



The Victorian cottage at Airfield was bought with 8 acres. The family bought up neighbouring pockets of land to create a mini-demesne of 35 acres.

# Lives Less Ordinary: the Women of Airfield

This is Airfield, a Victorian cottage which was bought and extended by a successful Dublin solicitor, Trevor Overend, and his wife Lily, in 1894.

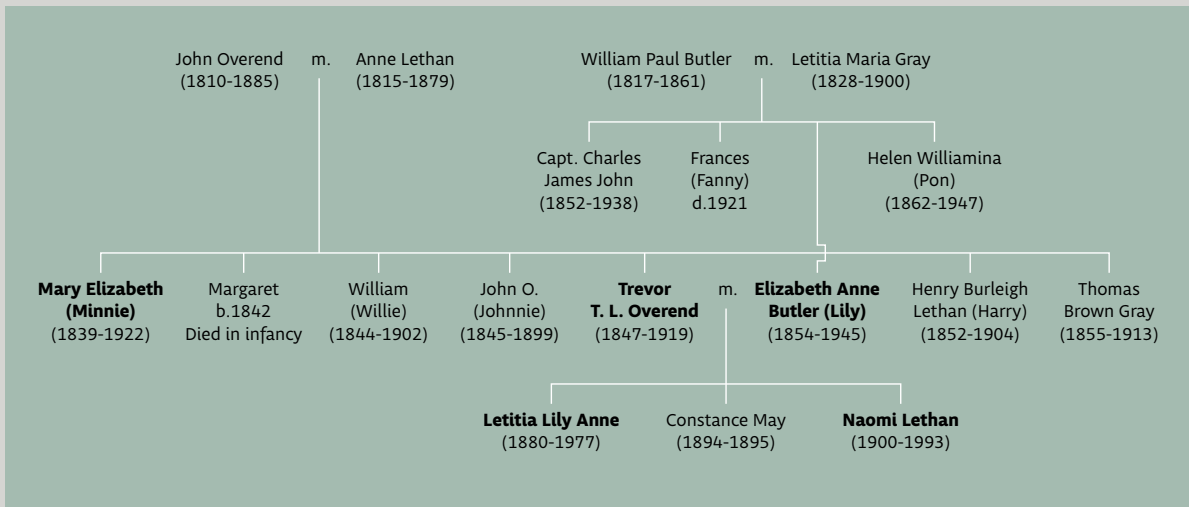
It was largely Lily, and their surviving daughters, Letitia and Naomi, who developed Airfield into what it is today: a splendid house, garden and farm in the South Dublin suburbs, which is open to the public.

The women of this extended family lived ordinary lives, but had extraordinary experiences. They travelled the world and engaged in charitable activity.



Lily's mother, Letitia Butler, was born at Upton House, and married into Broomville House, Co. Carlow; she represented a link to the world of the Irish rural gentry.

