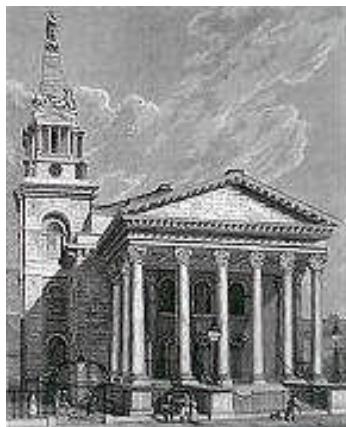


Bloomsbury in Bloom

Kasia Boddy

On 18th July 1863 Russell Square became the first of the large, private London squares to be ‘thrown open for the recreation of the masses’.¹ The occasion was a ‘working man’s flower show’, organised by the Revd. Samuel Hadden Parkes, the senior curate of St. George’s Bloomsbury. The church, designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor and completed in 1731, had been famous for a spire that was modelled on the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus and topped with a statue of George I. What Horace Walpole described as a ‘masterpiece of absurdity’ can be seen in the background of Hogarth’s ‘Gin Lane’ (1751).² During the nineteenth century, however, the church developed a rather less frivolous reputation. St George’s was ‘particularly active in the Church of England’s “civilizing mission”, providing practical help such as schools, a library and a soup kitchen for the local community’, and for eight years, from 1857 to 1865, Hadden Parkes was at the forefront of that mission.³



William Wallis, engraving after W.K. Morland,
St George's Church Bloomsbury (London: W. Clarke, 1817),
produced for the part-work publication *Walks Through
London, Including Westminster and the Borough of Southwark*
(1816-1817).



William Hogarth, *Gin Lane* (1751)

¹ Revd. Samuel Hadden Parkes, *Window Gardens for the People, and Clean and Tidy Rooms; Being an Experiment to Improve the Lives of the London Poor* (London: S. W. Partridge, 1864), p.43.

² Richard Tames, *London: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.48.

³ See <http://www.stgeorgesbloomsbury.org.uk/>. Born in Staffordshire, Samuel Hadden Parkes graduated from Jesus College Cambridge in 1854, and served as curate of St George's Wolverhampton from 1855 to 1857 before going to Bloomsbury.



Herbrand Street (Little Coram Street), April 2011

Hadden Parkes was largely concerned with the population of Little Coram Street (known as Herbrand Street since 1901), a ‘narrow street about ninety yard long’ with six courts, ‘all *cul-de-sacs*, running right and left at right angles’ to it. Hadden Parkes estimated that around 1,700 people lived there:

Some have no recognized calling, others are washers, *i.e.*, men who wash the cabs; these have generally been cabmen themselves, but have lost their license through misconduct or crime. Others are overworked and underpaid sempstresses, eking out a wretched hand-to-mouth existence by army work, straw-bonnet-making, and shoebinding; while the largest and most aristocratic are costermongers, under which division I place those who sell fruit, flowers, water-cresses, dried fish, and cat’s meat in baskets and barrows, and those who make and sell penny toys.

Overall, he concluded, their ‘condition . . . as a class’ was ‘as distressed and as low as any in London’:

The policeman on the beat has informed me that it is the most likely place in the neighbourhood in which to find any who were ‘wanted’ When I state that it is an offshoot from the well-known ‘Rookery’ in St. Giles, which was demolished at the time that the improvements were made in New Oxford-street, it will give a tolerably fair idea of the general character of the people.⁴

The architect George Godwin, editor of the influential reforming magazine, *The Builder*, described the street in similar terms in his 1854 book, *London Shadows*:

A stranger visiting this street will not fail to be struck with the immense number of children, women, and others, who swarm in crowds evidently too great for the visible houses. A careful inspection shows narrow passages leading from this street to collections of small houses inhabited by very poor people. One of these courts (Coram-place) is fifteen feet below the surface of the street, and is reached by a flight of steps. Having said this much, and considering the poverty of many of the inhabitants, and the ill-condition of the houses, none will wonder at bad results. Surrounded on all sides by tall buildings, and planted below the surface of the ground, it is scarcely possible for a breath of even comparatively pure air to reach the inhabitants.⁵

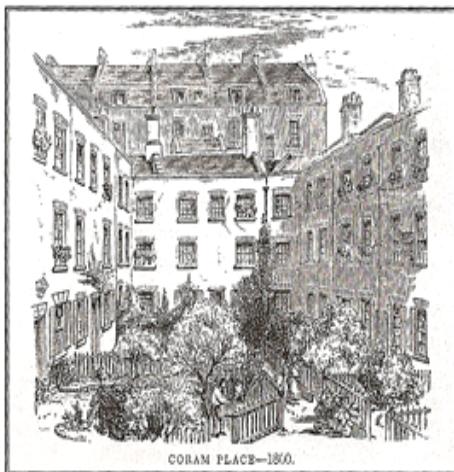
For Godwin, most urban social ills could be traced back to a lack of ‘pure air’. ‘Bad air,’ for example, ‘produced feelings of exhaustion and lowness of spirits, and these tempt the use of stimulants - the fruitful parents of all crime.’⁶ Even as germ theory took hold in the 1850s and 60s, the miasmic theory of disease, which proposed a close connection between disease and bad air produced by enclosed space, continued to exert an influence. For commentators such as Godwin, ‘debility, continued fever, death, widowhood, orphanage, pauperism, and money-loss to the living’ could all be attributed to ‘want of pure air’.⁷ The simplicity of miasmic theory encouraged a belief in simple solutions: if the air was purified, perhaps the rest would follow.

