

Bloomsbury and the Bloomsbury Project

An introduction by Rosemary Ashton

For a hundred years Bloomsbury has been celebrated as the home of the ‘Bloomsbury Group’ of writers and artists who lived and worked in the area in the early twentieth century. Yet though Virginia Woolf, her sister Vanessa Bell, and their friends have come to define the area as a centre for innovative cultural activity, they were by no means the first progressive inhabitants of Bloomsbury. The UCL Leverhulme-funded project ‘Bloomsbury and Reform in the Nineteenth Century’ is dedicated to the study of the area during the previous century, a time of major political, social, and educational change during which Bloomsbury acquired its distinctive intellectual and cultural character.

The Project’s timeline begins in the year 1800, when Francis Russell, fifth Duke of Bedford, obtained two acts of Parliament to develop his large Bloomsbury estate, the area stretching north from Great Russell Street to Euston Road and encompassing new squares including Russell, Tavistock, Woburn, and Torrington Squares, while the estate belonging to the Foundling Hospital further east was being developed at the same time, with streets and squares leading to Gray’s Inn Road.

A striking number of pioneering nineteenth-century institutions are to be found in Bloomsbury, the area bounded by Tottenham Court Road in the west, Euston Road to the north, Gray’s Inn Road to the east, and Holborn to the south. The establishment of these institutions turned Bloomsbury from a largely undeveloped backwater, an area of swampy marshland and rubbish dumps, into London’s intellectual and cultural heartland, the location for progress and innovation in many fields—art, law, education, science, and medicine—which it remains to the present day. The Bloomsbury Project offers an archive-based account of these institutions; it also identifies and describes the archives themselves as an aid to future researchers.

The Bloomsbury Project identifies and gives information about more than 300 reforming institutions, from the large and well-known—the University of London (later renamed University College London), opened in Gower Street in 1828 with a progressive syllabus and an open-door admissions policy, together with its pioneering teaching hospital, where the first anaesthetic in Britain was administered in 1846—to small individual ventures, including specialist hospitals like the Alexandra Hospital for Children with Hip Disease, opened in a house in Queen Square in 1867. It traces the activities of religious dissenters, millenarians, Jews, agnostics, Swedenborgians, as they instituted their educational establishments in the area. It describes the artistic innovations of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, founded in Gower Street in 1848, of William Morris’s Firm, established in Queen Square in 1865, and of the successful interior design business which Agnes and Rhoda Garrett ran from their home in Gower Street from 1875.

It studies the work of pioneers in the education of women, children, and the working class in such institutions as the Ladies' College, founded in Bedford Square in 1849; the London School of Medicine for Women, opened near Brunswick Square in 1874; the kindergarten movement, begun in Tavistock Place in 1853; the Working Men's College from 1854 and the Working Women's College from 1864; the Female School of Art in Queen Square; the Passmore Edwards Settlement, pioneer of after-school activities for the children of working-class parents and founder of the first school for disabled children in Tavistock Place in 1899. Though in some cases the location of a reforming institution in Bloomsbury was a matter of chance—the availability of a building or piece of land at the right time—the Project demonstrates how the establishment of certain important cultural and educational foundations in the area naturally attracted others to the vicinity. In the case of the Ladies' College in Bedford Square, for example, its proximity to University College London was dictated by the need its founder, Elisabeth Jesser Reid, felt to turn to the professors in Gower Street to teach her young women. The fact that Mrs Reid was a Unitarian, a religion shared by some of the founders and supporters of University College, was a further connection between the two institutions.

Individuals such as Mrs Reid, and several others who had connections with more than one of Bloomsbury's progressive institutions, are also investigated by the Project. Examples include the Unitarian lawyer Henry Crabb Robinson, a generous supporter of University College, the Ladies' College, and University Hall, built in Gordon Square in 1849 as a hall of residence for students of University College; William Morris, founder of the decorating firm in Queen Square and teacher at the Working Men's College round the corner in Great Ormond Street; and Mary Ward, co-founder of the Passmore Edwards Settlement for poor children in Tavistock Place and member of the council of the Froebel Society, which promoted the kindergarten system from a house also located in Tavistock Place. Also featured are a number of writers resident in Bloomsbury, including Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Anthony Trollope, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Mary Ward, George Gissing, Robert Louis Stevenson, and J. M. Barrie, all of whom caught the spirit of Bloomsbury in their writings. These and other individuals who contributed to giving Bloomsbury its special character are discussed in terms of their association with the area.

Through maps and plans, extracts from the papers of the Bedford and Foundling Estates and from the founding documents of the institutions built in Bloomsbury, the Project traces the physical growth of the area, the development not only of large public buildings, but also of handsome houses erected in tree-lined streets and squares during an energetic burst of building in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Our index to the streets and squares of Bloomsbury shows how the area became the habitation of choice for respectable professional men and their families by mid-century (and from the 1870s for professional women too), especially lawyers, doctors, architects, and university and museum employees. Information is offered about the social character of each street

and square at different periods in the nineteenth century, as London grew. Particularly significant in the development of Bloomsbury is the fact that no fewer than three of the capital's main railway stations were built along the area's northern border: Euston in 1837, King's Cross in 1852, and St Pancras in 1868. Hotels began to appear nearby, and the area, from being a neglected northern outpost of the city, became central to its business, a gateway to the metropolis, as well as the cultural heart represented by the ever-expanding British Museum with its treasures collected throughout the nineteenth century from all parts of the world.

In his novel *Heart and Science* (1883) Wilkie Collins described the area as an oasis of peace in the midst of a toiling city, an area of culture strategically situated between the fashionable west end and the City of London, centre of law and banking:

"The broad district, stretching northward and eastward from the British Museum, is like the quiet quarter of a country town set in the midst of the roaring activities of the largest city in the world. Here, when you are idle, you can saunter and look about, safe from collision with merciless straight-walkers whose time is money, and whose destiny is business... This haven of rest is alike out of the way of fashion and business; and is yet within easy reach of the one and the other."

The Bloomsbury Project website includes a number of articles on particular aspects of nineteenth-century Bloomsbury, from novels about lawyers' wives to homes for abandoned women and spiritualist societies, from German exiles to the influx of Scots, especially medical men, into the area, from fringe religious societies to scientific discoveries, from the first women students at University College London to the first female landscape gardener. The site as a whole offers a web of information about nineteenth-century Bloomsbury: its people, its institutions, its streets and buildings. We encourage you to discover it for yourself.