

'Homes of Hope': Efforts for the reform of 'fallen women' in 19th century Bloomsbury

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It is generally understood that the 'fallen woman', especially the common prostitute, was a central concern to Victorian Britain. Most will be familiar with the phrase, 'the Great Social Evil' and be aware of the efforts made by key figures, such as Gladstone and Dickens, to turn prostitutes away from their life of sin. There were a number of classifications for 'fallen women' in 19th century Britain and Victorian society was not particularly, certainly not as overtly, concerned with women who operated on a level of the 'demi-monde' and who represented much less of a danger to the social order. The focus of public anxiety was the ordinary 'fallen woman', the common prostitute or streetwalker who plied her trade openly. Prostitution was not technically illegal but it was intolerable to 'respectable' 19th century society. Common prostitutes came to symbolize the whole spectrum of social ills which to middle class Victorian minds threatened the fabric of society; sexual immorality of course, but also destitution, drunkenness, disintegration of the family, disease, ignorance, and so on.

Then, as now, the problem of prostitution in London was largely concentrated in certain parts of the city, the slums, the theatre district and the commercial docks, for example. Then as now, Bloomsbury had its share of streetwalkers, sitting as it did on the borders of some of the city's worse slums and in such close proximity to many of the major rail links bringing those seeking a new life into the big city. In the 19th century these were predominantly country people who hoped to better their lives somehow in London. More recently in the 21st century it appears these waifs and strays are often Eastern Europeans brought here by the same hope and by the same means. Not surprisingly, social concern surrounding this problem continues and King's Cross has long been a phrase resonant with a certain meaning.

The extent of the problem of common prostitution is notoriously difficult to establish. Depending on the source, estimates for the period range from a few thousand to 200,000 prostitutes in London. In reality, it is not practical to try to pin down these margins of society in exact numbers and any attempt to do so would serve very little useful purpose here. Amongst the more evident difficulties, it should be borne in mind that Victorians often classified women as prostitutes in ways which we would now no longer accept. Thus women co-habiting with men but not married to

them were deemed to be prostitutes, as were destitute women without evidence of other support, such as parents or other family, and thus potentially vagrant. Indeed vagrancy was one of the charges used to arrest women thought to be prostitutes. Suffice it to say that there were undoubtedly many, probably many thousands, of 'fallen women' in and around Bloomsbury at various points during the 19th century and these constituted a problem, both in a real sense and in the minds of respectable Victorian society.

That there were efforts made in Bloomsbury to address this social ill does not surprise us. The impulse for reform here is so clear in other ways that intuitively we expect some attempts to deal with this particularly pressing problem and indeed there were a number. Part of my hope for this conference is to alert other project members to those attempts to see if we can shed more light on their identities, their overlapping interests and the other ways in which they may have influenced developments in Bloomsbury and even elsewhere. To that end I have sent around a list of names, with some addresses, which I hope will prove to be of some use and would very much welcome any comments.

The longest-lasting group, the first on that list, were the *London Female Preventive and Reformatory Institution* which was established with that name in 1857 and whose eventual headquarters was at 200 Euston Road. I say eventual because the *LFPRI* often moved location and changed its name until it settled at that address. This was a characteristic of many of the groups set up to 'rescue the fallen' and teasing out a coherent, distinct history of each group can be a challenge. In the case of the *LFPRI* the task has been made easier, at least to some extent, by the fact that they lasted long enough to celebrate a Jubilee year in 1907 when the then Secretary, William Taylor, published a tribute called *The Story of the Homes*.¹ His is not, of course, necessarily always a reliably factual account however it is a valuable source. It spells out, amongst other things, the spirit of the organization which, he tells us, should be considered 'visionary' in its earnest determination to 'reclaim the lost'. Taylor describes institutions set up to deal with the problem of prostitution before the foundation of the *LFPRI* as wholly punitive in their purpose. Prostitutes had been detained for vagrancy or for being disorderly in penitentiaries very like prisons. Those

¹ W.J. Taylor, *The Story of the Homes*, 1907, issued by the Committee in connection with the Jubilee of the London Female Preventive and Reformatory Institution. Held at Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre (CLSAC), Holborn Library, filed at 57.32.

women suffering from venereal diseases were isolated in Lock Hospitals which quarantined them away from the rest of society. Public attitudes towards 'fallen women' reflected these institutions. 'Once fallen, forever lost' was the prevailing sentiment.