⁴ Hadden Parkes, *Window Gardens*, p.23.

⁵ George Godwin, *London Shadows: A Glance at the ‘Homes’ of the Thousands* (London: Routledge, Warne, and Routledge, 1854), pp.49-50. On Godwin, see James Winter, *Secure from Rash Assault: Sustaining the Victorian Environment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), chapter 10.

⁶ Ibid., p.45.

⁷ George Godwin, ‘Overcrowding in London; and Some Remedial Measures’, in *Transactions of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science 1862* (London: Victoria Press, 1862), p.594.



CORAM PLACE—1860.



CORAM PLACE—1864.

Hadden Parkes, *Window Gardens for the People*, pp.48-49.

Hadden Parkes also believed that overcrowding resulted in a lack of ‘ventilation’ which in turn led to the spread of ‘pestilential miasma’.⁸ It was a problem that had worsened considerably since he arrived in the parish as the buildings of Little Coram Street had been sublet and divided into multiple-occupancy lodging houses. In 1860, Hadden Parkes recalled, ‘it was no uncommon sight to see the little gardens carefully cultivated’; by 1864, however, the houses had ‘passed into other hands and been let out into single apartments’ - houses containing six or eight rooms now housed six or eight families. Consequently, the majority had fallen into a ‘very unhealthy and dilapidated condition’ and gardens were ‘altogether neglected’ and used as ‘yards merely to dry clothes’.⁹ For Hadden Parkes and Godwin, uncultivated gardens did not merely symbolise a more general deterioration; what was lost, they believed, was a vital means to purify the air.

Talk of the diagnostic, and curative, value of plants was a direct legacy of miasmic theory. Mid-Victorian journalists commonly imagined urban plants as sharing a ‘torpid life’ with their owners in the ‘musty courts and alleys’ of a pathological city. In particular, the geranium featured as a kind of floral equivalent of a canary sent down the mine to see if there was any clean air at all. Sometimes its troubles were correlated with a specific problem, such as the introduction of a gas-factory: ‘No improvement can ever reach [the gas-factory’s] infected neighbourhood,’ declared the *Illustrated News* in 1864, ‘no new streets, no improved dwellings, not even in a garden is possible within a circle of at least quarter of a mile in diameter, and not so much as a geranium can flourish in a window-sill.’¹⁰ More often, however, the problem, for

⁸ Hadden Parkes, *Window Gardens*, p.12.

⁹ Ibid., pp.24-28, 48-49.

¹⁰ Quoted in Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p.94.

people, as for their plant representatives, was simply the over-crowded, soot-filled city itself. In 1855, the gardening journalist Shirley Hibberd observed that ‘thousands of beautiful plants are every spring and summer brought from the nurseries around London, and sold in the city to undergo the slow death of suffocation - dying literally from asphyxia, from the absorption of soot in the place of air.’¹¹

Those plants which did survive asphyxiation, said the Christian Socialist Charles Kingsley, were able to diagnose a wide variety of diseases:

The sickly geranium which spreads its blanched leaves against the cellar panes, and peers up, as if imploringly, to the narrow slip of sunlight at the top of the narrow alley, had it a voice, could tell more truly than ever a doctor in the town, why little Bessy sickened of the scarlatina, and little Johnny of the hooping-cough, till the toddling wee things who used to pet and water it were carried off each and all of them one by one to the churchyard sleep.¹²

And the geranium could also attempt a cure. Plant respiration, argued Hadden Parkes, could adjust the atmosphere to ‘an average state of composition’, according to ‘the beautiful and wise law of compensation’.¹³ In an 1869 lecture, entitled ‘The Two Breaths’, Kingsley elaborated on the ‘mutual dependence and mutual helpfulness’ that existed between people and plants:

The delicate surface of the green leaves absorbs the carbonic acid, and parts it into its elements, retaining the carbon to make woody fibre, and courteously returning you the oxygen to mingle with the fresh air, and be inhaled by your lungs once more. Thus do you feed the plants; just as the plants feed you; while the great life-giving sun feeds both; and the geranium standing in the sick child's window does not merely rejoice his eye and mind by its beauty and freshness, but repays honestly the trouble spent on it; absorbing the breath which the child needs not, and giving to him the breath which he needs.¹⁴

¹¹ Shirley Hibberd, *The Town Garden: A Manual for the Management of City and Suburban Gardens* (London: Groombridge and Sons, 1855), pp.6-7.

¹² Charles Kingsley, *Glaucus: or, The Wonders of the Shore* (Cambridge: Macmillan, 1855), p.131.

¹³ Revd. Samuel Hadden Parkes, *Flower Shows of Window Plants, for the Working Classes of London* (London: Emily Faithfull, 1862), p.5.

¹⁴ Charles Kingsley, ‘The Two Breaths’, in *Sanitary and Social Lectures and Essays* (1880) (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2004), p.32.

