

A Tale of Two Squares: Russell Square and Gordon Square in the 19th Century

Deborah Colville and Rosemary Ashton, presentation to the London Metropolitan History group, Institute of Historical Research, 5 November 2008

1. Deborah Colville on Russell Square

Russell Square began its life as a London square around 1800, when the Duke of Bedford signed a building agreement with James Burton for a development which included the south and west part of Russell Square, the north part of Bloomsbury Square, Bedford Place in between them, and the gardens of both squares, which were to be a particular feature (and for which Burton later appointed Humphry Repton at the height of his fame).

This Duke was Francis, the fifth Duke of Bedford, and his original intention (c. 1795) had actually been to develop around Bedford House, his grand house¹ But this estate plan from 1800² shows the new idea, which is to demolish Bedford House and develop a way through from Bloomsbury Square to the much larger and grander Russell Square. His plans were carried out despite his sudden death in 1802.

Russell Square was, according to Pevsner, “larger than any earlier London square, including Grosvenor Square”³, and only Lincoln’s Inn Fields covers a larger area. According to *St James’s Magazine*, Russell Square had “the vastness of Lincoln’s Inn Fields without its dinginess”⁴ It was built around the grand house already on the site: Bolton House, home of the Lord Chancellor (which later became two residences).

The square is generally said to have been developed between 1800 and 1817, but actually development was rather rapid; Boyle’s *Court Guide* of 1808 has

¹ See Horwood’s map of 1799, showing Bedford House, the site of Russell Square, Southampton Terrace, and Bolton House

² BL Crace XV 16

³ Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: London Buildings North* (revised edn, 1998)

⁴ Quoted in Walford, *Old and New London*, vo. 4 (1878)

listings for houses most of the way round, all except the north west corner (between 22 and 33). An explanation for this might be found in an incident referred to in a letter to *The Times* of 5 January 1808, signed “Philanthropos”. “Philanthropos” was grumbling about modern building standards, claiming that in Russell Square “the fall of a house of the first class, in the NW corner, had [ie would have] utterly entombed a number of the poor men employed in finishing it; but [ie except that] they had luckily left off work before it happened”.

This continued to be a problem of Russell Square housing stock well into the twentieth century. The Institute for Advanced Legal Studies of the University of London, established in 1947, used premises at 25 Russell Square from 1948. Willi Steiner comments in his history of the Institute that “Sometimes, receptions were held in the Director’s room and, at first, guests had to be asked not to congregate in one area of the room but to disperse”⁵

If its development was rapid, so was the hold it took on the popular imagination. In the 1820s it was a “place very much laughed at by witty men”, following a quip made by John Wilson Croker, Secretary of the Admiralty, in a House of Commons debate in 1825, that he “did not profess to know exactly where Russell-square was”. This joke was still going strong thirteen years later, when Thackeray commented on it in his famous article ‘Half-a-Crown’s Worth of Cheap Knowledge’, published in *Fraser’s Magazine* in March 1838. “It may appear a strange affectation, in this blessed year 1838, to affect an entire ignorance of the habits of fourteen-fifteenths of the people amongst whom we live—a poor repetition of Mr Croker’s old joke, who knew not, positively, where about was Russell Square”. The suggestion is that Russell Square is not a place where fashionable people live, or which influential people know: it’s off the map.

⁵ Steiner, *The Institute for Advanced Legal Studies of the University of London, 1947–1976* (2000)

But it is Thackeray himself who definitively established Russell Square as the home of vulgar upstarts, the newly rich merchants who want a grand house still convenient to the City. It is the home of both the Sedleys and the Osbornes in *Vanity Fair*, written in the mid 1840s but supposedly set during the Napoleonic Wars. After the death of George Osborne fighting in France, his father and unmarried daughter Jane live what is for her a miserable existence in their house in Russell Square:

“At five o'clock Mr. Osborne came back to his dinner, which he and his daughter took in silence (seldom broken, except when he swore and was savage, if the cooking was not to his liking), or which they shared twice in a month with a party of dismal friends of Osborne's rank and age. Old Dr. Gulp and his lady from Bloomsbury Square; old Mr. Frowser, the attorney, from Bedford Row, a very great man, and from his business, hand-in-glove with the "nobs at the West End"; old Colonel Livermore, of the Bombay Army, and Mrs. Livermore, from Upper Bedford Place; old Sergeant Toffy and Mrs. Toffy; and sometimes old Sir Thomas Coffin and Lady Coffin, from Bedford Square. Sir Thomas was celebrated as a hanging judge, and the particular tawny port was produced when he dined with Mr. Osborne.

