) looks remarkably like the 1934 RIBA Headquarters which was influenced by Östberg's Town Hall and Asplund's City Library in Stockholm.¹⁸ In her final year, 1932, she had two of her projects published in the *AA Journal*: *A British Centre for Arts and Sciences in France* fifteen kilometres from Paris on the banks of the Seine, and her thesis subject which was *An Educational Centre for a Town of 25,000 Inhabitant* (Fig 6).¹⁹ The Educational Centre is remarkably futuristic with curtain walling along one elevation and Scandinavian style Modernist treatment on the other. In this final thesis she mentions the school system of Gary, Indiana that her father had visited in 1913 and the first of Henry Morris' village colleges in Sawston (the precursor to Gropius's Impington). Mary left the AA at the top of her class, winning the highly coveted medal from the *Société des Architectes Diplômés par le Gouvernement*, Paris, a prize for the best Diploma student of

17 Harry Stuart Goodhart-Rendel, "Growing Pains," *The AA Journal* 46, no. 529 (March 1931), 283.

18 "AA School Fourth Year Project," *The AA Journal* 46, no. 528 (February 31), 269–73.

19 Respectively in *The AA Journal* 48 no. 545 (July 1932), 52 and 55, and *The AA Journal* 48, no. 548 (October 1932), 103.

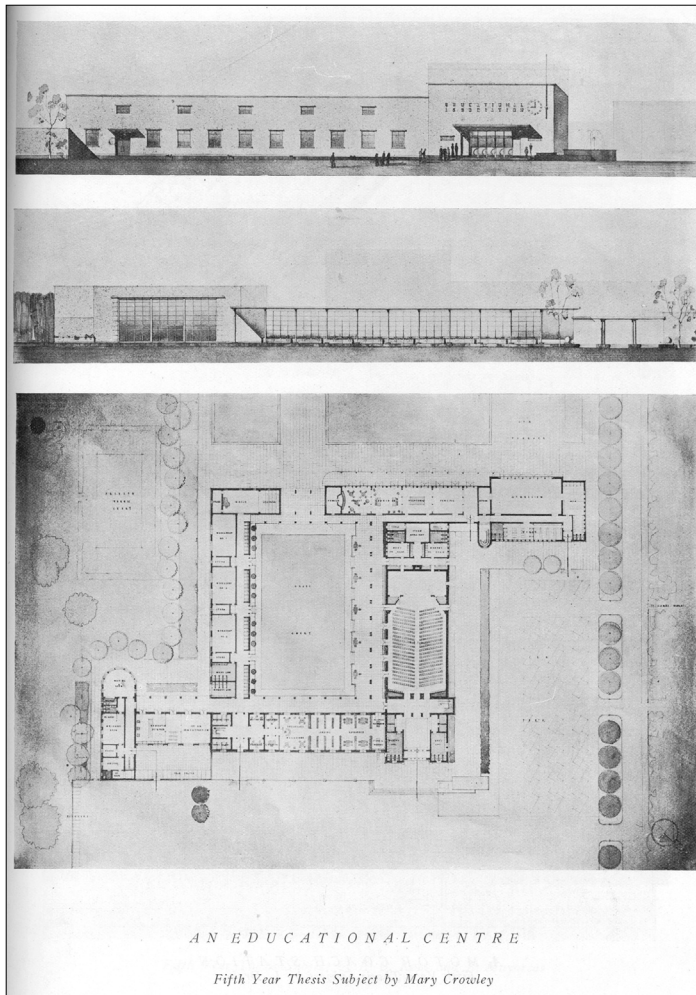


Fig. 6. An Educational Centre, Fifth Year Thesis Subject by Mary Crowley, *The AA Journal* 48, no. 548 (October 1932), 103. Courtesy of Dennis Sharp Archive.

the session. She was also awarded the Henry Florence Travelling Studentship (£50).²⁰ While studying at the AA Mary also gained seven months experience working in the office of the architect of Welwyn Garden City, Louis de Soissons (who retired from AA Council in 1929).²¹

Early Practice

Mary left the AA at a time of the Great Depression (1929–33) when there was a serious economic downturn and work was sparse. Her family were amongst her first clients. In 1934 she started working independently on a group of three houses at Sewell's Orchard, Tewin, for her parents, her sister Elfrida and brother-in-law - Elfrida had married architect Cecil Kemp,²² who became the Chief

²⁰ *The AA Journal* 48, no. 545 (July 1932), 41–2.

