

# WHERE *FLOWERS*

# BLOOM IN THE SANDS



Gertrude Jekyll's long-lost watercolours of her Mediterranean travels have recently come to light in a Surrey library. JUDITH TANKARD assesses this surprising side of the great gardener's life.

**L**ONG before she settled down to a quiet and purposeful life at Munstead Wood, Gertrude Jekyll was an intrepid, if not fearless, traveller in foreign lands. Voyages which took her in the late 1860s and early 1870s to Greece, Turkey and North Africa, as well as Italy and France, stimulated her well-known interests in exotic plants, landscapes and local customs. Because she was a young art student at the time, she invariably brought along sketchbooks and a paintbox (Fig 3), but few examples of her watercolours have survived from these travels. The recent discovery of two albums filled with watercolours painted during these voyages sheds new light on Miss Jekyll's artistic talents and formative design sensibilities.

Turning the leaves of these albums when he was writing his aunt's biography after her death in 1932, Francis Jekyll noted 'Arab cemeteries, chalk-white against the vivid blue of sky or mountains, courtyards

splashed with crimson sprays of *Bougainvillea* (Fig 6), ruins of Roman cities guarded by the sentinel spike of an *Asphodel*, the villa gardens with their riot of scarlet and orange, the changeless types of the Orient against a silhouette of flowering *Aloc* or *Prickly Pear*, the solemn outline of distant mountains against a sunset sky'.

This extraordinary collection of watercolours has been lying in the Surrey Local Studies Library in Guildford, undisturbed for years and long considered lost. The leather-bound albums, probably acquired after the Jekyll family's possessions were dispersed at auction in 1948 and then forgotten, contain dozens of the watercolour sketches so vividly described by Francis Jekyll. Dating from 1866 to 1874, they are all carefully labelled in Miss Jekyll's distinctive hand, but are unsigned. In addition to the Algerian, French and Italian scenes are numerous views of Surrey, such as Bramley House, where she lived as a child, and houses where she stayed on family holidays.

Miss Jekyll made her first lengthy trip abroad in 1863. Barely 20 years old, she

(Left) 1—Fruit shops, Blidah, from the newly discovered album of watercolours painted between 1866 and 1874. (Above) 2—Arab house in the country, with *Iris scorpioides*

had been invited to accompany Charles Newton—he was keeper of Greek and Roman antiquities at the British Museum—and his wife, Mary, on a voyage to Turkey, Greece and Rhodes. She would amuse her fellow passengers on the journey out by sketching some of the less-fashionable travellers (Fig 7). She found the countryside filled with strange, new plants and began collecting bulbs and seed-pods. In her first book, *Wood and Garden* (1899), Miss Jekyll recalled the pleasurable aromatic shrubs which she had first discovered in the Mediterranean.

Five years after the Aegean voyage, she stopped along the French Riviera at Nice and Cannes, where she sketched the stands of umbrella pines, the olive-green foliage and reddish-brown bark of the trees shown against the azure blue mountains in the background (Fig 10). Then, in 1872, she took a month-long sketching

holiday with her brother Herbert, visiting Turin, Milan, Parma, Bologna, Ravenna and Venice. In her sketches, she usually took a viewpoint from the city looking out over the landscape, with waves of hills and clouds beyond. In Venice, however, her compositional focus on buildings along the canals, rather than attempting to emulate Turner's famous atmospheric studies.

By far the most imaginative watercolours date from her visit to Algiers during the winter of 1873-74 as the guest of Mme Bodichon (née Barbara Leigh Smith), an accomplished painter who had studied with Corot (COUNTRY LIFE, March 2, 1989). They met through Hercules Brabazon Brabazon, a mutual friend who came to Algiers in 1868 to paint. Once considered an important watercolour painter, Brabazon did hundreds of impressionistic studies of Venice, the Italian Lakes, Provence, North Africa and other places that took his fancy. Brabazon's colour harmonies were instrumental to Miss Jekyll's later garden-design theories, which were formulated on drifts of plants in colour-themed borders. Not surprisingly, Brabazon's inimitable landscapes and occasional flower studies influenced her own paintings (Fig 5).