# LIVES LESS ORDINARY: THE WOMEN OF AIRFIELD

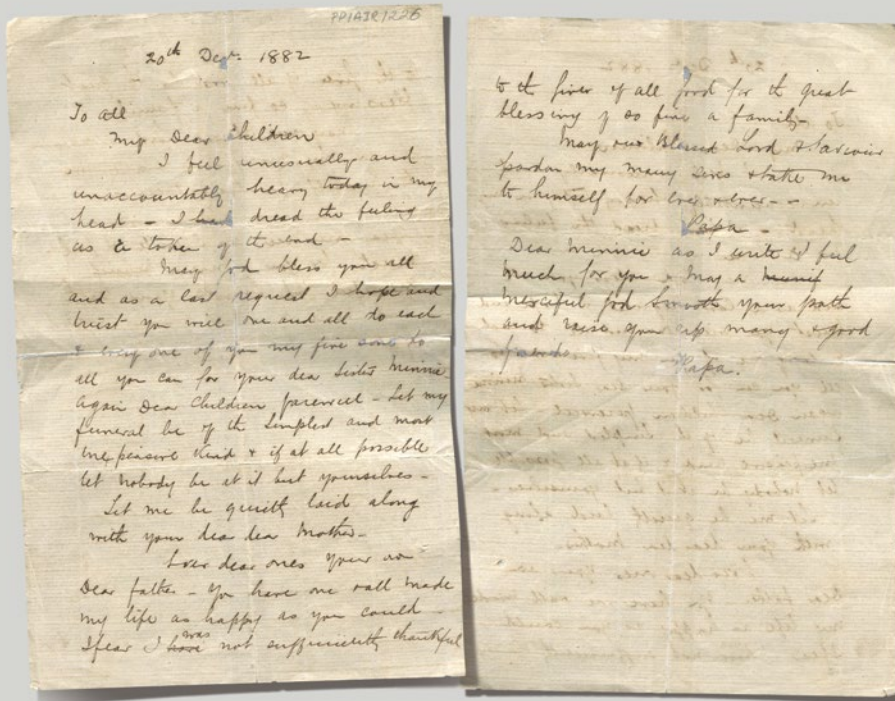


Gratefully acknowledging the support of: Airfield, Castletown House, Centre for the Study of Historic Irish Houses and Estates, Irish Research Council, John Paul II Library, Maynooth University, OPW-Maynooth University Research Centre, OPW, Stubbs Design, Yorkshire Country House Partnership.



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*'As a last request  
I hope and trust  
you will one and  
all, each & every  
one of you my fine  
sons do all you  
can for your dear  
sister Minnie.'*

John Overend's last letter to his children, December 1882.

## Unmarried Women in Society

Unmarried women of the genteel classes were seen as a problem by some in the nineteenth century. They were very likely to live in relative poverty; excluded from employment by society, and insufficiently provided for by their fathers.



Mary Evans Picture Library

## LIVES LESS ORDINARY: THE WOMEN OF AIRFIELD

An *Irish Monthly* article in 1885 discussed the problems facing these 'old maids':

*'Punch makes endless fun of them...all mankind pities them, with that pity which is so near akin to contempt...a woman who somehow has missed her vocation...They sit in gloomy rooms and they wander through the world – alone.'*

Minnie Overend, the unmarried sister of Trevor, suffered under the dominant succession pattern, where property passed from father to son – it was assumed that a woman would be supported by a husband.

As he lay dying, her elderly father, John, wrote an open letter to his children. He asked his five sons to look after Minnie. But this letter was not legally binding. If he had died without writing it, would the forty-six-year old Minnie have received any support from her siblings?

Minnie was forced to rely on the goodwill of her younger brothers. Her dependant position affected her. When her brother Harry died in 1904 she wrote:

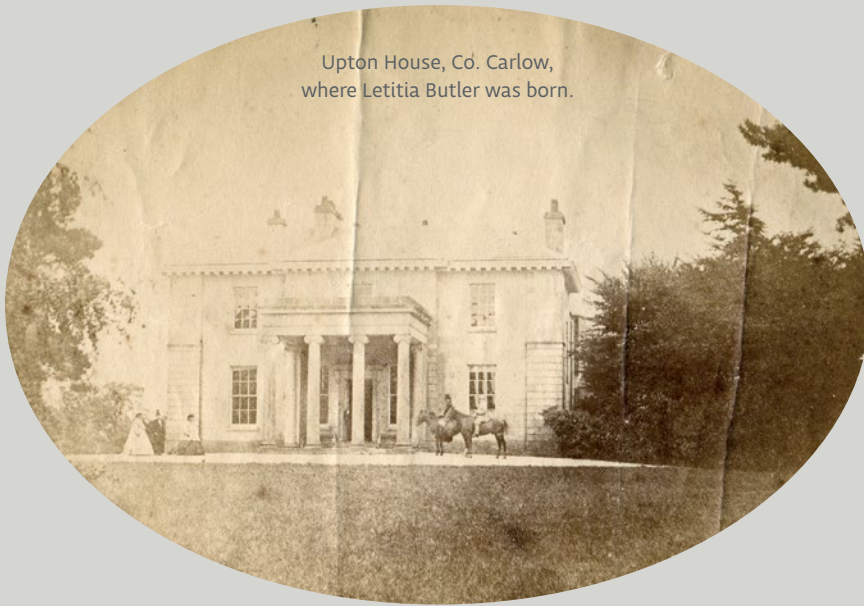
*'It is very mysterious why Harry – who had so much for which to live – should be taken – & I who seem to be of no particular use should be left.'*