The geranium provided, in miniature, the exchange of good air for bad that many reformers, even as they abandoned miasmic theory, continued to believe was necessary for city living. But even when larger green spaces such as parks were concerned, the ‘lungs of the city’ argument didn’t make much sense. ‘It takes about three acres of woods to absorb as much carbon dioxide as four people exude in breathing, cooking, and heating,’ Jane Jacobs noted a hundred years later: ‘the oceans of air circulating about us, not parks, keep cities from suffocating.’¹⁵

The Bloomsbury Bouquets

And I love – how I love – the plants that fill the pots
On my dust-dry window sill, –
A sensitive sickly crop, –

(Austin Dobson, ‘A City Flower’, 1864)

At least partly with pure-air concerns in mind, *The Builder* had been promoting ‘window horticulture’ for some time when Hadden Parkes observed the ‘care and attention’ with which some of his Little Coram Street parishioners cultivated their window-sill pot plants. Immediately he decided that this was ‘evidence of a latent taste which might be turned to better account’.¹⁶ Further evidence of not-so latent tastes would also have been found at this time in the competitive flower-shows run by burgeoning organisations such as the Stoke Newington Chrysanthemum Society (founded in 1846) and the Tower Hamlets Floricultural Society (founded in 1859).¹⁷ These societies and their shows were run entirely by and for their local members. What Hadden Parkes proposed, however, was something to be arranged ‘for the working classes, in which they were not expected to take any role other than as exhibitors’.¹⁸ Everything was to be organised by the church, with the help of better-off local residents. The East End floricultural societies competed at a high level of horticultural expertise; Hadden Parkes, however, envisioned the Little Coram Street show purely ‘as a means of cheering their lives and inducing habits of care, prudence and forethought’.¹⁹

¹⁵ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) (London: Pelican, 1964), p.101.

¹⁶ Hadden Parkes, *Window Gardens*, p.30.

¹⁷ See Julia Matheson, ‘Floricultural Societies and their Shows in the East End of London 1860-1875’, *The London Gardener*, vol. 8 (2002-3), 26-33.

¹⁸ Julia Matheson, ‘“A New Gleam of Social Sunshine”: Window Garden Flower Shows for the Working Classes 1860-1875’, *The London Gardener*, vol. 9 (2003-4), 60-70 (p.60).

¹⁹ Hadden Parkes, *Window Gardens*, p.30; ‘Recreation’, *Transactions of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science, London Meeting 1862*, ed. George W. Hastings (London: Victoria Press, 1862), p.817.

The first show, held in July 1860, was advertised by hand-bills displayed in shop windows in Little Coram Street and was confined to the street and its adjacent courts. All plants intended for exhibition had to be registered at a shop in the street, at least four weeks beforehand. There were three categories: Flower Dealers; Mothers and Fathers not Flower Dealers; Children. The adults competed for prizes of 5s., 3s., and 1s. 6d.; the children for 2s. 6d. and 1s. 6d. Plants of all sorts were displayed in a variety of make-shift containers - tea pots, jugs and wash basins – yet ‘nearly all were either freshly raddled or tastefully adorned with old scraps of gaily coloured paper-hanging’.²⁰ 140 plants were registered, although only 94 made it to the exhibition which was held in the Little Coram Street’s Bible Mission Room, lent by the Lady Superintendent Miss M.L. Wright. Non-exhibitors paid a penny a head (children a half-penny) and more than £2 was taken at the door. The venture was reported, as an example of ‘gardening under difficulties’, to the *Journal of Horticulture and Cottage Gardener*, which confessed that its initial thought was a flower show confined to the working classes of Bloomsbury ‘must be a joke - some satire upon our metropolitan shows, and that “Bloomsbury” was selected as an apt name for such a quiz. Our readers, however, will be no less surprised that we were, to find that it is sober earnest.’²¹

The show was such a success that the following year Hadden Parkes sought a larger venue, the National Schoolroom on Bury Street (now part of Bury Place), and opened the competition to the whole parish, divided into classes according to residence so as not to favour those ‘living in situations more favourable to the growth of plants’.

1. ‘Persons living in the little Coram Street district - viz., Little Coram Street, Abbey Place, Chapel Place, Russell Place, Coram Place, Marchmont Place, Tavistock Mews, Colonnade, Little Guilford Street.’
2. ‘Persons living in the Mews.’
3. ‘Persons living elsewhere in the parish.’

Children were divided by gender and by school - ‘Parochial, National, Sunday and Infant Schools’ or ‘Ragged Schools’. There was also a competition for domestic servants.²²

²⁰ Ibid., p.33.

²¹ ‘Flower Shows in Towns for the Working Classes’, *The Journal of Horticulture and Cottage Gardener*, 30 April 1861, p.75

²² Hadden Parkes, *Window Gardens*, pp.35-6.

In 1860, any plant had been welcome and only three weeks notice given. In 1861, the organisers extended the period between registration and exhibition to 7 weeks and limited the competition to three categories - geranium (i.e. pelargonium), fuschia and annuals. 'I feel it of no use,' wrote Emilius Bayley, the Rector of St Georges Bloomsbury, 'encouraging the poor to cultivate plants which cannot repay them for their trouble, and which must cause disappointment.'²³ The editors of the *Journal of Horticulture and Cottage Gardener*, regretting the small selection of plants involved and worried that not enough attention was being paid to technical matters, contributed a pamphlet 'Window Gardens for the Many' to be given to all first-prize winners.²⁴ One of the show's organisers, Walter H. Bosanquet (of 5, Torrington Place) wrote to the *Journal* to express his own disappointment at the reluctance of 'the poor' to buy or grow plants especially for exhibition; 'they will simply send any they may happen to have their possession, and nine times out of ten those plants are Geraniums.'²⁵ But Hadden Parkes and Bayley were not really interested in the plants as much as in the 'trouble' taken over them.