These people and their like gave the pompous Russell Square merchant pompous dinners back again.”⁶

So, how did the real Russell Square match up to its fictional image? Actually, its earliest residents seem to have been more in keeping with the tone established by Bolton House, which in 1799 was occupied by the Lord Chancellor, Lord Loughborough. The Lord Chief Justice, Thomas Denman, moved here from 5 Queen Square when he inherited substantial estates from his uncle in 1812; his first biographer, J. Arnould, writing in 1873, described this new address as being the “‘ne plus ultra’ of a successful barrister’s ambition”⁷

Other occupants in those early years included Sir Charles Abbott, a later Lord Chief Justice (from 1818) and a Governor of the Foundling Hospital, at no. 28;

⁶ Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (1847–1848), ch. 42

Sir Arthur Pigott, the Whig lawyer and politician, at no. 35; and of course another lawyer and politician, Sir Samuel Romilly, at no. 21, the house where he cut his throat in 1818 following the death of his wife, Anne. There were some merchants: Swinton Colthurst Holland (no. 13 in 1820), rich merchant, partner in Barings, and uncle of Elizabeth Gaskell. There were the Booths at no. 3 (from at least 1808 until 1820); these were the Booths of Booth's gin, and the (Sir) Felix Booth who was a promoter of polar exploration. But the majority of occupants were lawyers, with some military men, and doctors. So despite the fact that in his dinner party scenes in *Vanity Fair* Thackeray locates his merchants in Russell Square and the lawyers, doctors, and military men elsewhere, at the time he was actually writing about, the Square was full of prominent lawyers, doctors, and military men.

Thackeray goes on to describe a Mr Smee, who had hoped to marry Jane: he is "an artist...very celebrated since as a portrait-painter and RA, but who once was glad enough to give drawing lessons to ladies of fashion. Mr Smee has forgotten where Russell Square is now, but he was glad enough to visit it in the year 1818, when Miss Osborne had instruction from him". It's amusing to read this account of a now-famous painter who has turned his back on Russell Square given that in 1818, when he was supposedly content to visit it as a humble drawing-master, Sir Thomas Lawrence, the portrait painter, lived at no. 65. And he would have been difficult to miss: legend has it that when he painted a portrait of the Russian general Platoff, the house was "guarded by Cossacks mounted on white chargers"⁸

So perhaps *Vanity Fair* is more of a satire on Thackeray's time of writing, the 1840s. At this time there were indeed some rich merchants living there. Moses Mocatta, of the Jewish bullion-broker family, lived at no. 33 but after his retirement from business, when he was devoting himself instead to scholarship and some charitable works. (Mocatta and Goldsmid was the business partnership; the Goldsmids included Isaac Lyon Goldsmid, one of the three buyers of the site for the University of London (UCL) in 1826.) The

⁷ Quoted in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

Baker family at no. 13 were timber merchants and wine merchants, and there were merchants at no. 15 (Hunter), 24 (Caldecott), 29 (Meek), 43 (Bell), and 49 (Leon). They were, however, outnumbered in 1841 at least by bankers, barristers and other lawyers, and those of independent means (according to the 1841 census data). And there were also lots of doctors (both physicians and surgeons), some architects, the publisher George Routledge at no. 50 – and the inimitable Henry Crabb Robinson at no. 30 (1838–1867).

But Thackeray had started a trend in his depiction of Russell Square as a home of rich but vulgar merchants. After *Vanity Fair*, there was Dinah Maria Mulock, Mrs Craik, whose novel *Mistress and Maid* was serialised in 1862 and set in the recent past. It's mainly about three single sisters and their servant, living together and running a school. Their ne-er do well nephew, who becomes a medical student in London, has as his godfather Mr Peter Ascott, "the merchant of Russell Square, once a shop boy of Stowbury". He is a "stout, bald headed, round faced man—I suppose I ought to write 'gentleman'" who is "fat and flourishing...[with] the fat, underhanging, obstinate, sensual lip, the large throat—bull-necked, as it has been called—indications of that essentially animal nature which may be born with the nobleman as with the clown; which no education can refine, and no talent, though it may co-exist with it, can ever entirely remove. He reminded one, perforce, of the rough old proverb; 'You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear'". None of which stops him from later marrying Selina, one of the sisters, but they are very unhappy, despite the servants, the carriage, and the house in Russell Square.