²¹ RIBANPA_5426_Crowley_Mary_1934_1–5 (February 9, 1934), Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), London.

²² "Six pithead baths erected by the Miners' Welfare Committee: Architects: J. H. Forshaw, C. G. Kemp," *Architectural Review* (1941), 79–80.



Fig. 7. A view of Kemp House taken in 2007 with a single extension on the side, designed by the author. Courtesy of Dennis Sharp Architects.

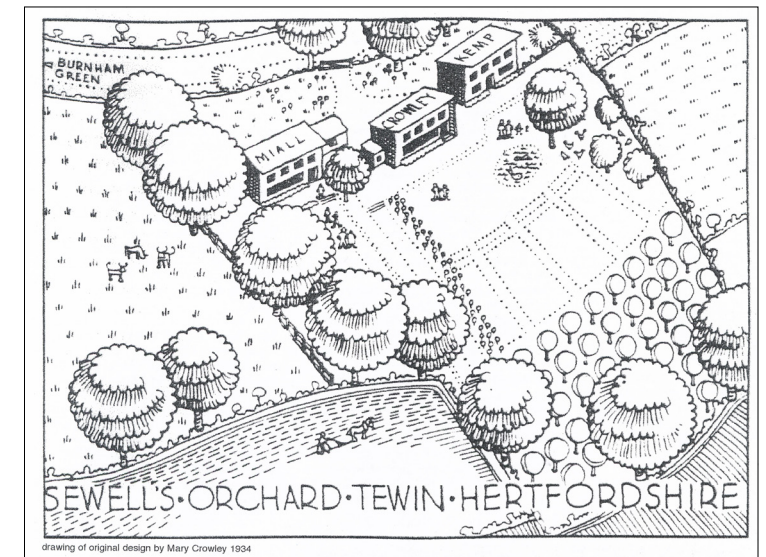


Fig. 8. Line drawing by Mary Crowley showing bird's eye view of a group of three houses at Sewell's Orchard, Tewin. Courtesy of Dennis Sharp Archive.

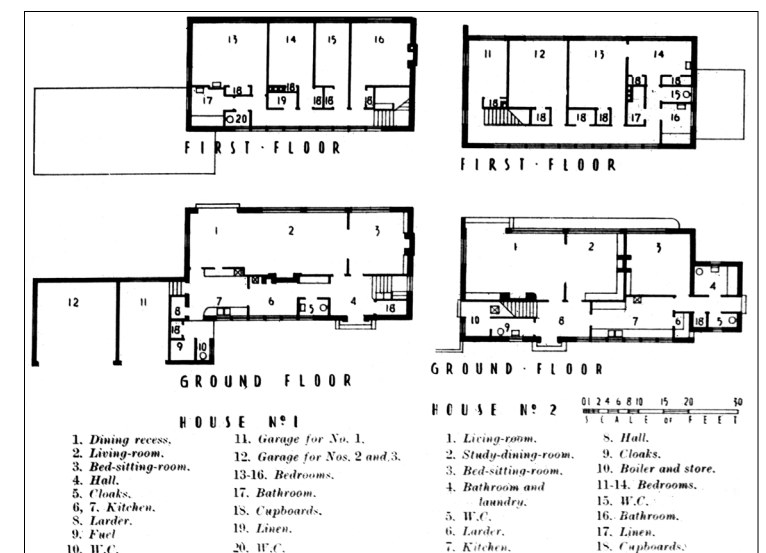


Fig. 9. "Houses At Tewin, Herts, Architect: Mary Crowley A.R.I.B.A.," *The Architect & Building News*, June 26, 1936, 388. Courtesy of Architectural Association Photo Library.

architect to the Miners Welfare Commission and was responsible for the innovative design of the pithead baths, and a third house for another Quaker family, the Mialls (Fig. 7).²³