Thus, in 1857, the missionary zeal of the *LFPRI* to 'reclaim' these women to society was seen to be a real attempt at reform. The society founded itself on Christian principles of redemption and argued that women, even if 'fallen' from grace, deserved compassion and, stained as they were, could reform enough to become members of society. This approach in fact harkened back to earlier attitudes in the mid-18th century which had seen the foundation of four charities for reformed fallen women, including the Magdalen Hospital. I won't belabour the point here, but attitudes late in the 18th century had hardened and prostitutes had become society's pariahs by the early 19th century. In 1857 the 'fallen woman' as social victim was still a novel notion. Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*, for example, published just a few years before in 1853, had been denounced by many because of its sympathetic portrait of a 'fallen woman'. Poor women would often kill themselves and/or their illegitimate babies for fear of the censure they knew they would otherwise face from respectable society. If nothing else, that censure meant that they would be unlikely to find employment and that their only source of livelihood would be the streets. The *LFPRI* viewed fallen women as victims of economic conditions and circumstances. The group had formed apparently after an encounter between Commander Blackmore, one of the names on that list, and what he called a 'bundle of rags' he found huddled in a corner of Trafalgar Square late in 1850. The bundle turned out to be a domestic servant rejected by her employers after an amorous adventure who was friendless and turning to prostitution. Blackmore took her to Mr and Mrs Thomas, again on the list, who housed her and eventually opened *The London Female Dormitory* in response to the obvious need to provide homes for homeless women. Mr. Thomas and Blackmore put together a melodramatic history of this encounter in Trafalgar Square and others like it called *London by Moonlight*², which in 1852 they sent to Dickens for his advice on publication. His immediate response was that they 'publish it just as it was', in other words without his intervention or name, a deft solution worthy of Dickens's reputation for circumspection.

² *London by Moonlight or Missionary Labours for the Temporary Female Home*, 1852. held at CLSAC, filed at 57.32.

The language of both *The Story of the Homes* and *London by Moonlight* professing to ‘reclaim the wanderer’ may sound sensational to us now, but the precepts of this group were in fact forward-thinking for the period. Melodrama did inform much of the way in which these groups chose to describe their efforts since it helped to identify the ‘fallen woman’ as vulnerable victim, rather than more conventionally as the culpable scourge. It would take too much time to elaborate on this now or to quote any passages at length, however I have included in my handouts a copy of a flyer for another organization founded in Bloomsbury with very similar sentiments which can give a flavour of the language these organizations adopted.

The flyer is for the *Homes of Hope* on Regent Square. These were set up, as it says, in 1860 to house and help the ‘less degraded class of penitent fallen young women’. There was indeed a sliding scale of ‘sinfulness’ in Victorian minds and these young women were likely to be of a slightly better class than the usual streetwalker, perhaps servants or shop girls, not yet wholly degraded into common prostitutes. That they were usually unwed mothers is clear. As the flyer indicates, the *Homes of Hope* strove to provide two pathways to reform, religious instruction and training in useful skills. This was also the approach of the *LFPRI* and illustrations of that group’s attempts to ‘seek to establish the reclaimed in respectable service’ are also in some of the handouts. Note, for example, the number of Religious Services held annually along with the number of Temperance Meetings. The illustrations call into question Victorian notions of what constituted ‘punitive’ and it is easy to see why some girls might have chosen not to stay long at the homes. Indeed, in a similar attempt in another part of London, Dickens was disappointed to find that some reformed ‘fallen women’ simply could not settle down to a life of regimented instruction and enforced piety. However, the accounts we have of the homes in Bloomsbury do not benefit from such a commentator and there is no evidence other than one’s own instincts to indicate that women did not benefit as much as the homes claimed they should.

Another group which set up to try to assist friendless fallen women in an enlightened way established itself at a meeting held in Lawson’s Rooms on Gower Street in 1867. I have been unable to find an exact address for Lawson’s Rooms and it could be interesting to this project to establish that location. This group called their organization *Open-All Night Refuge—The Ever Open Door* and although the homes they established were outside of Bloomsbury, in nearby Fitzrovia, I include their

names here since there may be some interesting overlaps of interests, especially as one of them, R. N. Fowler, later became Lord Mayor of London.

If we can return to the flyer for the *Homes of Hope*, I call your attention to its purpose and also that of the handwritten appeal below it. It is an appeal for donations and all these groups relied on such means to fund their efforts. They were essentially what we have come to understand as public charities and there are indications that they were often successful in raising substantial funds. The very longevity of the *LFPRI* suggests this but it was certainly not the only group to found and maintain homes in this way. One anecdote in *The Story of the Homes* recalls how an anonymous donor left £1000 for three successive years in the society's offices on Euston Road. The amount may be exaggerated, indeed one almost feels it must be given what that sum represented then, but without question the public did support these organizations. There was certainly public anxiety surrounding the urban poor in general during the period which the media, then as now, fuelled when it suited it to do so. The notorious case later in the century of W.T. Stead and the 'Maiden Tribute' is just one glaring example of the attention the plight of the 'fallen woman' began to receive during this period, attention which encouraged donations of all sizes and the participation of public figures and aristocratic patrons in a number of reform efforts including these homes in Bloomsbury.