Craik uses Russell Square as the setting for most of the disappointments and tragedies in the novel: both mistress and maid suffer there. Selina dies there aged 41 after having a "son and heir", and Elizabeth sees her beloved Tom canoodling with another woman under the plane tree near Keppel Street. Russell Square brings nothing but unhappiness to these fictional residents, except, of course, the vulgar merchant Mr Ascott, who continues to live in Russell Square after the death of his wife almost as if nothing has happened.

⁸ Hayes, *East of Bloomsbury* (1998)

However, once again, the residents of Russell Square don't seem to match its fictional usage, either in terms of when the novel is set or when it was actually published. In fact there was a lot of continuity in the Square's residents around this time. Dr Henry Root was at no. 2 from the 1840s to the 1860s. Dr George Darling was at no. 6 from the 1830s to the 1860s. The Salt family, who were bankers, had occupied no. 9 from the 1820s until 1861. The Tooke family (including Thomas, the economist, and William, of the SDUK and the Mendicity Society, two prominent Bloomsbury institutions), had occupied no. 12 from as early as 1808 until the 1860s. The barrister James Russell lived at no. 40 from 1841–1861. And John Benjamin Heath, a merchant who was also Consul General for Sardinia and from 1845–1847 Governor of the Bank of England⁹ lived here from at least 1841–1861. New arrivals included the clergyman F. D. Maurice at no. 5 (he moved from Queen Square in 1856, a couple of years after founding the Working Men's College in Red Lion Square in 1854) and the architect G. E. Street, who moved from Montague Place into no. 51 in 1862. Another founder of a Bloomsbury institution, Charles Edward Mudie, of Mudie's circulating library, was living at no. 13 in 1861. Both continuing and new residents, therefore, seem to have considered the Square a prestigious address. Obviously they didn't read novels.

Despite all these residents who were so involved with Bloomsbury's institutions, Russell Square itself, unlike Bloomsbury's other squares, seems not to have had institutions itself. Our Project is particularly interested in investigating the relationship between Bloomsbury's reforming and radical institutions, and their locations. There are fourteen other squares in our area, not counting the two within Gray's Inn, or the proposed Carmarthen Square, which was at the planning stages when the University of London (UCL) unceremoniously displaced it. Of these, Bloomsbury Square had the Hahnemann Hospital, the Royal Orthopaedic Hospital, and the Pharmaceutical Society, as well as the College of Preceptors. Tavistock

⁹ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

Square had schools. Red Lion Square had the Mendicity Society, charities, a church, and colleges. Queen Square had hospitals, religious charities, schools, a church, and eventually, the Art Workers' Guild. Brunswick Square and Mecklenburgh Square were built around the Foundling Hospital in their centre; Brunswick Square had a school of anatomy and Mecklenburgh Square the West London Collegiate School. Woburn Square had a church, and Argyle Square the New Jerusalem Swedenborgian church. Regent Square had schools, two churches, and the Homes of Hope for fallen women. Euston Square had a railway station. Russell Square did not even have its underground station until 1906, and that is actually in what used to be Colonnade Mews. Even Bedford Square had Bedford College from the 1850s to the 1870s, two schools, and, we might argue, the SDUK, since its Secretary, Thomas Coates, was based there in the 1840s and 1850s. And Gordon Square had its church, University Hall, and then Dr Williams's Library.

It did, however, have a near miss. In the 1890s Russell Square was again being used as a kind of disparaging shorthand, this time by John Passmore Edwards. Mary Ward, at the time better known as the novelist Mrs Humphry Ward, was trying to found a settlement—a kind of meeting place and educational centre for local people and their children—somewhere on the Duke of Bedford's estate in Bloomsbury, with the help and financial backing of self-educated newspaper proprietor and philanthropist, John Passmore Edwards. When Mrs Ward first approached the Duke, he said that he might be able to let her have some land in Russell Square. Passmore Edwards was horrified. He wrote to Mrs Ward that "A settlement in Russell Square will be surrounded and influenced by the immediate district. It will not partake of the missionary character that was originally intended. It will be kid-glovish and Russell Squarish"¹⁰

Who was living there in the 1880s and 1890s and was it kid-glovish and Russell-Squarish? Well, Mary Ward herself had actually lived in Russell Square (no. 61, on the east side) herself from 1881 until 1890 (Passmore

