



Former Balfour Laboratory, 2011.

Image is the author's own.

The Balfour Biological Laboratory, Cambridge University: A 'Subculture' for Women? (1884-1914)

The building used for the Balfour Biological Laboratory as it appears today.

It opened in order to provide a dedicated space for women undergraduates at Cambridge to prepare for their Natural Sciences Tripos. These women already found themselves excluded from existing science clubs and tutorials. Increasing pressure on laboratory space in the early 1880s threatened to further debar these women from access to practical science demonstrations. Opened in 1884 and located between Pembroke and Emmanuel Colleges in Downing Place, the Balfour Lab occupied a central if secluded site for women science students to observe practical demonstrations and conduct experiments.

How far was the Balfour Lab integrated into Cambridge's wider research culture? Historian Marsha Richmond has suggested that the laboratories provided a 'subculture' of women's science. Informal games of badminton and lunches eaten in the labs, Richmond suggests, reflect a distinctively 'homey' atmosphere.¹ At the same time, however, the laboratory facilitated co-working between women scientists like **Muriel Wheldale** and figures such as **William Bateson**. If the Balfour Lab nurtured women's scientific ambitions, its graduates also relied upon male colleagues for contacts and references in order to advance their careers.

This separate site for women's scientific research lasted thirty years. Its closure in 1914 coincided with the opening of **Frederick Gowland Hopkins's** Department of Biochemistry. Several women (including Muriel Wheldale) went on to join Hopkins's notably mixed research group, a transfer of talent that perhaps attests to the Balfour Lab's success in preparing its women students for research careers in biochemical science.

¹ Marsha L. Richmond, "'A Lab of One's Own': The Balfour Biological Laboratory for Women at Cambridge University, 1884-1914", *Isis* **88** (1997), p. 442.