

Henry Ryecroft meets Henry Maitland: George Gissing in and on Bloomsbury

Richard Dennis
Dept of Geography, UCL
r.dennis@geog.ucl.ac.uk

Introduction

George Gissing is not normally associated with Bloomsbury. He is a man of the slums, or on the margins, or maybe a cynical observer of the nouveau riche, but never a Bloomsbury academic or intellectual. And yet Bloomsbury featured prominently in both his own life and his work. In this paper I want to focus on (1) Gissing's relationship with the British Museum; (2) his use of the streets and squares of Bloomsbury; (3) his own residence in various lodgings in Bloomsbury and how this translated into his novels; and (4) to reflect on his overall personification of Bloomsbury, including scenes from his novels that were apparently NOT based on his own particular experiences.

The British Museum

Gissing obtained his reader's ticket for the British Museum Reading Room in November 1877, the day after his 20th birthday.¹ In *New Grub Street* Edwin Reardon applies for his reader's ticket on his 21st birthday, for which he needed "the signature of some respectable householder".² Gissing himself seems not to have had any difficulty getting his ticket, notwithstanding both his youth (he must have misrepresented his age and claimed to be 21) and his recently obtained criminal record.³

The British Museum was central to Gissing's life in London, both as an impoverished writer, as a source of heat, light and running water as well as a site for research, and as a classical scholar. In *New Grub Street*, as Reardon's efforts at story-writing are rejected by magazine editors:

What a blessed refuge it was, there under the great dome, when he must else have sat in his windy garret with the mere pretence of a fire! The reading-room was his true home: its warmth enwrapped him kindly; the peculiar odour of its atmosphere – at first a cause of headache – grew dear and delightful to him.⁴

And in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, Gissing's supposedly fictional but mostly autobiographical 'reminiscences':

Once, on going down into the lavatory to wash my hands, I became aware of a notice newly set up above the row of basins: "Readers are requested to bear in mind that these basins are to be used only for casual ablutions." Oh, the significance of that inscription! Had I not myself, more than once, been glad to use this soap and water more largely than the sense of the authorities contemplated?⁵

The distinctiveness of the Reading Room's environment also features in *New Grub Street*, in the person of Mr Quarmby, one of the many characters in the novel who labour, in Jasper Milvain's phrase, as "dwellers in the valley of the shadow of books".⁶

Mr Quarmby laughed in a peculiar way, which was the result of long years of mirth-subdual in the Reading-room. ... His suppressed laugh ended in a fit of coughing – the Reading-room cough.⁷

Gissing's letters and diaries are full of visits to the Reading Room. In March 1878, for example, he was using the Museum as a base for writing magazine articles; in 1879-80, he was there reading about apoplexy and paralysis, mainly in connection with his wife's chronic illness. In December 1890, while reading the first volume of Charles Booth's 'Life and Labour' in the BM, Gissing was delighted to discover a reference to his own work, *Demos*

at the parallels between Booth's systematic social survey and Gissing's topographic

lived; all he asked was the possibility of privacy. This was a mere *pied à terre*; it housed his body and left his mind free.¹³

The case of Egremont raises the question of whether it was necessary to *live* in Bloomsbury in order to exploit its principal resources. For the moment, however, I want to conclude my exploration of Gissing's British Museum by considering its *social* function as meeting place. In *New Grub Street*,

And two incidents in Gissing's later short novel, *Eve's Ransom*: Eve Madeley, who has been living in London for some time, latterly in Gower Place, is at first more sensitive to the London environment than her suitor, Maurice Hilliard, who comes "face to face with Miss Madeley in Gower Street" one afternoon:

"Will you let me walk a little way with you?" he asked.

"Certainly. I'm just going to change a book at Mudie's." She carried a little handbag. "I suppose you have been going about London a great deal? Don't the streets look beautiful at this time of the year?"

"Beautiful? I'm not sure that I see much beauty."

"Oh, don't you? I delight in London. I had dreamt of it all my life before I came here. I always said to myself I should some day live in London."

"You never go into the country?" he said, feeling unable to join in her praise of London, though it was intelligible enough to him.