Edwards lived in Bedford Square). A few years after the Wards moved out, the editor of *The Times*, George Buckle, moved into number 61. Next door were the publisher William Swan Sonnenschein and his brother Edward, the scholar. On the same side of the square, north of Guilford Street at no. 1^A was the Rev. Robert Bradley, the vicar of St Peter's, Regent Square, and at the other end of that terrace, in the north-east corner, were the Pankhursts, who made no. 8 a "centre for political gatherings, especially of socialists, Fabians, anarchists, suffragists, freethinkers, and radicals", according to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. At no. 13 was Sir George Williams, founder of the YMCA, and other residents ranged from a cigar merchant, to a dairy manager, to an advertising agent, to a boot manufacturer, to a civil engineer, to a house furnisher.¹¹ This eclectic mixture of inhabitants might explain why George Henry Duckworth, who walked round the area three times in 1898 as part of the project to update Booth's poverty maps, described it in three different ways! On October 17 1898, when he walked round the parishes of St Giles and St George Bloomsbury (ie mostly the Bedford Estate) with PC R. J. French, he noted that Russell Square should remain yellow as in the original edition of the map – yellow being the highest classification on the poverty maps, meaning "Upper-middle and Upper classes. Wealthy", and that there were some menservants and carriages.

He seems to have forgotten having walked around before, on 13 July 1898, when he walked round it and the area to its south and east (St George the Martyr and across to Gray's Inn Road) with PC Robert Turner. On that occasion, Duckworth said it should be red (middle-class, well-to-do) to yellow. Turner told him that there 'used to be many Jews living here and round about, but they seem to be leaving'. And he walked round it on 19 July 1898, when his walk took him north of the square and through the parishes of Christ Church (Woburn Square) and St Pancras, again with P. C. Turner. This time he noticed that the houses were being done up with terracotta facings. He

¹⁰ John Passmore Edwards to Mary Ward, 3 November 1894, MS Mary Ward Centre papers, London Metropolitan Archives.

¹¹ Information from 1891 Post Office Directory and from 1891 census data.

also said that the leases were falling in and that there were “not many what you’d call carriage people living here now” “perhaps still yellow as map”.

Whatever the Square was like in the 1890s, the Passmore Edwards Settlement did not move in, but was built instead on Tavistock Place (the building is now Mary Ward House, as you will see in the second part of this talk) and Russell Square was left to be kid-glovish and Russell Squarish. But not for long. A couple of vulgar upstarts were about to move in. Within a few years, the residents on the east side (the lowest and the highest numbers, including Mrs Ward’s house) were displaced and the buildings subsequently demolished to make way for Charles Fitzroy Doll’s enormous hotels, the Russell (1892–1898) and the Imperial (1905–1911) (original version, much grander than the current building). No fictional upstart merchant could possibly have been more florid and vulgar than these two exuberantly commercial excrescences!

This finally put paid to perhaps Russell Square’s best chance of getting an institution established here in the nineteenth century – the National Union of Teachers. Founded elsewhere in the 1870s, this organisation had just changed its name from the National Union of Elementary Teachers when it moved to Bolton House, Russell Square, in 1889. The union went from strength to strength as the end of the century approached, but unfortunately, its days in Russell Square were numbered. The development of the two gargantuan hotels led to the demolition of Bolton House in 1910–1911 and the NUT was forced to build its own massive headquarters a few blocks to the northeast, Hamilton House on Mabledon Place (1915), still the NUT headquarters today. How different things might have been.

2. Rosemary Ashton on Gordon Square

Like its grander and older neighbour, Gordon Square was developed during the first half of the 19th century on the Duke of Bedford’s Bloomsbury estate. Though some professional men and their families took up residence at

various times, it was not inhabited to the same extent as Russell Square by wealthy bankers, famous lawyers, judges, physicians, and architects. In fact, Gordon Square's developer, Thomas Cubitt, found it difficult to let the houses he built there. This is because building started twenty years after Burton began Russell Square; Gordon Square was started in the 1820s, at the same time as nearby Tavistock Square, also by Cubitt, though Burton had built on its east side as early as 1803, and also at the same time as Torrington and Woburn Squares, which were being built by James Sim. All this was going on at a moment when the building trade was about to suffer a slump and when more fashionable housing was going up further west, near Regent's Park, and in the neighbourhood of court and Parliament, in such areas as Belgrave Square (much of that being developed, ironically, by Cubitt himself).¹²

During the 1830s slump, no building went on in Bloomsbury. John, the sixth Duke of Bedford, designed the gardens in the middle of Gordon Square at the end of the 1820s, and Cubitt built a few houses in the square in the 1840s, but by the early 1850s, the east and west sides were both unfinished, and the final houses on these sides were not finished until 1860, five years after Thomas Cubitt's death.¹³ Given the difficulty of finding respectable families to occupy the houses, the character of the square was less private and less smart than the Duke of Bedford wished; like his predecessors and successors, the sixth Duke did all that he could in the drawing up of contracts and leases to stop his Bloomsbury estate from becoming commercial, its houses, mews, stable yards, and alleyways from becoming multi-occupied or used for small trading.