The three houses in Tewin are radically different to anything else in the area. The mono-pitch buff brick structures look deceptively simple. The influence on the design was Scandinavian and drew on the seminal AA trip from 1930.²⁴ Every detail was carefully thought through especially in relation to the services and the control of sun, light and air. The upper floor bathrooms are grouped together with a concrete floor to cope with any leaks or future failures; the ironmongery on the windows allow for the full extent of the windows to be opened without any dividing frames and all the rooms have natural controllable air vents. The internal arrangement on the ground floor with sliding doors creates a flexible space which can be used for intimate dining or open plan parties. The shared gardens maintained a sense of the open countryside and a pond was designed to store rainwater. A simple return on the south facing façade gives each house a sense of enclosure and privacy (Fig. 7). Completed in 1936, the Sewell Orchard houses were included in an exhibition at the Building Centre²⁵ and published alongside houses by other great Modern Movement architects such as Breuer, Yorke, Goldfinger, Lubetkin, Lescaze, Chermayeff, and others in F.R.S. Yorke's book *The Modern House in England* published in 1937. This was a remarkable achievement and testament to her talent as an architect (Figs. 8 and 9).

In the same period Mary worked with Ernö Goldfinger on several projects including his own house which was part of a terrace of three units in Willow Road, Hampstead (London NW3). Goldfinger had moved to London in 1934 after marrying an English artist he met in Paris, Ursula Blackwell, (of the Crosse and Blackwell food group) and he had offices in Bedford Square near the AA.²⁶

The two housing projects are very different. Goldfinger's houses are a split level terrace of red brick faced town houses with a spiral staircase linking the multi levels whilst the Tewin houses are a group of modern villas in the countryside on one and a half acres of land. It is difficult to see what Mary contributed to the Goldfinger terrace but Sewell Orchard was entirely under her control and in her interviews she also acknowledges the help of John Brandon-Jones and Cecil Kemp.²⁷ She collaborated on projects with Brandon-Jones and other students who studied with her at the AA, including Judith Ledebor.²⁸

School Building Design

Mary collaborated with Goldfinger on a series of projects for the French toy makers Abbats and a project for a prototype prefabricated expanding nursery school commissioned by the Nursery Schools Association in 1934. A sketch of the design is held by the RIBA Drawings and Archive Collections.²⁹ She went on to design a nursery school at Kensal House, the innovative housing project by Maxwell Fry (Fig. 10). Kensal House was completed in 1937 and financed by the Gas Light and Coke Company for re-housing slum dwellers. The dramatic curve of the nursery school creates a dynamic geometry and sense of place. There are many similarities with the prototype she had designed a few years earlier for the Nursery Schools Association, particularly the use of top lights and sliding folding doors that merge inside and outside spaces. Mary was also involved in Goldfinger's *The Child Exhibit* at the 1937 British Pavilion at the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne* designed by Oliver Hill under Frank Pick. Hill was a contemporary AA student who had also gone on the AA trip to the Stockholm Exhibition in 1930.³⁰

Between 1938–40 just before the onset of Second World War, Mary and another contemporary student, Anne Parker, worked with Goldfinger on designs for evacuation, school, and holiday camps.³¹ In 1940 she collaborated with Justin Blanco White (another ex-AA student) and Goldfinger on prefabricated industrial housing design run by the RIBA.³²



Fig. 10. Nursery at Kensal House designed by Mary Crowley. Courtesy of Architectural Association Photo Library.

²³ Bill Miall, *Memoirs*, http://prism.bham.ac.uk/~miallrc/private/WEM_memoirs.pdf (accessed November 3, 2015).

²⁴ Brodie talking to Mary Medd, September 7, 1998, National Life Story Collection: Architects' Lives, British Library C467/29, Medd, Mary, Part 3 of 11, <http://sounds.bl.uk/Oral-history/Architects-Lives/021M-C0467X0029XX-0003V0> (accessed July 6, 2017).

²⁵ Catherine Burke, *A Life in Education*, (London: Ashgate, 2013), 69.

²⁶ Design Museum, "ERNÖ GOLDFINGER Architect (1902–1987) Designing Modern Britain" (2006) <http://design.designmuseum.org/design/erno-goldfinger?print=1> (accessed January 4, 2016).

²⁷ Brodie, Part 3 of 11.

²⁸ Leonard Marsh, *Mary Medd Architect 1907–2005* (Kent: Meadow Publications, 2013), 4.