The late-nineteenth century calls for increased rights for women in property, education, employment, and the vote, led to fears of their de-feminisation. In 1870, *Punch* caricatured such campaigners as over-educated and unattractive spinsters, in 'An Ugly Rush'. Their unseemly behaviour in agitating for votes contrasted with the elegant woman who was fulfilling the 'natural' role of wife and mother in the background.



Minnie Overend, c.1880.



Upton House, Co. Carlow,  
where Letitia Butler was born.



The solicitor Trevor Overend and his  
fiancée Lily, on their engagement in 1879.

## A Place Called Home

Wills drawn up by fathers or husbands could have a profound impact upon family life. The provisions they made, or did not make, for female members of the household had an impact for years to come.

Saint Stephen's Green Park, Dublin, c.1899  
(trialsanderrors/licensed via Wikimedia Commons)



# LIVES LESS ORDINARY: THE WOMEN OF AIRFIELD

Women of historic houses were rarely secure in their homes beyond the lifespan of father or husband. Like Minnie Overend in 1882, Lily Butler lost her permanent home on her father's death in 1861. Lily's brother, Capt. Charles Butler, inherited the family seat. Shortly afterwards, Lily, her sisters and her mother moved to rented accommodation in Dublin. This insecure existence came to an end for Lily when she married Trevor Overend in 1879.

Not only did he provide her with a secure home during his lifetime, but in his will of 1919, he made a dramatic departure from the poor provisions made by John Overend and William Butler for their wives and daughters. He made his widow and daughter financially independent. Recognising 'all her great goodness', he organised for the sale of his practice, so the proceeds could go towards her upkeep during widowhood.

Neither of Trevor's daughters, Letitia and Naomi, married, but they were freed from the dependency experienced by many unmarried women. They were fortunate to be made financially independent through bequests – Letitia from her bachelor uncle Tommy, and Naomi from her father. Understanding how precarious finances could be for single women, Letitia supported her aunts financially for the rest of their lives. Her maternal aunts, Fanny and Helen, affectionately referred to their house as 'Letitia Lodge' to mark this support.

*'I give my motor car and all accessories thereto and all my wines liquors and consumable stores, and all live and dead stock and all my wearing apparel to my said wife absolutely.'*

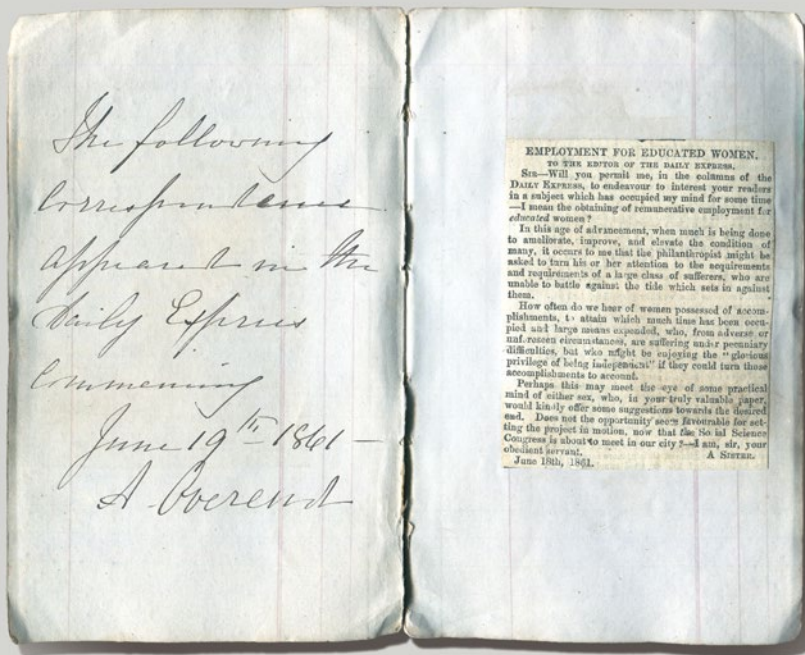
Detail from the will of Trevor Overend, 1919.