Successive Dukes managed to keep the estate mainly residential; in 1868 William, the eighth Duke, even objected to an academic resident of Gordon Square, Dr Adolf Heimann, Professor of German at UCL, opening in his large house on the south side (number 57; still there) an institution to be called 'Gordon College' for teaching German and accommodating students. As

¹² See Donald J. Olsen, *Town Planning in London: the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries* (New Haven and London, 1964, reprinted 1982), p. 60ff;

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 62ff.

Heimann's friend William Michael Rossetti said, the Duke's objection was that it would 'deteriorate the property by bringing houses down from the private to the professional rank'.¹⁴ In the end Heimann opened his 'Gordon College for Ladies' to learn German in Queen Square in a house not owned by the Duke of Bedford.¹⁵

Thanks to the fierce policies of the Dukes of Bedford, the most undesirable fate – overcrowding, trading, and descent into slumminess - did not befall Gordon Square, but it did become somewhat 'institutionalised' from the late 1840s. Since private tenants did not come forward in enough numbers, sites on the west side were leased, perforce, to large building projects. In December 1853 the enormous Catholic Apostolic Church, built with money from the fabulously wealthy banker Henry Drummond to continue the millenarian work begun by the charismatic Edward Irving, opened for worship on the south west corner. (It was later renamed the Church of Christ the King, was for a time the University of London church, and is now a high Anglican church.) More significantly for the purposes of this paper, there opened in 1849, also on the west side and close to the site soon to be filled by the church, University Hall, now known as the Dr Williams's Library. Designed by UCL's professor of architecture, Thomas Donaldson, the building was funded by a group of Unitarians who wanted UCL students to have a nearby hall of residence on the Oxbridge college model. The Hall encountered several difficulties. Since some of these echoed problems which had faced UCL itself when it was founded as the University of London twenty years earlier, I will turn back to the 1820s briefly and look at the early days of UCL.

The idea for a university in London had two main motives: to bring the rapidly expanding metropolis, the capital city of the most advanced country in the world, into line with many European cities which already had universities; and to offer a university education in England to students who were unable to graduate from the two ancient universities, Oxford and Cambridge, because

¹⁴ See *The Letters of Christina Rossetti*, ed. Antony H. Harrison, 4 vols. (Charlottesville and London, 1997-2004), I, 313-14.

¹⁵ See Heimann's advertisement in *The Times*, 15 October 1868.

they could not subscribe as required to the 39 Articles of the Church of England. The London University, proposed in 1825 and opened for classes in 1828, would embrace dissenters, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and atheists. It would also expand the syllabus beyond the classical, mathematical, and theological subjects which dominated Oxbridge. In its early years UCL, as it became known after King's College was opened in the Strand in 1831 as a Church-and-King rival, advertised the first chairs in the country in many subjects, including English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Hebrew, geography, geology, botany, and physiology.

UCL's founders were radicals and liberals, many of them associated with the agitation for political reform going on in Parliament and journalism in the 1820s. Jeremy Bentham was an influence, and the prime mover, the Scottish poet Thomas Campbell, brought his experience of Scottish and German universities to the table. George Birkbeck, begetter of Mechanics Institutes for the education of labouring men, Zachary Macaulay, James Mill, and Lord John Russell were among those who served on the first Council of UCL. Their undisputed leader, and Chair of Council until his death in 1868, was Henry Brougham, the most famous lawyer of his day and Lord Chancellor in the first Whig administration after the passing of the Reform Act in 1832. Brougham brought the highest possible profile to the new academic institution because of his celebrity as one of Parliament's best orators and as a stupendously successful lawyer (he had defended Queen Caroline in the famous House of Lords 'trial' of 1820, making fools of George IV and his supporters in the process).

Some of the attention was welcome and much needed. Brougham's influence, particularly with the *Edinburgh Review*, which he had helped to found in 1802, and *The Times*, whose editor Thomas Barnes was a friend, ensured that his doings were always in the news, often in articles penned by Brougham himself. Thanks to him, the new University, though attacked in the ultra-conservative press, was given frequent favourable coverage in *The Times*. On the other hand, Brougham acted as a magnet for negative responses too; these came from a range of anti-reform commentators, including members of

the Tory government, the two ancient universities, and the bishops and clergy of the Church of England.