The 1862 show was called off, 'for some reason unknown to me', reported Bosanquet, but his fear that this would provide a 'serious check' to the cause was unfounded.²⁶ In June of that year, Hadden Parkes was invited to deliver a paper on the shows to the annual meeting of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science. At the Guildhall, he reported not only on his own success but on the fact that the idea of a window-garden flower show had been taken up that year by the Revd. Coxhead of St Clement Danes in Westminster and by Miss Oxley, Honorary Secretary of the Fitzroy-market Ragged School. Miss Oxley's was the first show at which Lord Shaftesbury presented the prizes.²⁷ An evangelical Conservative force behind numerous ameliorative reforms including the Ragged School Union (founded in 1844), the 1847 Factory Act and the 1848 Public Health Act, and soon to become the figurehead of the window-garden flower show movement, Shaftesbury's ideal was a 'stable and hierarchic society bound together by mutual obligations between rich and poor'.²⁸ Nothing in Hadden Parkes's published writing suggests that he thought otherwise. His talk to the NAPSS was reported in their annual *Transactions* and printed as a pamphlet, *Flower Shows of Window Plants, for the Working*

²³ 'Flower Shows in Towns for the Working Classes', *Journal of Horticulture and Cottage Gardener*, 30 April 1861, pp.75-76.

²⁴ 'Bloomsbury Flower Show', *Journal of Horticulture and Cottage Gardener*, 2 July 1861, p.259.

²⁵ Walter H. Bosanquet, 'Flower Shows for the Poor in Town', *Journal of Horticulture and Cottage Gardener*, 23 December 1862, p.760. Bosanquet appears in the 1881 census as a 42-year-old solicitor.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *The Penny Illustrated Paper*, 5th July 1862, p.3.

²⁸ Geoffrey B.A.M. Finlayson, *The Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, 1801-1885* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), p.76. See also Kenneth Hylson-Smith, *Evangelicals in the Church of England, 1734-1984* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), pp.196-201.

Classes of London. Both were published by the Victoria Press, another Bloomsbury reforming initiative, established by Emily Faithfull with the purpose of providing employment for women. The Press was based at 9 Great Coram Street before moving to Farringdon Road in 1862.²⁹



Women compositors working in Composing Room at the Victoria Press,
Illustrated London News (from Fredeman, 'Emily Faithfull and the Victoria Press')

Within the 'palisaded enclosure' of Russell Square

The third Bloomsbury show, held on 8th July 1863, was again 'an improvement on any of its predecessors', not least because it was hosted in Russell Square.³⁰ The previous year Hadden Parkes had argued that 'it would be a great boon to the poor, and would in a great measure ensure the success of these flower shows, if they could be held in the larger squares of London'.³¹ The plea was taken up by the editors of the *Journal of Horticulture and Cottage Gardener* who, more specifically expressed their 'hope' for a 'marquee upon [the] grass' of Russell Square. 'The denizens of the square need not fear that any injury would be inflicted upon the trees or flowers growing within their palisaded enclosure,' they insisted, 'for the authorities at Kew and Crystal Palace will bear testimony in addition to our own that no such outrages are perpetrated in their gardens, notwithstanding the unrestrained admission to them of the working classes.'³²

The move to Russell Square made the show famous. While the organisers of the earlier events had attempted to imitate the style of the fashionable Crystal Palace flower shows, there

²⁹ See William E. Fredeman, 'Emily Faithfull and the Victoria Press: An Experiment in Sociological Bibliography', *The Library*, 5th Series, vol.29, no.2 (June 1974), 139-164

³⁰ 'The Dead and the Living in Bloomsbury', *The Builder*, 11 July 1863, p.489.

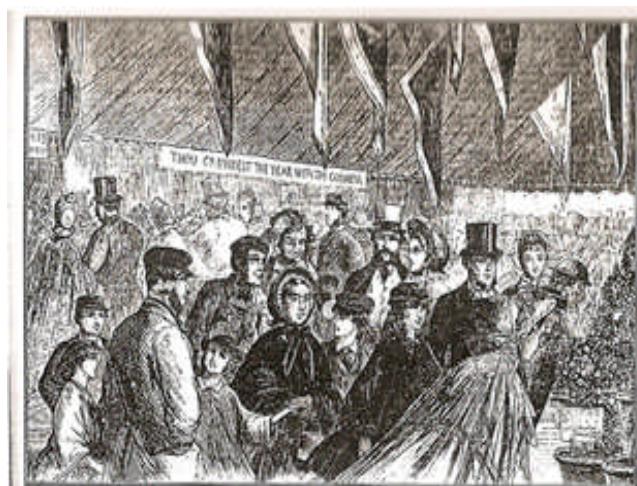
³¹ Hadden Parkes, *Flower Shows of Window Plants*, p.8.

³² 'Bloomsbury Flower Show', *Journal of Horticulture and Cottage Gardener*, 2 July 1861, p.259.

was a limit to what could be done in cramped school rooms. A marquee in Russell Square, with accompanying brass bands, was a different matter entirely and the show attracted a lot of publicity.