Wills of unmarried women might be no more than an informal set of wishes jotted down on paper; very often they were not accompanied by the signatures of witnesses, and consequently had questionable legal standing. With much less property to bequeath than their brothers, there was less need for formality.

*Wishes*  
I have left the letter I first wrote as only a few things altered, as Drummog is not here now  
Lot, Drummog Ling, Multiple Gold Cases,  
Picture of King & May, standing by Anna-Egan -  
Picture of 1st Garden by Horrie Bell  
Picture of 2nd Garden by John Drummog  
Mush, Cap Cooked Ling, Small Harmonid  
Charles Ling - Leo's Cross - Smoke  
Picture of 3rd Garden - Anderson's  
Picture of 4th Garden - Anderson's  
Chair, Household things if she still has  
Clothes any that suit, some black & Plate  
Golden Wedding Tea set, Sapphire ring  
but love me, if not give to Kathleen G  
Pictures -  
Emme Lyndall - Pearl Brooch in case  
Kathleen Greville, Black Cabinet & over glass  
not to be sold as most China belonged to  
Brookville - & Blue, Brown, China - the rest does  
not matter. also give Kathleen Harlagin Tea  
set, my press on Top Lobby which was a tweedling  
press on 3rd floor. Helen's Book to the Cap  
Don't give anything made by the Cap



Helen Butler's informal will or 'wishes', leaving bequests of jewellery, 'household things', pictures and clothes to her circle of family, friends, and servants.



Above: Minnie Overend pictured around the time of her journey to Alexandria.

Left: Minnie's mother, Anne's, scrapbook of articles on the women and work debate.

## Leaving Home

Women who had no secure income or home would sometimes travel to find work, and greater independence. By the end of the nineteenth century growing numbers of women were entering the labour market, but some sections of society still viewed their right to education, suffrage and independence with suspicion.



Egyptian street scene c.1890

## LIVES LESS ORDINARY: THE WOMEN OF AIRFIELD

In 1899, at the remarkable age of sixty, and after a lifetime of relying financially upon her brothers, Minnie struck out for a degree of independence. She travelled to Alexandria, Egypt, to take up a position suitable for an 'educated lady' of her social standing: matron of a home for European nannies and domestic servants.

Minnie's brother, Harry, worried about the effect such a hot climate could have on her health:

*'I am greatly afraid that life in Alexandria during the hot season would bring suffering, particularly in a house that was not managed with plenty of money.'*

But Alexandria was an independent home-away-from-home for Minnie. She had the freedom to continue her usual pastimes with English-speaking friends, while managing the recruitment of servants, and taking regular sight-seeing excursions.

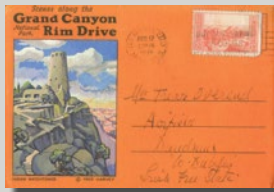
Minnie had always wanted to travel, and had copied pages of travel writing into her diary since she was a teenager. Her voyage to Egypt allowed her to take on the persona of a travel writer, and she commented on everything from the 'Crowds of Arabs in their flowing robes' to the Sudanese railway system. Her journal was certainly written with a wider audience than herself in mind.



*'Next morning was lovely [after leaving Gibraltar on the way to Egypt]. It was bright. Sun shining & sea smooth, & the range of the Sierra Nevada along the Spanish Coast looked lovely, the snow covered tops of the mountains glistening in the sun. The next three days were deliciously calm, the Sunsets indescribably beautiful. The long golden track seeming to go straight from the ship to the Sun – the gorgeous colours of the afterglow, and the silvery beam of the moon shining at the same time must be seen to be appreciated.'*

Extract from Minnie's travelogue.