Brougham was eminently caricaturable; his long upturned nose was a useful feature, as was the pronunciation of his name. He often appeared in cartoons as a broom wearing a lawyer's wig and gown, or as the new broom which would 'sweep away' injustices in the law, or as the 'schoolmaster abroad', carrying a birchbroom for chastising pupils. 'The schoolmaster is abroad' became a well-known mantra, picked up from a famous speech by Brougham in the House of Commons in January 1828, in which he attacked the appointment of the Duke of Wellington as Prime Minister. This was not a time, he said, for the soldier to be prominent in modern society; 'there was another person abroad... The schoolmaster was abroad! And he trusted more to him, armed with his primer, than he did to the soldier in full military array, for upholding and extending the liberties of his country'.¹⁶

Establishment commentators launched their attacks on a kind of composite entity. It suited them to pretend that the university was intended for the working classes and that it would encourage those classes to ferment revolution in social, political, and religious matters. Winthrop Mackworth Praed's prophetic poem, 'The London University. A Discourse delivered by a College Tutor at a Supper-party', published in the *Morning Chronicle* in July 1825, anticipates the tone of many others:

Ye dons and ye doctors, ye Provosts and Proctors,
 Who are paid to monopolize knowledge,
 Come make opposition by voice and petition
 To the radical infidel College...

... let them not babble of Greek to the rabble,
 Nor teach the mechanics their letters;
 The labouring classes were born to be asses,

¹⁶ *The Times*, 30 January 1828.

And not to be aping their betters.¹⁷

The university opened its doors in October 1828 against this background; it had no charter, little money – being in essence a joint-stock company in which interested patrons bought shares – and no residential arrangements for its students, whom Thomas Campbell in his long letter to *The Times* in February 1825 describing the plan for the new institution, had envisaged as being middle-class young London men living at home with their parents. Professors were paid according to the number of students they attracted to their courses, which proved hazardous for some; they, too, had no college accommodation. Many were recruited as clever young graduates of Oxford or Cambridge who had difficulties with the Articles (men such as the brilliant young Cambridge mathematician Augustus De Morgan) or teachers from the Scottish universities, particularly Edinburgh, from which a number of innovative medical men were appointed, only to carry on in London some of the debilitating quarrels in which they had already been embroiled in Edinburgh.

From the start there was disagreement on the Council about whether a clergyman might become a professor; if so, could that clergyman be an Anglican, or must he be a dissenter? The liberal principles governing the foundation were interpreted in an illiberal way by some, who objected to clergymen of any colour, and others, chiefly the influential Unitarians among the shareholders, who wished to make UCL a dissenting academy in all but name. False starts and resignations occurred in the early years on these and other grounds.¹⁸ Suspicion and sometimes antagonism from Oxford and Cambridge added to the difficulties faced by UCL, which struggled to find students at first. By the 1840s, however, William Wilkins's fine classical building on Gower Street, though denounced as the godless college by some, had established itself at the heart of fast-developing Bloomsbury. The land on which it was built had been until then marshy and covered in rubbish tips and cesspools. To the east of University College, Bloomsbury was being

¹⁷ *Morning Chronicle*, 19 July 1825.

developed by Cubitt and others, and the streets and squares now appearing on the map naturally became the habitat of professors and their families.

Then came in 1848 the Unitarian-led initiative of opening a hall of residence. University Hall was built and the question again arose: would it be an entirely secular institution like UCL (where a compromise had been reached on the question of having reverend professors, but the trend was increasingly to appoint non-clergymen) or should there be a chaplain, in imitation of Oxbridge, and if so, of what denomination? Much arguing and agonising on this point took place on the University Hall committee, as the voluminous diaries of one of its members, Henry Crabb Robinson, demonstrate. (By a nice coincidence, Crabb Robinson's manuscript diaries and correspondence are deposited in the Dr Williams's Library, the very building which started life as University Hall.) Crabb Robinson, an elderly lawyer and Unitarian, who lived in Russell Square, had been the friend of Wordsworth and Coleridge, had known Blake, Hazlitt, and Lamb, and was a member of UCL Council as well as being a benefactor and founder member of the committee for University Hall.

Some of the founders of University Hall wanted it to be a college in connection with UCL where Unitarian ministers and sons of Unitarians could receive a religious education;¹⁹ some hoped for a merger in the new building in Gordon Square with the teachers and students of Manchester New College, the chief institution for training Unitarian ministers in the country; others thought of it more simply as a hall of residence to be open to students of all faiths and none. In May 1848 it was resolved to hire land and put out a contract for the building; the Duke of Bedford would sell the fee 'provided we obtain an Act of Parliament', according to Crabb Robinson's diary of 13 May. The plan to bring Manchester New College to London was delayed several times, mainly because the Manchester professors feared losing their jobs or status, but was finally achieved in 1853, after the members of both University Hall and Manchester New College had come to see that their continued existence apart was endangered. At that point the leading Unitarian minister in England,

¹⁸ See Negley Harte and John North, *The World of UCL 1828-1990* (London, 1991), *passim*.

