

The First Sydney Orthoptist - Emmie Russell or Audrey (Roberts) Wormald?

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INTRODUCTION

To New South Wales (NSW) orthoptists Emmie Russell is considered the doyen of orthoptics, the first in the state, one of the first in Australia and a foundation member of the Orthoptic Association of Australia (now Orthoptics Australia). In the few historical accounts of Australian orthoptics that is how she is described. But was she really the first? Certainly, she was the first qualified orthoptist but she was not the first undertake some basic orthoptic tasks. That honour goes to Audrey (Roberts) Wormald who worked under the supervision of Sydney paediatric ophthalmologist, Dr Ernest Temple Smith.

In the early 1930s Drs Norman (later Sir Norman) Gregg, Frederick Gregory Roberts and Edwin Temple Smith were Honorary Surgeons in the Department of Ophthalmology at Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children (RAHC). Temple Smith was the most senior having been appointed to the Department in 1914. Gregg followed in 1925 and, slightly later still, Gregory Roberts. According to author and doctor, DG Hamilton, Temple Smith 'prided himself on keeping up to date and was keen to establish an orthoptic clinic at RAHC before he retired.'¹ Around 1930 Gregory Roberts returned to Sydney, having spent three years working in London, and was tasked with establishing the new Orthoptic Clinic. Emmie Russell commenced her orthoptic training in Melbourne in 1932 and while waiting for her to complete it, and for the Orthoptic Clinic to be formally established, it would appear that Audrey (Roberts)



Audrey (Roberts) Wormald.



Emmie Russell.

Wormald, Temple Smith's secretary, accompanied him to RAHC where she assisted in some clinical tasks.

Audrey Roberts was born circa 1908. She spent her early childhood in Hobart. Sometime after her father's untimely death, her mother moved to Sydney. Audrey attended Ascham School in the eastern suburbs of Sydney for her high schooling from 1920 to 1923 where she gained her Intermediate Certificate.² After school she completed a business college course. She then worked as a medical secretary for a family friend, ophthalmologist Dr Edwin Temple Smith in Macquarie Street in Sydney. By February 1926 Audrey was engaged to William Dalton Wormald an Englishman with relatives in Sydney.³ She continued working with Temple Smith after she was married. This was unusual for women at that time. Most gave up work mainly because society pressure which saw a woman's place as in the home to support and care for her working husband. She did not have children and worked in Temple Smith's rooms for some years. As a young patient of Temple Smith's, orthoptist, Lyn (Lipman) Brent recalls Mrs Wormald being his secretary in the late 1940s.⁴

Hamilton records that Mrs Wormald 'was appointed the first orthoptist to the [RAHC Orthoptic] clinic. She had previously received a short training at the Royal Westminster Hospital' but this has proved to be incorrect.² In 1997 Dr Reuben Hertzberg, who had been head of the Ophthalmology Department at the RAHC, wrote an unpublished article in response to Dr Bill Gillies who had asked for more details about the history of orthoptics in Sydney. In the paper, Hertzberg contradicts Hamilton and states 'There was no orthoptic clinic at this time [that is in 1931]. Mrs Wormald attended the outpatient clinic and assisted the honoraries by taking visual acuities and instructing parents whose children had an eye occluded.'⁵

Hertzberg's comments provide some insight into Audrey's likely role as Temple Smith's secretary. The science of orthoptics developed in England in the 1920s in response to ophthalmologists' need for assistance with the time-consuming assessment of children's ocular motility status. Like the British ophthalmologists before him, it is probable that Temple Smith taught Audrey how to assess

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a child's visual acuity and give advice to parents whose children required occlusion therapy. Essentially, he was following the apprenticeship training model which had been in place before Mary Maddox established the formal orthoptic training course in England in 1928. Hamilton was referring to the period in the early 1930s. By that stage Audrey had worked with Temple Smith for several years, so she may well have been quite adept at vision testing young children.

As has been well documented the first orthoptist, Mary Maddox, was taught by her ophthalmologist father Dr Ernest Maddox, to examine and treat patients with ocular motility defects. In some ways Audrey's experience mirrored Mary Maddox's path to becoming the first orthoptist. Like Audrey, Mary first worked as a secretary, and then went on to take a great interest in the science of ocular motility function. The difference between them was the path each of them followed. Mary continued along a professional route while Audrey chose to remain a secretary and to leave the orthoptic work to the orthoptically qualified Emmie Russell. Whether Audrey ever contemplated orthoptic training is unknown but being newly married, and the only orthoptic training course in Australia was held in Melbourne, it is likely that she simply chose to remain in Sydney.

As a final note it is unclear why Audrey is referred to in Hamilton's book as Mrs 'M' Wormald. We know her husband was William Dalton Wormald and, as was the custom at the time, women adopted and were referred to by their husband's initials. She therefore should have been referred to as Mrs WD Wormald. We can only presume that Hamilton's entry is incorrect either due to a printing error or that he was given incorrect information. Hamilton wrote *Hand in Hand* in 1979 some 46 years after the Orthoptic Clinic was established. As no records can be traced that record details of how the Orthoptic Clinic was set up, it is likely that some of his information was gathered from hearsay and may have contained factual errors. Whatever the reason there is compelling evidence that Mrs M Wormald was indeed Audrey Roberts, a medical secretary, not an orthoptist. But nevertheless, under Temple Smith's tutelage she assisted him by assessing children's vision and gave advice to parents whose children required patching. She may have performed some clinical tasks, but it is Emmie Russell and not Audrey Wormald who was the first orthoptist in Sydney.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Almost as interesting as the history of Audrey (Roberts) Wormald and her role in the formative years of Australian orthoptics is how the story was unearthed and the pieces put together.

I am extremely grateful to the following people who

helped 'find' Mrs Wormald - to retired Australian orthoptists Jill (Coddington) Gordon and Lyn (Lipman) Brent and British orthoptists, Ann (McIntyre) Edwards and Bronia Unwin. Without their input, the identity of Mrs Wormald would have remained a mystery. Ann and Bronia confirmed that 'our' Mrs Wormald did not train at Westminster Hospital as Hamilton suggested. Lyn attended Temple Smith's surgery as a child. She remembered Mrs Wormald and so could confirm that she was his secretary and not his orthoptist. But these discoveries still did not tell us Mrs Wormald was. Without Jill's forensic genealogical searching we would never have discovered Mrs Wormald's true identity. Jill searched the births, marriages, deaths and shipping records and pieced together the information which led to the conclusion that Audrey Roberts was in fact Mrs William Dalton (nee Audrey Roberts) Wormald. I am extremely indebted to Jill for all her hard work and tireless efforts in solving the mystery.

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