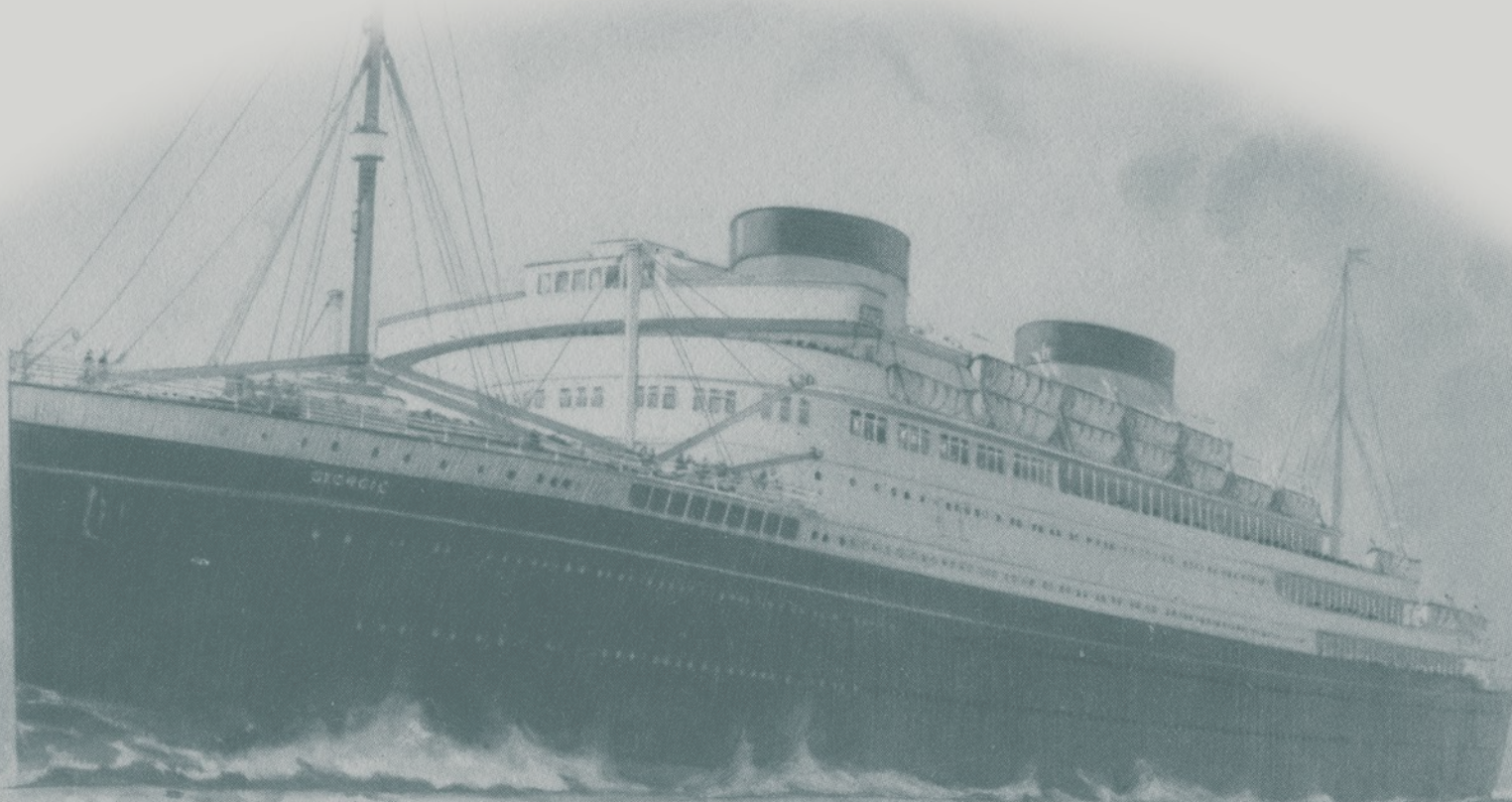




Travel mementoes collected from some of the many places visited by the Overends.

## Travel and Freedom

The Overends were a global family, and had relations and friends living as far away as India, New Zealand and Australia. Physical activity and independent travel did not daunt them. Both Letitia and Naomi learned to drive. They drove around Ireland in their prized Rolls Royce cars, and circumnavigated the world.