James Martineau, became professor at University Hall, at first dividing his time between London and Liverpool, where he had a large congregation, and later moving to London permanently; from the 1880s he lived at No. 35 Gordon Square, on the north side.

The early years of the Hall, however, were dogged by bad luck. The first Principal to be appointed, Francis Newman, professor of Latin at UCL and the brilliant younger brother of John Henry Newman, resigned before the building work was finished on the ostensible grounds that his wishes regarding the proposed accommodation for him and his wife had been ignored. Crabb Robinson and others suspected that Mrs Newman was probably the cause of Newman's withdrawal; she was a member of the Plymouth Brethren and did not like the idea of keeping a lodging house for students.²⁰ In any case, Newman's own religious belief had changed over the years, as he documented in a series of confessional books, and by 1848 he was neither an Anglican nor a dissenter of any definite kind. His resignation was accepted in November 1848, while building was still proceeding, and attention turned immediately to another brilliant candidate.

This was Arthur Hugh Clough, the poet and Oxford don who felt he had to resign his Oxford fellowship over the issue of conscience and the Articles; in 1848 he came second in the competition to become Professor of English at UCL, and Crabb Robinson, impressed by him, supported his appointment in Newman's stead to the University Hall post. The committee met in December 1848, when opinion was divided; some were charmed and impressed by Clough, while others insisted on looking for a Unitarian to appoint. By the end of January 1849 Clough had been uneasily appointed, and had uneasily accepted, answering the question whether he was willing to take Unitarian prayers every morning with the honest but not very satisfactory reply that he had left Oxford because of doubts about his religious belief, and hardly felt in

¹⁹ Henry Crabb Robinson diary, 9 July 1846, MS Dr Williams's Library.

²⁰ Henry Crabb Robinson to his brother Tom, 11 November 1848, *ibid*; Walter Bagehot to T.W Bagehot, December 1848, *Collected Works*, ed. Norman St John-Stevás, 15 vols (London, 1965-86), XII, 289. See also Rosemary Ashton, *142 Strand: A Radical Address in Victorian London* (London, 2006), p. 30ff.

a position to lead or advise young men about theirs.²¹ On taking up the position later in 1849, after the opening of the Hall, Clough wrote to his old Oxford friend Tom Arnold on 29 October, saying 'Here I am', breakfasting and dining with 'my eleven undergraduates (that should be 30 and I hope will be some day)', but expressing forebodings that 'in the end I shall be kicked out for mine heresies' sake' by the 'Sadducees' (Unitarians) who ran the place.²²

Clough was not kicked out, but it was obvious his heart was not in it. Someone else was appointed specifically to take prayers, which solved the problem of Clough's doubtful religious position; but student numbers did not improve, as Clough made no effort in the matter; the Hall's finances were in deficit by £500 in November 1850; by 1851 it was clear that Clough would soon be leaving by mutual consent.²³ He was replaced by a much more suitable candidate for those Unitarians who really thought of University Hall as a residence for their co-religionists and who wanted Manchester New College to come south, so that the Hall could double as an institution for training Unitarian ministers – rather far, this, from the original principles of the mother institution, UCL. The next appointment was Richard Holt Hutton, another brilliant scholar, this time a graduate of University College School and UCL itself, a Unitarian but not a clergyman and not – as his later career of literary and philosophical critic would demonstrate (he was one of the shrewdest critics of George Eliot's novels, for example) – the 'out-and-out' Unitarian desired by some on the committee. Unfortunately, Hutton lasted only a few months; he was forced to resign in June 1852 because of serious ill health which required him to go abroad. Crabb Robinson, who had donated money to the venture, sat on its committees, and supported each of these young men in the face of opposition, now despaired at 'another blow to this ill-fated institution, w[hi]ch cannot prosper except as a College for U[nitarian]

²¹ Henry Crabb Robinson diary, 11 December 1848, 1 January 1849, and Crabb Robinson to Tom Robinson, 27 January 1849, MSS Dr Williams's Library.

²² Arthur Hugh Clough to Tom Arnold, 29 October 1849, *Correspondence of Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. Frederick L. Mulhauser, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1957), I, 273-4.