The tent, decorated with flags of all nations and with various devices, with the flowers ranged on tables on either side, presented a most pleasing effect. Of course, within this tent there were no new plants from China or Japan, no large and fragrant roses like those of Paul, no wondrous masses of pelargonium bloom like those of Fraser; but there was that which was more remarkable still, for there were plants grown in areas by domestic servants; in the mews by the wives and children of stablemen; in the garrets by poor sempstresses; in kitchens by water-cress girls ; in first and second floors by costermongers; in any imaginable nook and corner by the children of National and Ragged Schools, and one even in the sick ward of the parish workhouse.³³

Hadden Parkes was pleased to note that 'upwards of 3,000 persons, rich and poor together' attended, while the *Illustrated London News* welcomed the show as a 'observable' sign that 'amidst [London's] rush of utilitarianism there is pleasing approach to sentimentalism'.³⁴



'Working Man's Flower Show in Russell-Square',
The Penny Illustrated Paper, 18th July 1863.

The show was also remarkable for its staging of a new competition - prizes for 'clean and tidy rooms' - an idea which Hadden Parkes noted 'arose out of a conversation between the

³³ Hadden Parkes, *Window Gardens*, p.45.

³⁴ Ibid., p.47; 'Changes in London', *Illustrated London News*, 16 July 1864, p.70.

editor of the “British Workman” (Mr. Smithies)’ and himself.³⁵ 86 residents registered and, according to Rector Bayley, the only complaints came when inspection visits were ‘not paid sufficiently often’.³⁶ The rooms were regularly graded, by Hadden Parkes, Bayley and Smithies, on the following scale:

- A clean and tidy
- B tidy but not clean
- C clean but not tidy
- D dirty

‘This system of marking, simple as it seems, is not without its difficulties,’ reported Hadden Parkes in a book on the scheme published in 1864. ‘It is not easy, when called upon to judge and decide, to give the right mark, for there are so many small circumstances, such as the order and arrangement of the furniture, ornaments, &c., as well as cleanliness, which have to be taken into account, and which cannot be comprehended in any general rules. But a similar difficulty will be encountered upon any plan, and I am inclined to think that this is the best that I have heard of, and, on the whole, will work well.’ Mrs Duncan won the first prize of £2 while Mrs Bailey and Mrs Kean a £1 each; in all 31 competitors were praised for having made ‘real progress’.³⁷ Bayley concluded that ‘regular visitation’ had resulted in a ‘decided improvement’ both in ‘sanitary’ and ‘moral effect’ but *The Builder* reported the experiment with mixed feelings.³⁸ ‘It is not very satisfactory to think that people must be bribed to keep their home decent, but we must take things as we find them, and act accordingly.’³⁹ Bribery also had its limits. Hadden Parkes admitted that after the competition was over the ‘majority’ of competitors ‘relapsed into their old habits.’⁴⁰

³⁵ Ibid., p.65. Lord Shaftesbury kept portraits of T.B. Smithies and his mother on his library wall. Edwin Hodder, *The Life and Work of the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury* (1886), vol.3, p.402, quoted in Peter Roger Mountjoy, ‘Thomas Bywater Smithies, Editor of the *British Workman*’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 18, no.2 (Summer 1985), 46-56 (p.46). Mountjoy quotes and discusses the exhortations to temperance and cleanliness that filled the *British Workman*; for example, ‘Reader! If you have not already done so already, go and wash yourself NOW!’ The magazine was based at, and distributed by, Hadden Parkes’s publisher, S.W. Partridge in Pater Noster Row.

³⁶ ‘The Bloomsbury Flower Show: E. Bayley, Letter to the Editor’, *The Times*, 7 July 1864, p.8.

³⁷ Hadden Parkes, *Window Gardens*, p.70.

³⁸ ‘The Bloomsbury Flower Show: E. Bayley, Letter to the Editor’, *The Times*, 7 July 1864, p.8.

³⁹ ‘The Dead and the Living in Bloomsbury’, *The Builder*, 11 July 1863, p.489.

⁴⁰ Parkes, *Window Gardens*, p.73.



'Bloomsbury', *The Builder*, 11 July 1863, p.489.

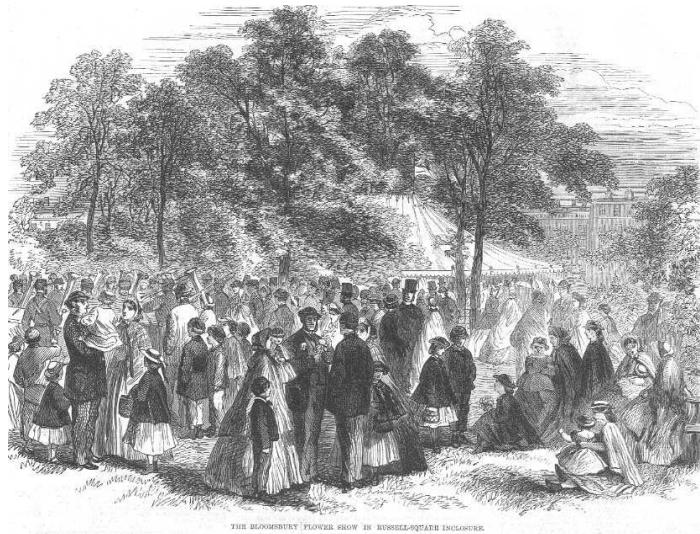
The fourth show, in 1864, extended the 'clean and tidy rooms' scheme to the whole parish - 304 competitors registered - while the flower show expanded yet again.⁴¹ Two bands of music were in attendance—that of the E division of the Metropolitan Police, and that of the 37th Middlesex volunteers—and when the distribution of prizes had been completed many of the younger part of the company amused themselves with dancing.⁴² *All the Year Round* covered the show from the perspective of a South Kensington resident who, while hating his own neighbourhood's fashionable affair, was charmed by the Bloomsbury event. The appeal was partly due to the simplicity of the poor children – who, in their 'blessed ignorance', 'utterly ignored any deference to the powers that powers that were' - and partly due to the simplicity of the poor flowers.

