



Marjory Stephenson
picnicking *al fresco* with
colleagues, c. 1921

Cambridge University
Archives, Biochemistry
Department Photograph
Albums.

From the Fens to FRS

Marjory Stephenson (centre, wearing hat) at a river picnic with **Dorothy Moyle** (later **Needham**: 1896-1987) and 'D.L.F.' (Dorothy Lilian Foster), c. 1921.

At this stage, Stephenson had been working at Cambridge for two years and had only recently begun her research into bacterial biochemistry. Born nearby in the Cambridgeshire village of Burwell in 1885, Stephenson had been encouraged in her studies by her father, **Robert Stephenson**. Indeed, it was Robert who had explained symbiotic nitrogen fixation to her as a child. In turn, Stephenson's mother and governess oversaw her route to university.¹ Despite her local roots, however, Stephenson's path to Cambridge was anything but straightforward.

Without the funds to study medicine, she began in 1906 training (Gloucester) and teaching (London) in domestic science. From 1911, **R.H.A. Plimmer** (1877-1955) offered Stephenson the chance to research metabolism and teach advanced nutrition at University College London. After co-presenting papers to the newly-founded Biochemical Club in 1912, Stephenson won a Beit Scholarship. However, the First World War intervened and Stephenson was enlisted to help the Red Cross in both France and Salonika (Thessaloniki, Greece). Mentioned in dispatches, Stephenson received an MBE for her war service in 1918.

So the calmness of the *al fresco* scene shown here followed a turbulent period in Stephenson's life. Then aged 36, Stephenson was at the start of the work for which she would ultimately be made the first woman Fellow of the Royal Society (FRS).

¹ Muriel Robertson, 'Marjory Stephenson, 1885-1948', *Obituary Notices of Fellows of the Royal Society* **6** (1949), p. 564.