A Biographical Note on Rosa Grindon

By Dr Monika Smialkowska

Rosa Grindon, née Elverson (1848-1923) was born in the Derbyshire village of Newhall, near Burton-on-Trent. Her father William was an agricultural labourer, who progressed to become a draper, grocer, farmer, and brick manufacturer. Like him, Rosa made her own way in life, working in a succession of domestic roles, from an elderly lady's companion to a housekeeper. While employed as a Lady Housekeeper to the widower John Gilbert, the Mayor of Lichfield, she performed the duties of his Lady Mayoress and, together with Gilbert's daughter Florence, helped transcribe mediaeval texts at the Litchfield Cathedral Library for the Early English Text Society. In 1889, Rosa gained the L.L.A. diploma in English, Botany, Geology, Physiology, and Geography. The L.L.A. – Lady Literate in Arts – was the equivalent of an MA, awarded by the University of St Andrews before women were allowed to take standard university degree courses. It was delivered extramurally in different locations across Britain, and Rosa completed hers in Cheltenham.

Despite her early stated opposition to marriage, in her forties Rosa Elverson married the renowned naturalist Leopold Grindon, thirty years her senior, and moved to Manchester to live with him. By that time Leopold, formerly a cashier, was an established lecturer and author, and the couple lived in a terraced house in Cecil Street. Once in Manchester, Rosa Grindon threw herself wholeheartedly into amateur academic, cultural, and social work. She shared her husband's interest in science, particularly botany. She became an active member of the Manchester Naturalists' Society and the first woman to be elected to its Council. She was also invited to attend the meetings of the Manchester Microscopical Society, which caused some controversy, since at that time the association did not allow women to join.

Rosa Grindon championed many social causes, ranging from combatting air pollution, through fair treatment of domestic servants, to women's suffrage. She took part in meetings of the Manchester Society for Women's Suffrage, and in 1913 she was elected one of its vice presidents. The fact that she specified 'Lecturer and Suffragette' as her occupation in the 1911 census indicates that securing votes for women was a particularly important issue for her, but there is no evidence that she approved of violent means in pursuing this goal. As a lecturer, she covered a variety of topics, including literature and natural history, at such institutions as the Manchester Geographical Society, the Chester Society of Natural Science, and the Manchester Working Men's Club Association. A keen supporter of educational and cultural

associations, she was the founding member of the Life Study Society, the Ladies' Chess Club, the resurrected iteration of the Manchester Ladies' Literary Club (initially established by Lydia Becker), and other groups.

One area particularly close to Rosa Grindon's heart was horticulture. Following her husband's death, she honoured him by founding the Leo Grindon Flower Lovers' Association, and she was instrumental in the establishment of the Manchester Tramwaymen's Horticultural Society. She worked tirelessly to help those living in the squalid conditions of the turn-of-the-century Manchester to beautify their surroundings by growing plants, even if they did not have gardens and had to make do with boxes and pots in their windows and back yards. She organised and judged flower and gardening competitions, and spoke about introducing greenery to enhance the quality of life in urban areas at the first conference of 'The Cult of the Beautiful in Industrial Centres'.

Rosa Grindon's other great passion was Shakespeare. She was President of the Manchester Ladies' Shakespeare Reading Club, and she built her reputation as a Shakespearean authority in both local and national arenas. She delivered numerous addresses and courses of study on Shakespeare's plays at various venues in and around Manchester: at her own house, in local libraries, clubs, meeting halls, and theatres. Between 1909 and 1913, at the invitation of the Shakespeare Festival Committee, she lectured at the annual Festivals held at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon. She published some of her lectures in pamphlet format, and a posthumous edited collection, entitled *Shakespeare and His Plays from a Woman's Point of View*, appeared in 1930. She associated and corresponded with many of the period's leading Shakespearean actors and scholars, among them Ellen Terry, Henry Irving, Herbert Beerbohm Tree, Violet and Irene Vanbrugh, Frank Benson, Sidney Lee, and Edmund Dowden. In the winter of 1912/13, she established the Manchester Shakespeare Tercentenary Association, to prepare for the approaching three-hundredth anniversary of the playwright's death in 1916. Despite the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, the Association organised numerous commemorative activities, among them reading classes, lectures, essay writing and poetry competitions, and an exhibition of Shakespeareana. After Rosa's death, a bequest that she left in her will was used to fund the Shakespeare Window above the main entrance to Manchester Central Library.

In some of her activities, Rosa Grindon combined her love of Shakespeare and horticulture. She coached an amateur theatre troupe, the Pastoral Players, who performed scenes from Shakespeare's plays in the little open-air theatre that she created in her house's

back garden. She was also the moving force behind the establishment of a small Shakespeare Garden in Whitworth Park in 1916. This was the initiative that led to the creation of the larger and more impressive Shakespeare Garden in Platt Fields in 1922, which has recently been restored by the community group Shakey Gardeners after years of neglect.

Ethan Lemon's mural pays a fitting tribute to Rosa Grindon, referencing her two life passions and areas of achievement, Shakespeare and horticulture. Simultaneously, its colour scheme of green, white and violet alludes to her suffragist convictions, as these were the colours adopted by the movement, symbolising hope, purity, loyalty and dignity, as well as representing the acronym for Give Women the Vote.

For more information about Rosa Grindon, see:

Tony Goulding, 'Mrs Rosa Grindon', https://chorltonhistory.blogspot.com/2024/02/mrs-rosa-grindon-another-story-by-tony.html

Charlie Hulme, 'Rosa Leo Grindon (1923)', *John Cassidy: Manchester Sculptor*, http://www.johncassidy.org.uk/grindon.html

Monika Smialkowska, '"What is Shakespeare to Manchester"? Shakespearean Engagement in the North at the Turn of the Twentieth Century', in *Shakespeare in the North: Place, Politics and Performance in England and Scotland*, ed. Adam Hansen (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), pp. 219-43

'Mrs. Leo. H. Grindon, L.L.A.', *Manchester Faces and Places*, 7.1 (Oct. 1895), 7-12