When I go to South Kensington and read Kapteorotix splendidiosus, I bow as on a first introduction. I have never met the gentleman before. But here, in Russell-square, I was among the friends of my childhood. I knew the elegant full-belled fuchsias, hanging with their bursting petals each over each, and drooping over the pots containing them; I knew the sturdy geraniums, with their scarlet flowers, their broad soft hairy leaves, their thick resolute stems; I knew the annuals, bright, and gaudy, and fleeting; and I pushed my way in among admiring crowds, and felt quite young again as I looked upon many a bud and leaf once familiar, but long forgotten.

⁴¹ 'The Bloomsbury Flower Show: E. Bayley, Letter to the Editor', *The Times*, 7 July 1864, p.8.

⁴² *The Illustrated London News*, July 23, 1864.

'If the district visitors were to come to my study,' he concluded jovially, 'I don't think they would give *me* a prize for a tidy room! We live and learn! I am not so rabid against all flower-shows as I was. The Bloomsbury Bouquets have taught me a lesson.'⁴³



The Illustrated London News, July 23, 1864

Interest in the Bloomsbury window-garden show peaked in 1864, but it continued for a few years afterwards. In 1865, the show was held in Bloomsbury Square (with 1000 exhibits); in 1866, the first year without Hadden Parkes, it was housed (with 1200 exhibits) in the garden of the Foundling Hospital, Guilford Street.⁴⁴ There is no record of a show in 1867 or in 1868. In 1869, 'the committee of Russell-square' again 'generously accorded the use of their garden' to the Bloomsbury Flower Show 'under Lord Shaftesbury's presidency'.⁴⁵ That is the last mention of Bloomsbury flower shows that I have found.

Beyond Bloomsbury

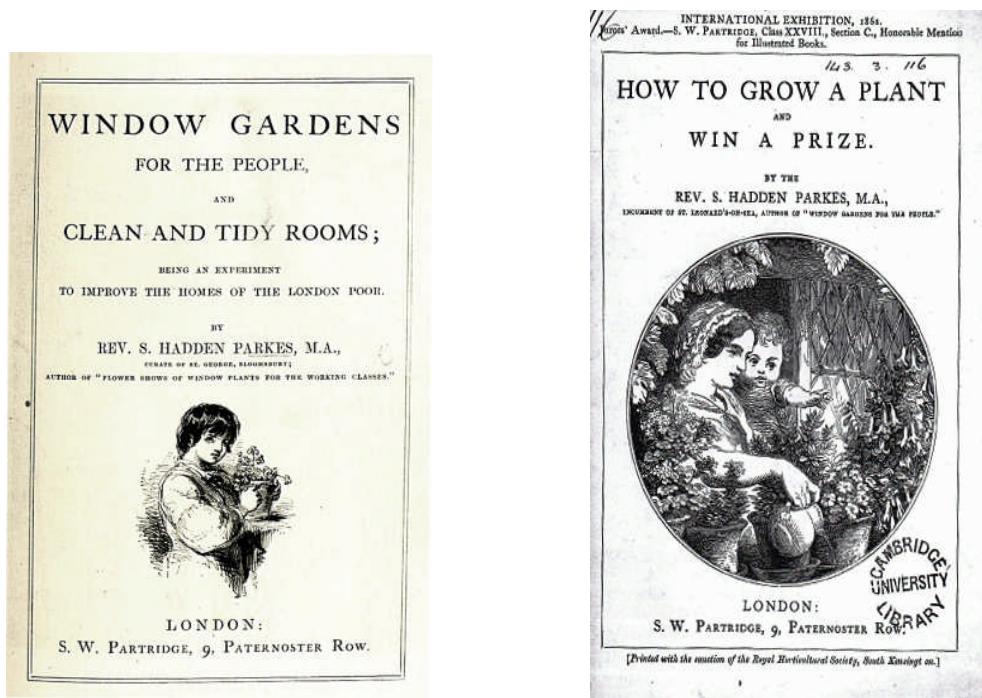
What the Rev. Bayley called the Bloomsbury 'movement' or even the 'Bloomsbury Floral Institution' gradually spread to the East End and to 'other large towns' in Britain and in

⁴³ 'The Bloomsbury Bouquets', *All the Year Round*, 20 August 1864, pp.32-35.

⁴⁴ 'The Bloomsbury Flower Show: E. Bayley, Letter to the Editor', *The Times*, 1 July 1865, p.5; 'Metropolitan News', *Illustrated London News*, 8 July 1865, p.7; 'The Bloomsbury Flower Show: E. Bayley, Letter to the Editor', *The Times*, 12 July 1866, p.5.