²⁹ Juliet Kinchin and Aidan O'Connor, *Century of the Child: Growing by Design, 1900–2000*, (New York: MOMA, 2012).

³⁰ "The A.A Visit to Sweden and Denmark," *The AA Journal* 46, no. 522 (August 1930), 104–6.

³¹ *Architects & Building News*, October 27, 1939, 88–9, and *Architects & Building News*, March 22, 1940, 288.

³² R.I.B.A., *Industrial housing in wartime: Results of a competition organised by the Royal Institute of British Architects* (London: RIBA, 1940).

Hertfordshire County Council

1941 was a turning point for Mary when John Newson, the Chief Education Officer at Hertfordshire, offered her a job to work in the Hertfordshire County Council's Education Department.³³ There was an urgent need to help schools make arrangements for the mandatory requirement to feed school children – something her father had campaigned for. She worked with Paul Mauger on the project which mainly focused on providing facilities for cooking in small village schools. This also gave Mary an opportunity to speak to teachers about education ideas. She kept up with the ideas of Henry Morris on the village schools in Cambridgeshire through John Newsom and her father.³⁴

The 1944 Education Act radically changed the education system for secondary school in England and made all schooling free for all pupils and raised the school leaving age to 15. The new Act made it a duty of local education authorities to secure the provision of primary and secondary schools:

and the schools available for an area shall not be deemed to be sufficient unless they are sufficient in number, character, and equipment to afford for all pupils opportunities for education offering such variety of instruction and training as may be desirable in view of their different ages, abilities, and aptitudes, and of the different periods for which they may be expected to remain at school, including practical instruction and training appropriate to their respective needs.³⁵

The pressure to build new schools in a war-torn Britain where there was a shortage of materials required great ingenuity and creativity to deliver large numbers of buildings quickly and economically.

In 1945 Hertfordshire County Council appointed its first ever County Architect, C.H. Aslin. Aslin established the Hertfordshire County Architect's Department in 1946 with Stirrat Johnson-Marshall as his deputy and a team of architects including Mary and David Medd. When Mary joined the Hertfordshire Architect's Department she was nearly forty years of age, single and the only professional female architect on the staff list. Her experience of pre-fabricated building construction and her in depth knowledge of education and school design internationally made her an invaluable member of the team that was already aspiring to build fifteen schools within two years of being established.³⁶ The first three schools that were designed by the team that Mary and her future husband David Medd were part of were Essenden School (120 children), Cheshunt School (200 juniors) and Croxley Green School (320 children).³⁷

Mary's most significant work on schools, which was to have national and international impact, developed after she was 40 years of age and in partnership with her husband David Medd. The

couple married in 1949 and both moved from Hertfordshire County Architect's Department to the newly formed Architects and Building Branch (A&BB) headed up by Johnson-Marshall who was the deputy County Architect in Hertfordshire. The Medds wrote many of the *Building Bulletins* that became the standard references and set the standards for school design all over the world including the Ministry of Education *Building Bulletin 1* which was issued in the first year (1949).³⁸ The couple worked so closely together that it is difficult to single out Mary's contribution.

From the very start of her professional career Mary was a Modernist focused on the welfare of children. Her Quaker upbringing and her father's involvement in founding Letchworth and Welwyn Garden Cities meant that in her formative years, Mary was surrounded by people with vision and ideas about social justice and equality. Ideas about space, form and prefabrication evolved from what she saw and learnt on student trips especially the famous Architectural Association student trip to the Stockholm Exhibition in 1930. Mary developed her knowledge and hands-on expertise of prefabrication and school building as a member of the Hertfordshire Architects Department. This early experience enabled Mary to pursue an international and celebrated career in school design.

³³ Brodie, Part 3 of 11.

³⁴ Brodie, Part 5 of 11.

³⁵ Great Britain, *Education Act 1944*: 7&8 Geo Ch 31 (London: HMSO, 1944), 5.

³⁶ "Architectural Pre-View, The Hertfordshire Architect's Department," *Architectural Review* (February 1947), 63–6.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Geraint Franklin, 'Built-in variety': David and Mary Medd and the Child Centred Primary School, 1944–80, *Architectural History* 55 (2012), 321–367.

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