²³ Crabb Robinson diary, 10 October and 14 November 1850, MS Dr Williams's Library.

ministers'.²⁴ Later that year both University Hall and Manchester New College bowed to the inevitable and agreed to merge.

The connection with UCL remained, but was from this time less troubled; University Hall continued to act as a hall of residence for UCL and its principals were drawn from the ranks of UCL professors, from William B. Carpenter, the biologist (1853-9) to Edward Spencer Beesly, the historian and socialist (1859-82), and Henry Morley, Professor of English and an enthusiast for allowing women to take degrees (1882-9).

University Hall continued in its new double form until 1890, when Manchester New College removed to Oxford, at which point the trustees of Dr Williams's famous library of nonconformist books bought the building, moving from Grafton Way (then Grafton Street).²⁵ The Library immediately rented some of its rooms in the building, still called University Hall, to a new educational venture. Its founder was John Passmore Edwards, born in Cornwall in 1823 to poor parents, who had taught himself from cheap books (including those published by Brougham's Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge) and risen to become a wealthy newspaper proprietor in London. He was now putting some of his money into educational projects in London and Cornwall, chiefly by endowing public libraries. In 1890 he established with Mary Ward a settlement for the education of local working people and the safe play of poor children in Bloomsbury. The Passmore Edwards Settlement, as it was known, started in a couple of rooms in University Hall, then moved to a hall in nearby Marchmont Street, and from 1897 operated in a specially designed building on Tavistock Place, the building now known as Mary Ward House.

Mary Ward – granddaughter of Dr Arnold of Rugby, niece of Matthew Arnold, and author of one of the best-selling novels of the nineteenth century, *Robert Elsmere* (1888) – used her considerable powers of persuasion to liaise

²⁴ Crabb Robinson to Tom Robinson, 21 June 1852, *ibid.*

²⁵ See *Survey of London*, XXI.

between the eleventh Duke of Bedford and Passmore Edwards.²⁶ She got the former to donate the land and the latter to put up the £14,000 it took to erect the building, which was designed in Arts and Crafts style, both functional and aesthetic, by two young Bloomsbury architects, A. Dunbar Smith and Cecil Brewer, who were themselves residents at University Hall in Gordon Square. The new Settlement building, with lodgings for residents - mainly young lawyers and architects - who lived there free in return for lecturing and organising events in the evenings and at weekends, brought education to those who could not aspire to study at University College and who lived in the increasingly occupied smaller streets to the east of the elegant squares on the Bedford estate, the part of Bloomsbury reaching over to Gray's Inn Road with its meaner streets and less particular requirements on its leases.

The Passmore Edwards Settlement represented the beginnings of the play centre movement, with gymnastics, dance, and singing on the children's curriculum. Facilities for adults included free legal advice, classes in academic subjects, chess, art, and cookery, a library, and access to lectures in the Great Hall. There was a coal club and a mother-and-toddler club. In 1899 the Settlement opened the first school for disabled children in the country. This forerunner of our modern day nursery schools and after-school clubs for children complemented the kindergarten movement begun by the German exile Johannes Ronge, established also in Tavistock Place in 1853. The Settlement's activities for adults supplemented the efforts of the Working Men's and Women's Colleges, established in 1854 and 1864 respectively, also in Bloomsbury.

By the time Passmore Edwards helped establish the Settlement, he was himself a Bloomsbury resident, as Mary Ward had been for ten years; he lived in Bedford Square and she - until 1892 - in Russell Square. When Mary Ward and Passmore Edwards were discussing where to set up their organisation after leaving Gordon Square and Marchmont Street, one possibility was to occupy a house in Russell Square. Passmore Edwards

²⁶ For Mary Ward, see John Sutherland, *Mrs Humphry Ward: Eminent Victorian, Pre-eminent*

objected to this; it would, he wrote in November 1894, be 'kid-glovish and Russell-Squarish'.²⁷ The site on more demotic Tavistock Place was found and an architectural competition held for the new building, which opened late in 1897.

In summary: Gordon Square, in spite of Bedford estate restrictions, has housed educational establishments continuously since 1849. University Hall was at first designed to be an outpost of University College; all its principals were UCL professors. As the Dr Williams's Library it remains a scholarly institution, no longer connected organisationally with UCL, but at the back its small garden is shared with buildings belonging to UCL, including several departments, history among them, which now occupy the remaining Cubitt houses adjoining the Dr Williams's Library on the west side of Gordon Square.

Edwardian (Oxford, 1990).

²⁷ John Passmore Edwards to Mary Ward, 3 November 1894, MS Mary Ward Centre papers, London Metropolitan Archives.