⁴⁵ 'Bloomsbury Flower Show: E. Capel Cure, 1 Montague-place, Letter to the Editor', *The Times*, 10 July 1869, p.5.

America.⁴⁶ These ventures were partly the result of the success of Hadden Parkes's 1864 book, *Window Gardens for the People, and Clean and Tidy Rooms; Being an Experiment to Improve the Homes of the London Poor*, which contained 14 illustrations and sold for a shilling, was warmly reviewed by the *Lancet* and extracted in a variety of other journals.⁴⁷ *How to Grow a Plant; And Win a Prize* - also published by S.W. Partridge of 9, Paternoster Row - followed in 1865, and opened with the news that the Royal Horticultural Society was planning 'an Exhibition of Plants grown by the working classes of London' in its summer show. Every exhibitor would receive two tickets to the show, prompting Hadden Parkes to enthuse 'it will be quite like a holiday to spend a day in the beautiful Gardens at South Kensington, almost as good as a trip to the country.'⁴⁸



Throughout the late nineteenth century the letters page of the *Times* featured financial pleas from clergymen eager to provide the means 'to bring some gleams of beauty and

⁴⁶ 'The Bloomsbury Flower Show: E. Bayley, Letter to the Editor', *The Times*, 1 July 1865, p.5; 'Bloomsbury Flower Show', *The Times*, 18 July 1866, p.12. A similar show in Liverpool was noted in the *Journal of Horticulture and Cottage Gardener*, 28 May 1861, p.163 and the first Edinburgh Working Men's Flower Show took place in 1865. 'Exhibitions of Window-Gardened Plants', *Journal of Horticulture and Cottage Gardener*, 9 July 1868, p.27.

⁴⁷ *Lancet*, Oct 1, 1864. Extracts also appeared in *Meliora* and *The Home Visitor*.

⁴⁸ Revd. Samuel Hadden Parkes, *How to Grow a Plant; And Win a Prize*, p.3

cheerfulness into' the 'ill-provided rooms' of the 'working classes'.⁴⁹ In 1866, for example, Andrew Suter, Incumbent of All Saints in Spicer Street, Whitechapel, announced that he had received a letter and a donation of £5 from Florence Nightingale, 'a helpless invalid, herself dependent on window gardening for almost her only pleasure'.⁵⁰ At many of these shows, the Earl of Shaftesbury was mentioned as a benefactor or prize giver. In his introductory remarks to the 1865 Bloomsbury show, of which he was President, Shaftesbury observed that he was to attend three shows just that week and that he knew of 20 in London that summer. 1865 was Hadden Parkes's last summer at St George's Bloomsbury - he moved on to become rector of St Leonard's in Sussex - and Shaftesbury took the occasion to praise him as 'just as much a benefactor as the man who invented the steam engine or any of the other wonders of the age'.⁵¹ But Shaftesbury himself was a great benefactor to the movement, which he never failed to say 'taught the poor the best of lessons, for they watched the flower from seed to blossom, and learnt the beneficence of a great and unseen power', and his influence was surely behind the presence at parochial flower shows of such luminaries such as the Dean of Westminster in 1866, Gladstone in 1876, and Princess Frederica of Hanover in 1885.⁵² But window-garden flower show craze also spread much further: during 1870s and 80s, they became a regular feature of urban summer life and their organisers extended to reformers of various other creeds and kinds. In 1875, 'Jews and Gentiles engaged in friendly rivalry' over fuschias at the Jews' Infants School in Commercial Street, while in 1894, the housing reformer Octavia Hill staged a competition at the Red Cross Hall in West Southwark.⁵³ In 1867, the *Lancet* described a show that took place in the grounds of the Middlesex Hospital and noted that flowers 'grown in the rooms or on the window-sills of very poor persons living in the district of St. Andrew's, Wells-street, and Christ Church, St. George's' competed against pots cultivated by sick children on the hospital wards.⁵⁴ By the end of the century competitions and exhibitions like that this could be found from Edinburgh to New York and few remembered that Bloomsbury was 'the birth-place of window-gardening'.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ 'St Margaret's and St John's, Westminster, Window Gardening Flower Show: W. Conway, Letter to the Editor', *The Times*, 7 July 1866, p.6.

⁵⁰ 'East London Window-Garden Flower Show: A.B. Suter, Letter to the Editor', *The Times*, 9 July 1866, p.12.

⁵¹ *Holborn and Bloomsbury Journal*, 8 July 1865, p.2.

⁵² 'Metropolitan News', *Illustrated London News*, 14 July 1866, p.34; 'A Children's Flower Show', *The Times*, 11 July 1876, p.5; 'People's Flower Show', *The Times*, 16 July 1885, p.12.

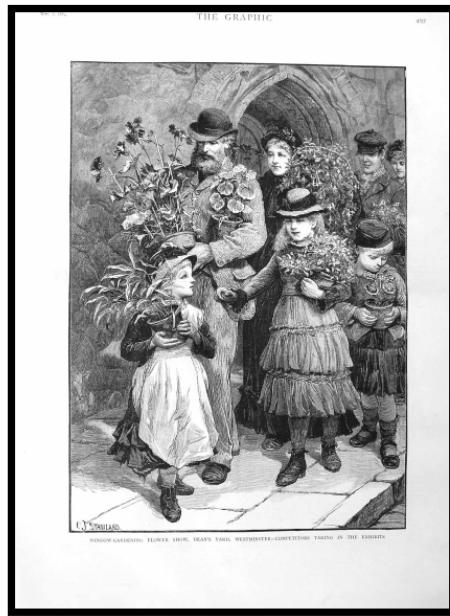
⁵³ *East London Observer*, 17 July 1875, p.6, quoted in Matheson, 'A New Gleam of Social Sunshine', p.68; 'Flower Show in Southwark', *The Times*, 10 July 1894, p.4.