## LIVES LESS ORDINARY: THE WOMEN OF AIRFIELD

In 1878, Fanny Butler went on a walking holiday in the Lake District, with her aunt Bessie. They were not restricted by 'lady-like' etiquette, and Bessie climbed down a hill 'in a sitting posture, with the aid of her heels and hands', laughing all the way.

Fanny's niece, Naomi Overend, also enjoyed the delights of travel, exercise and tourism. She took an annual skiing holiday, travelling on her own to Kitzbühel, Austria, where she made many friends.



### Naomi Overend and Anschluss

Naomi's 1938 trip to Austria was particularly eventful, as she witnessed the arrival of German troops into Kitzbühel during Anschluss. On a visit to her friend Countess Bigner in Vienna, Naomi watched 'Göering review troops'. She caught the unfurling of Nazi flags on camera.

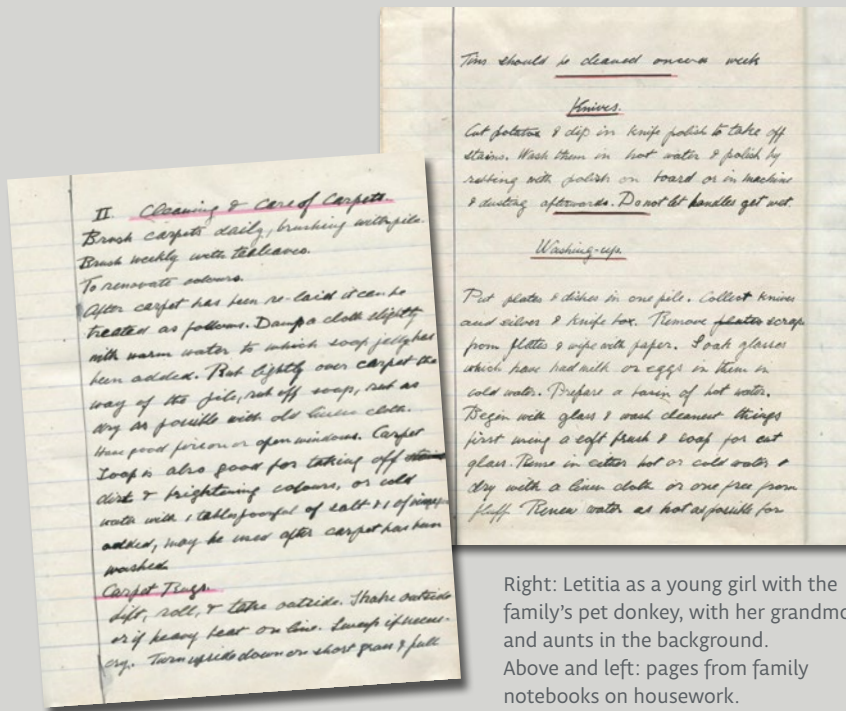


Naomi Overend (left) pictured with friends on the ski slopes.

Naomi's travels continued after the Second World War when she journeyed to the South Pacific, Australia and New Zealand. Whilst travelling first class (as always), she was one of six passengers chosen to sit at the Captain's table, though;

*'Neither I nor the other 6 know why we were elected for none of us are statesmen, film stars, business magnates or directors of the line!'*  
(28 July 1956).





Right: Letitia as a young girl with the family's pet donkey, with her grandmother and aunts in the background.  
Above and left: pages from family notebooks on housework.



## Returning Home

Despite their interest in travel, the Overend sisters relished running their home, also garden and farm at Airfield. Like their mother and aunts, they received training in household management, cooking and cleaning – everything from ‘how to iron knickers’ to cleaning carpets and making marmalade.



