Ethel Ann Burton-Brown of Prior’s Field

Julia Huxley opened Prior’s field School on 23rd January 1902. In the few years before she died aged only 46 in 1908, she created an extraordinary school for girls. Prior’s Field nurtured talent, fostered ambition and encouraged girls to look out into society – as it does to this day.

A few years prior to Julia’s death, Ethel Ann Burton-Brown, a visiting lecturer, had so impressed her, that she invited her to enter a partnership to become joint headmistress and eventually entrusted her to take over as sole head, when she knew that her health was failing.
Shortly after hearing the saddest of news, Ethel Ann gave out this heart-felt message of hope to the school community.

"We have something left to do for her sake – to work at Prior’s field and in the world outside, so that the traditions which she planted and loved so much may grow and flourish, and that her ideal for us may be realized, that we should live by admiration of all that is good and great, by ‘the unconquerable hope’, and by love to one another”

Prior’s Field Magazine, Autumn 1908

Ethel Ann gave the rest of her life to those aims, and without her Prior’s Field would undoubtedly not be the school it is today. The following paragraphs reveal more about the life of Ethel Ann Burton-Brown and the path she took to Prior’s Field.

She was born Ethel Ann Marshall in Hertford in 1868. Her father, the Rev. Charles Marshall, was Headmaster of a boys’ prep school and all her earliest lessons were shared with the boys. Her mother was a daughter of Dr. Metham, of Devonport.

When she was old enough, she went to Highfield School in Hendon, Middlesex where she was very happy, and where she worked with immense zest at every subject that she could learn. She wanted to gain all knowledge, to read all books, to learn all languages, but she also found time to practice—she played the piano with enthusiasm, and she sang. She learnt to sew and played tennis well. Ethel Ann was an outstanding scholar and she easily gained a place at Girton College, Cambridge.

Girton was the UK’s first residential institution offering university-level education for women. The College helped convince the world that women could thrive intellectually, studying the same subjects to the same level as men. Girton’s foundation was a bold step towards women’s full and equal participation in political, social and economic life; it was a pathway to widening participation and inclusion, and Ethel Ann was there in those pioneering days.
It was not an easy road these pioneers trod. Whilst they could study the same courses as men it was only in 1880, six years before Ethel Ann went up to Cambridge, that women were granted official permission to sit Cambridge University examinations.

Ethel Ann Marshall (back row, second from left) with fellow students at Girton, 1886

At this time, when Ethel Ann and her contemporaries were full of youthful optimism and the desire to learn, there were still professors who would refuse women in their classes. The students had the added pressure of not really knowing that they would be able to attend classes and receive the education they were paying for! Women weren’t allowed to receive degrees at Cambridge until 1948.

Ethel Ann wanted to study Classics; it was typical of her character that the reason she gave for this was that she knew no Greek and wanted to learn it, but the authorities didn’t think that was a good enough reason, and persuaded her to take her second subject, History.
In one way this was fortunate, for some of the greatest men in Cambridge were then lecturing in History, and she often spoke in the years after of all she owed them, in particular Professor Gwatkin, and Professor Creighton, afterwards Bishop of London, both of whom welcomed female students. These men were to become Ethel Ann’s close friends and counsellors for many years.

The culture and pioneering spirit of Girton, which went beyond just completing subjects and taking exams, must have impressed upon Ethel Ann. Not only did she commit herself fully to her academic studies, but she also played an active part in many of the co-curricular activities that were on offer.

She was President of the College Debating Society, and when in March 1888, Newnham College came for an inter-collegiate debate, The Girton Review, reports that E. Marshall rose ‘with great zest’ to oppose the motion. She was Secretary of the Historical Club and arranged readings and discussions on various historical topics.

She was almost certainly part of the Girton Fire Brigade Society which was very popular. In 1879 the Fire Brigade was founded by two students who had witnessed a nearby haystack go up in flames and realized the College would be vulnerable if a fire broke out. The existence of the fire brigade is testimony to the determination of Girton women to meet any challenges that confronted them.

Girton College Fire Brigade, early 20th Century
Women often performed better than the men at Cambridge, and Ethel Ann received a First in History, performing better than all the men in her year. Though she was never officially awarded this distinction.

After Girton, Ethel Ann married Frederick Hewlett Burton-Brown, a medical doctor, who had had a glittering career at Charterhouse and at Magdalene College, Cambridge. She had wanted to break off the engagement, but her family would not let her, and the marriage went ahead. Immediately after, Ethel Ann was taken to India where Frederick secured a position with the Indian Army Medical Service. Those were days when women followed the paths of their husbands. We can only imagine how daunting this must have been for a young woman in her early twenties to go to the other side of the world, away from everything she had been used to. But such was Ethel’s character that she determined to make the most of the situation.

They were sent to many out of the way places and there were many difficult journeys. Ethel Ann gained a quite unique knowledge of the lesser-known parts of Northern India and wherever she went she insisted upon seeing and learning what she could of native life. She was thrilled by the interesting customs she encountered. Ethel Ann was frustrated by the attitudes of others who thought it inappropriate for her to enter an Indian house and meet Indian women.