Homes for 'fallen women' also funded themselves through the labours of their inmates, who not only did all the necessary domestic chores of their own household, but also usually took in laundry or seamstress work as part of the training they were given. This could seem potentially exploitative to modern eyes accustomed to the standards charities are expected to adhere to today. At that point no real authority yet existed to scrutinize the finances and management of groups which benefited from public contributions. There is no indication from my research so far that any of the groups I have mentioned were anything but well-meaning and genuine. However the potential for abuse both of the funds raised and of the women themselves was spotted by one organization which appears to have set itself up to police such abuse and the target of its attention was a group of homes for fallen women in Bloomsbury run by Miss Elizabeth Stride. *Miss Stride's Homes* were established in 1872 with its headquarters at 17 Hart Street which is now Bloomsbury Way. Initially Miss Stride seems to have operated with a certain success. Lord Shaftesbury became her patron and she raised enough support and funds to establish three homes for 'fallen women',

at Hart Street, Great Coram Street and on Tottenham Green. She bought these properties and clearly had an eye for a bargain. One of these, the house on Great Coram Street, had been the scene of a notorious and bloody murder. Miss Stride purchased it when no doubt very few others would have wished to do so and refitted it to her purposes. Unfortunately she did not pay the builder who took on the work whether because by that point, as she claimed, she could not or whether she was simply unscrupulous enough not to as was claimed by others. Certainly according to the *Daily News* early in 1874 she was being sued for payment by the builder.

By that point Miss Stride and her homes had become the centre of controversy brought about by the investigations of a group calling themselves then the *Society for Organizing Charitable Relief and Repressing Mendacity*. This group took it upon themselves to send what was effectively a private investigator to Miss Stride's homes and his reports, if they can be trusted, were damning. Miss Stride had the support of a clergyman, the Rev Hough, chaplain of Millbank Prison and the reports describe Miss Stride and Rev Hough as living together in one of the homes in luxurious comfort with a few 'fallen women' as domestic servants, not the many undergoing reform as Miss Stride's advertisements claimed. This investigating society eventually came to be called the *Charity Organizing Society* and appear to have been a precursor to our own Charities Commission. They pursued their enquiries relentlessly, uncovering what they put forward as evidence condemning Miss Stride and her confederate; the robbing of poor boxes, the exploitation of inmates of the homes, misuse of funds gathered by public subscription etc. They even went so far as to expose Miss Stride's own personal history as a sham. She was not the gentlewoman of independent means she pretended to be, according to the *C.O.S.*, but a former shop girl and petty thief who had been dismissed from other charitable groups for drunkenness and a violent temper.

Miss Stride denied all charges and was championed by one newspaper, the *Suburban Press*, in a bid to clear her name. Her efforts were successful enough to force the *C.O.S.* to write public letters disclaiming responsibility for the reports which were, at least publicly, anonymous. Nevertheless a special committee was set up to review her work, Lord Shaftesbury demanded to have his name and support withdrawn from her homes and by July 1876 Miss Stride was declared bankrupt. Even if the scandal was not true, the mud had stuck, as is usually the case after such a long, public exchange. What I have yet to determine is whether Miss Stride was guilty of

the charges against her or an innocent victim of a spiteful campaign waged by those envious of her success and perhaps resentful of her independence as a woman. Certainly her purchase of the Great Coram Street house points to a woman of unusual character, either so independently-minded and devoted to her cause that she could overcome any natural distaste for such a place in order to take advantage of a low sales price or one arrogantly indifferent to public opinion and rapacious. The ostentatious stationery which Miss Stride used for her correspondence from Hart Street, presumably at the expense of the homes, suggests the latter but this is pretty circumstantial. The fact that in 1878, just two years after her bankruptcy and the closing of the homes, *The Times* carried an advertisement for the re-establishment of Miss Stride's homes in Bloomsbury could be evidence equally of a pious drive to do good or of an incorrigible determination to take advantage of a gullible public. Miss Stride died in 1879, supposedly still very poor although her funeral was criticized by some for its expensive pomp. So far I remain undecided about Miss Stride and her homes but with the backdrop of the other more conventional charities which sought to reform 'fallen women' in Bloomsbury, her story does at least provide some unexpected colour and may yet prove to provide even more.