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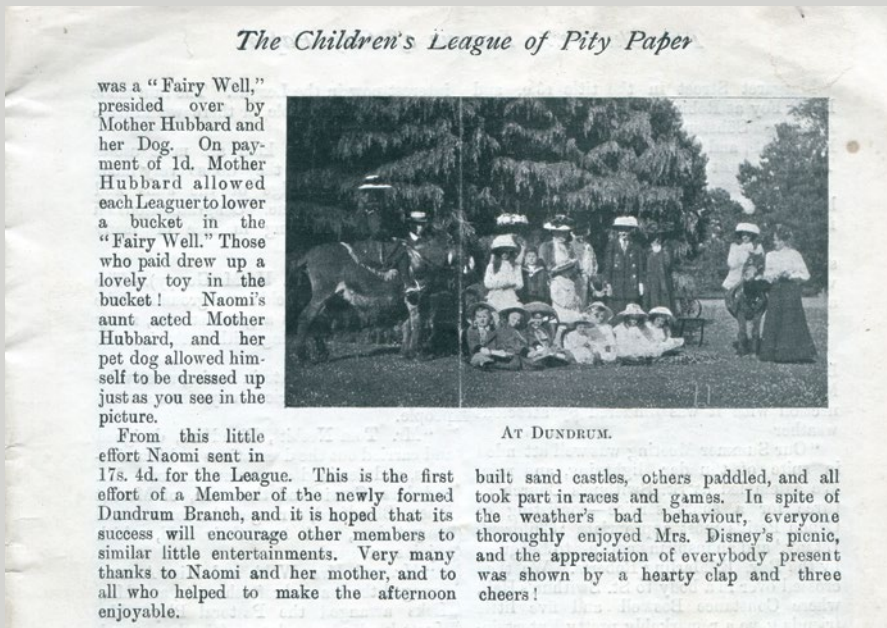


Their mother, Lily, had a rural upbringing in Co. Carlow, and was interested in gardening and farming. When she moved to Airfield with her husband Trevor she set about creating a miniature demesne in the Dublin suburbs. Within a year of the couple setting up home, she was already collecting eggs and engaging in hobby farming.

Letitia and Naomi were equally passionate about the farm, and delighted in working in a traditionally male industry. They became adept at buying Jersey cows, entering shows and selling produce. Naomi was still entering cattle (named after characters in Gilbert and Sullivan operas) in the Royal Dublin Society Spring Show in 1991, when she was 91 years old.

This desire for excellence in the Jersey herd was a reflection of the sisters' wider social conscience, and belief in the importance of clean, uncontaminated milk for children. Letitia had helped found the Children's Sunshine Home in 1925, with a donation of £5,000. This charity provided nutrition and short-term residential care for inner-city children suffering from rickets. The Sunshine Home passed a resolution in 1930 to pressure the Free State government into banning the sale of contaminated milk.





Details of Naomi's fundraiser at Airfield were included in the Irish notes of *The Children's League of Pity Paper* in 1909.

## War, Charity and Fulfilment

Charitable activity was perceived as an essential duty of middle- and upper-class women, which was instilled from an early age. Naomi was a member of the Children's League of Pity – the middle-class children's fundraising wing of the NSPCC.



# LIVES LESS ORDINARY: THE WOMEN OF AIRFIELD

*In this League we seek the help of well-to-do and happy children in the cause of those who are sorrowful and suffering... It is a costly thing to make people who are cruel to children to do right, and we need all the help which kind-hearted and unselfish young folks can give us to make all the homes in the country, where little children are unblessed by love, and who are sick, sad, and tearful, as happy as the homes who join our Children's League of Pity.*

Mary Bolton, 'The Children's League of Pity. What it is',  
*The Children's League of Pity Paper* (1893)



## Letitia and the First World War

Letitia was thirty-four, and independently wealthy, when the First World War broke out. She became a central member of the Alexandra College Branch of the Saint John Ambulance Brigade, eventually rising to the position of Chief Superintendent of the Nursing Division in Ireland. She worked daily at the Irish War Hospital Supply Depot, in Merrion Square, sending medical supplies to war hospitals on the front. She missed the camaraderie of working in the depot when the war ended, but continued volunteering in the organisation.

Letitia Overend wearing her Order of the Hospital of Saint John medals. She was awarded an honorary doctorate from Trinity College Dublin in 1961 in appreciation of her voluntary charitable work.





Letitia Overend in old age in her garden with one of her many pet dogs, and prized Rolls Royce in the background. In addition to their charity work and travel many pages of the sisters' diaries demonstrate their strong connection to the house, garden, and farm at Airfield, where they spent much of their time.