Her first two children were born in India, Beatrice, who later succeeded her mother as Headmistress of Prior’s Field and Margaret, who tragically died in infancy.

After India came a year or two in London. Ethel Ann found a new outlet here for her energy and human interest, in social work; she worked for Women's University Settlement in Southwark. The Settlement was founded by women from Girton and other women’s colleges. Its objective was to "promote the welfare of the poorer districts of London, more especially of the women and children, by devising and advancing schemes which tend to elevate them, and by giving them additional opportunities in education and recreation".

Ethel Ann had a warm and sympathetic heart and clearly had a great passion for this work. She brought this philanthropic work to Prior’s Field by encouraging the girls to support good causes in any way.
In 1896 Frederick bought a medical practice in Rome. Italy and especially Rome, were full of inspiration to Ethel Ann. Everyone of interest came to visit the Burton-Brown’s in Rome. Ethel Ann was a good conversationalist, and we can imagine how she enjoyed the talk of all those wise and learned men of every nation. The renowned archaeologist Giacomo Boni was a great friend from the first days. She watched him excavate the Roman Forum and wrote the first guidebook in English to the new excavations.

Friends who came out to Rome insisted on being "taken round" by her, and so she began to lecture on the ruins and in museums. She took every opportunity to get to know Italy and it was during those years, that she laid the foundations of her knowledge of Italian painting.

It was in Italy that her twin boys, Christopher and Theodore were born. There was also another son born in Italy, who sadly died in infancy.
The Roman life could not last forever and in 1904, Frederick was forced to give up his practice. The family moved back to England, to London where he unsuccessfully attempted to set up various medical practices. Things got so bad between Frederick and Ethel Ann that a judicial separation was drawn up. Frederick left the family and moved abroad.

Ever resourceful, Ethel Ann realised that she had the skills to become breadwinner for the family. She took up lecturing seriously. She lectured to learned bodies and to parties in the National Gallery and British Museum. She lectured in Cambridge on the recent excavations in the Roman Forum and was given the honour of being made an Honorary Fellow of the Cambridge Classical Society and the Royal Historical Society.

Her lecturing was very popular, and she was asked first to one girls' school, then to another, and in 1905, she came for the first time, to Prior's Field to lecture on Italian pictures. Her first talk was given in the girls’ hall, now the staffroom, by the light of a feeble oil lantern. Such was her knowledge of Italian paintings and Greek sculpture that these lectures became a weekly event at the school and were an inspiration to all who heard them.

![Girls’ Hall, Prior’s Field, Early 20th Century](image-url)
Mrs Burton-Brown followed up her lectures by taking parties of senior girls to London to visit the National Gallery, the British Museum and other places of artistic interest. She became a close friend of Julia Huxley who took her into partnership as joint headmistress in April 1906. The two women had the same values, and they strove to ensure that academic excellence at Prior’s Field went hand in hand with social courage, and a sense of responsibility to care for others. The school became Ethel Ann’s life for the next two decades.

It is fitting that instead of its January opening date, Prior’s Field adopted the date of Ethel Ann’s birthday on 13th June as its annual day of celebration. There were picnic teas in the rose garden as well as tennis, sports and celebration dinners. Scarlet poppies, daisies and grasses festooned the dining hall to echo the school colours, which matched the Italian flag. There was a half-day holiday, the spectacle of teachers taking part in silly games at the girls’ command and an evening of dancing. There was the rare and wonderful treat of a magnificent, iced birthday cake for the whole school to share.

The School “Birthday”, 1910
The poor relationship with her husband and the scandal that would have caused in those days, must have made life very hard for Ethel Ann, but without this, she would never had come to Prior’s Field.

The following words were written by the one who perhaps knew Ethel Ann the best, her daughter and successor as Prior’s Field Headmistress, Beatrice Burton-Brown.

“Looking back on life with Mother how can I write all I feel and the little things I remember - warmth first I think, & love; a golden spirit enclosed in a hard hard life, always longing to be free & soar to heights of scholarship and knowledge, but kept down by successive disasters and responsibilities. Looking at pictures and even more encouraging others to look at them was food for her spirit. What fun she could be too! I remember one train journey, perhaps I was 8?, from Bologna where we had been staying with some old friends in their hotel. We were always poor, our train lunch that day was grapes & bread - but some quirk from the past makes me remember it as such fun. What did we talk of? We were always happy together. But she could rage with fury, her temper was often fierce. She used to tell me off with no uncertainty. We loved each other very dearly and she was my greatest friend. She was a truly great woman”.

Prior’s Field provided a sanctuary for Ethel, a place for her to flourish and share her talents. Her determination, joy in learning, ambition for women, live on at Prior’s Field now. She was an inspiration to generations of Prior’s Field girls

Ethel Ann Burton-Brown died in 1927 and is buried near Julia Huxley at Compton. The writing on her simple gravestone reads:

"ETHEL ANN BURTON-BROWN OF PRIOR'S FIELD"
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