⁵⁴ 'Window Gardening', *The Lancet*, 6 July 1867, p.23.

⁵⁵ On the spread of philanthropic window-gardening from Cleveland to Boston, Chicago, New York and Philadelphia, see Robert A. Woods and Albert J. Kennedy, *The Settlement Horizon* (1922)



'The Prize Geranium'
Little Folks (date unknown).



'Window-Gardening Flower Show, Dean's Yard
Westminster – Competitors Taking in the
Exhibits', *The Graphic*, 8 Nov 1884, p.497.

Conclusion

We should have fewer roughs, if we had more flower-fanciers amongst the poor.⁵⁶

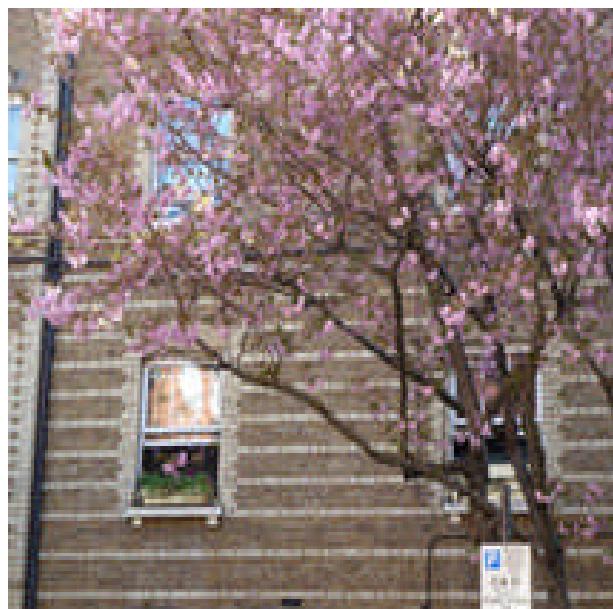
The efforts of the Samuel Hadden Parkes and his associates drew upon, and fed into, general trends in social and sanitary reform during the 1860s and 1870s. Yet the Bloomsbury context was decisive. During this period, memories of the 1815 Corn Law riots, in which angry protesters had invaded the aristocratic squares of Bloomsbury, were very much alive as the wealthy residents of Bloomsbury became increasingly aware of the impoverished, and therefore potentially riotous, population living pretty much on their doorsteps. It was with such concerns in mind that, in 1874, Frederick Miller described the Russell Square flower shows and the 'playing of the Police brass band within the enclosure of Tavistock Square in the summer time' as signs of 'social progress and refined taste unknown in the days when "pitched battles" were the chosen recreation of "the people" on the same spot.'⁵⁷ But the feudalistic paternalism of the village-fête-style flower show was never going to be enough. As Richard Dennis has argued,

(Transaction Publishers: New Brunswick, NJ, 1990), ch. 10 'Summer in the City' and Appendix 3 'Window-Box Gardening'. A report on the growth of the Edinburgh Working Men's Flower Show is included in 'Exhibitions of Window-Garden Plants', *Journal of Horticulture and Cottage Gardener*, 9 July 1868, p.27.

⁵⁶ Richard Rowe, 'A Plebeian Flower Show at the West End', *Good Words*, 9, 1 Aug 1868, p.517.

⁵⁷ Frederick Miller, *St Pancras, Past and Present* (London: Heywood, 1874) p.147.

what the wealthy residents of socially mixed neighbourhoods such as Bloomsbury really wanted was a kind of *cordon sanitaire* between themselves and the threatening slums. These often took the form of carefully managed ‘model dwellings’ for ‘an elite working class’; for example, in 1850 the Duke of Bedford supported the building of ‘model homes for families’ in Streatham Street.⁵⁸ In 1885, Little Coram Street was provided with its own philanthropically designed model dwelling, one of London’s several ‘Peabody Buildings’. Residence in the distinctive sandy-brick-coloured buildings, intended for ‘the very lowest order of self-supporting labourers’, required compliance with an extensive list of rules and regulations.⁵⁹ Peabody tenants had to agree to be vaccinated, to go to hospital immediately when suffering from an infectious disease, and to ensure that closets and lavatory windows would ‘be washed every Saturday’ and that communal steps were ‘swept every morning before 10 o’clock.⁶⁰ When it came to ‘clean and tidy rooms’, the carrot of a flower-show prize had been superseded by the stick of eviction. And yet to this day the window boxes and hanging baskets remain, not cleaning the air or improving morality, but occasionally punctuating the assertive façade of the Peabody Buildings and reminding us of the individuality of the people who occupy them.



A window box in the Peabody Buildings, Herbrand Street, April 2011

⁵⁸ Richard Dennis, ‘Modern London’, in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol.3 (1840-1950), ed. Martin Daunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp.95-132 (p.111).

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.112.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Roy Porter, *London: A Social History* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994), p.272.