## Airfield Today

Both Letitia and Naomi inherited considerable personal wealth. In the spirit of social responsibility, they devoted large sums, and considerable time to their chosen charities, and they worked in a private way to alleviate the financial difficulties of less fortunate family and friends – Naomi even offered to buy her friend's house, and return the deeds after the sale.



# LIVES LESS ORDINARY: THE WOMEN OF AIRFIELD

Letitia and Naomi were imbued with the independent spirit and self-assurance of their position in society. Without husband or children they could move with confidence through the world as travellers, Rolls Royce owners, philanthropists and businesswomen. They were not to be taken advantage of, and would move funds elsewhere if a charity would not use the money correctly.

The sisters were given independence by the generosity and enlightened attitudes of their father and uncle, who did not reserve the largest bequests for male heirs; but they also benefitted from changing social attitudes in the twentieth century. Letitia was twenty-four before women

were allowed to study at Trinity College Dublin, but she would go on to receive an honorary doctorate from the university in 1961.

They had no direct heirs. Instead of allowing their house and land to be broken up or sold to developers, the sisters founded a charitable trust. They succeeded in creating their own legacy; a private haven of countryside in suburban Dublin, which is used as a recreational and educational resource.

Their little estate would outlast their lives, and the great estates of their Butler Ormond relatives. Today this dynamic enterprise is a testament to the growth of opportunities for unmarried women, which occurred in just two generations.



Naomi Ormond and the 1926 Rolls-Royce she keeps in pristine condition.

## Naomi's Rolls Royce makes ad-men purr

BRITISH admen running a lavish campaign to bolster the image, and fortunes, of the Rolls-Royce have called on the experiences of a unique Irish motoring family.

When it comes to demonstrating the longevity of the top people's car there is no better example to quote than that of the 1926 tourer owned by Miss Naomi Ormond of Dublin, and the admen are doing just that.

"Miss Letitia Ormond of Dublin" mentions the crepe colour advert in the glossy magazine, "I drove her 1926 Rolls-Royce every day for over 50 years. Her sister Naomi is still driving the same car".

The Ormond family is one of the best known in Irish vintage and veteran motoring circles and the car that is helping to broaden their fame is a Mulliner-bodied drop-head which was imported to Ireland in early 1927.

Miss Letitia bought it in London for £1,700 and soon became a familiar sight around Dundrum, the family's home, and the city.

She kept the car in pristine condition, and even maintained it herself — there are 30 grease points alone — having picked up the necessary skills by spending some time at the Rolls school.

Miss Letitia, who was Superintendent-in-Chief of the St. John Ambulance Brigade, travelled around Ireland in the car and visited England, where it caught the attention of the Rolls-Royce people in the mid-50s. A spokesman said: "It was in perfect running order thanks to her excellent maintenance".

When she died in 1975, her sister Naomi decided to keep the car in the family and take the wheel herself.

"I don't however, use it that much nowadays," said Miss Naomi. "It is even with a bit to loose and run and of course, there's the road tax too. The factory rate is a 20 horsepower but here the Government rate is a 22 horsepower which makes it pretty costly. It hasn't been out for some time."

Vintage car enthusiasts call it the Ormond home from time to time to start their car up and run it around, and a representative of Herts, the Dublin Rolls-Royce agent, calls regularly to take the motor for a spin on the open road.

"The car was originally ordered by an English gent for his wife," says Miss Naomi, "who later also actually was asked her car" but when she saw it she said she didn't want it. So, Letitia bought it."

"It even became something of a film star in 1972 when the Columbia Broadcasting Company of America came here and filmed it for a programme. They were taking a Rolls-Royce" after the American market.



Letitia and Naomi's cars were an expression of their independence. Both sisters attended training at the Rolls Royce School of Instruction so they could maintain them themselves. Letitia's 1927 Rolls was driven daily for over fifty years. The sisters never hired a chauffeur, because they wanted the pleasure of driving for themselves. They would not sell their cars or their land, and both can be visited today.