Francis Jekyll commented that Miss Jekyll's 'susceptibility to colour

and composition reached its high-water mark' during this trip to Algeria, but her own writings offer only few details of her impressions. The Bodichons' house, where she stayed, was 'a good way up-hill, quite at the top of Mustapha Superieur, the inland suburb of Algiers', and just beyond was all open country where she invariably headed to paint landscapes, early-morning views of the plain below the Gorge of the Shiffa (Fig 9) or a view of the plain from her window (Fig 4). In Algiers and neighbouring villages, she sketched street scenes of Arab jewel merchants and market vendors (Fig 1), but these human figures are seldom as compelling as her landscapes.

Eerie views of Arab cemeteries and white houses in the countryside are highlighted against striking navy blue skies. The wild plants growing nearby are always noted (Fig 8). It was while she was in Algiers that Miss Jekyll discovered striking foliage plants, such as agaves,

opuntias, asphodels and flowering aloe, as well as fragrant shrubs. Much to her chagrin, she later discovered that most of these plants were 'unwilling to be acclimatised in England'.

As she wrote in *Wood and Garden*: 'What a paradise it was for flower-rambles, among the giant Fennels and the tiny orange Marigolds, and the immense bulbs of *Scilla*

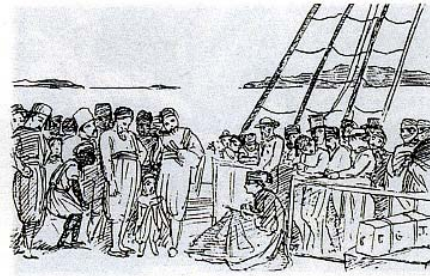
*maritima* standing almost out of the ground, and the many lovely Bee-orchises and the fairy-like *Narcissus serotinus*, and the groves of Prickly Pear wreathed and festooned with the graceful tufts of bell shaped flower and polished leaves of *Clematis carthosa*'.

She also wrote of her delight in seeing *Iris stylata* (*unguicularis*) for the first time 'in its home in the hilly wastes, a mile or two inland from the town of Algiers!' While on these botanical rambles in and around Algiers, she found the tiny, blue-flowering *Iris scorpioides* which, in one watercolour, she depicted growing among rocks, with a white house looming in the distance (Fig 2).

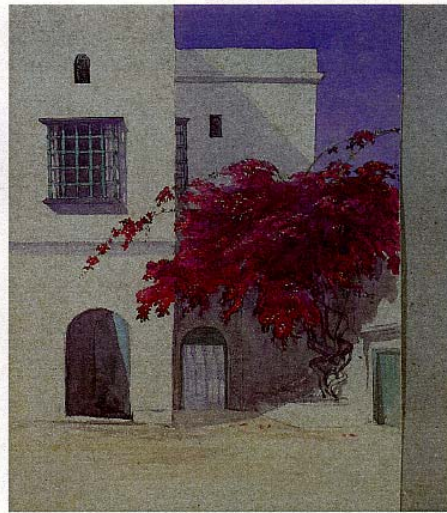
The albums will be available for researchers at the new Surrey History Centre in Woking at the end of October. The Godalming Museum has a sketchbook containing Gertrude Jekyll's pencil drawings of some of these Algerian plants and scenes.



3—Gertrude Jekyll in heavy marching order, a drawing by Mary Newton



7—Miss Jekyll sketching fellow passengers, 1863, from Gertrude Jekyll: A Memoir



(Top) 4—Eastern end of the plain—from my window. (Above left) 5—A vase of flowers. (Above) 6—Bougainvillea



8—*Clematis cirrhosa*. (Top right) 9—The Gorge of the Shiffa. (Above right) 10—Les Maures from St Cassien near Cannes