"I go now and then as far as Hampstead Heath," Eve answered with a smile.²¹

Some time later, after Eve has left her Gower Place lodgings, Hilliard waylays her in Holborn as she is leaving work one evening. After visiting a restaurant, they walk back up Southampton Row "neither speaking until they were within sight of Russell Square". Now it is Hilliard who is sensitive to the Bloomsbury environment:

"I like this part of London," said Hilliard at length, pointing before him. "I often walk about the squares late at night. It's quiet, and the trees make the air taste fresh."

"I did the same, sometimes, when I lived in Gower Place."

...

A long silence followed. They passed out of Russell into Woburn Square. Night was now darkening the latest tints of the sky, and the lamps shone golden against dusty green.²²

Nature in the heart of the city doesn't just impact our emotions; it makes **us** more 'natural' – impulsive and reckless.

Gissing would have been familiar with the night-time environment of Bloomsbury. At various times his closest friends – Eduard Bertz and Morley Roberts – each lived in Bloomsbury. For example, Roberts moved to 35 Tavistock Place (Figure 1) in October 1890 where, for the last couple of months before moving to Exeter, Gissing would regularly spend evenings with his friend: on 8 November 1890, for example, he spent from 8.00pm to 1.30am at Roberts'; likewise on 6 December; while on 11 December, when Gissing "Went to Museum, but could not get books, because of darkness", he and Roberts went on to see 'The Gondoliers' at the Savoy.²³

Living in Bloomsbury

While many of Gissing's trips to the B

lodging-house, where the landlady, Mrs Pettindund, and her entourage of husband, grown-up children and lodgers “could not be called poor”, but squandered their income “in surfeit and vice” and were oblivious to any sense of “their mental and moral debasement”.²⁷

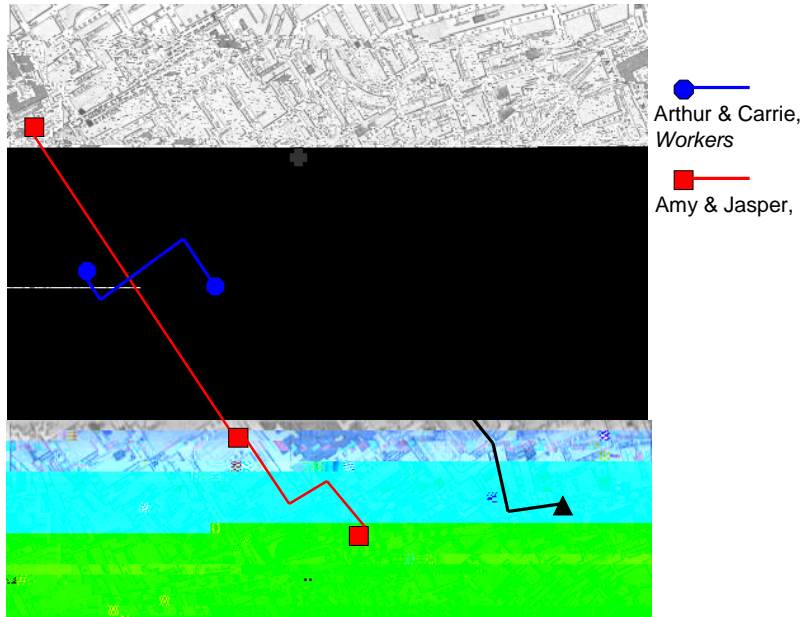
Gissing’s next port of call was 70 Huntley Street, the only one of Gissing’s Bloomsbury homes that still exists, where they again took one “very comfortable” room in another street that Booth labelled “fairly comfortable”. In 1881 70 Huntley Street accommodated

Just over two years later, after moves to Islington and “the West End” (actually the northern fringes of Notting Hill), ostensibly to be nearer the pupils he was teaching, the Gissings returned to Gower Place: Gissing “long[ed] for the neighbourhood of life and bustle and noise”.³² But now they took three rooms in no. 15 on the south side of the street, including a “proper kitchen” and shut off from the rest of the house by glass doors, “just like having a house to oneself”. Gissing enthused about the “*absolute* privacy”; his study looked out, not onto the street, but “onto one side of University College” (though it should be noted that he must have been looking *over* the two-storey cottages of Little Gower Place, which lay between the south side of Gower Place and the college, and which Booth shaded light blue (“Poor. 18s. to 21s. a week for a moderate family”).³³ In

they eventually rented a whole house in Ewell, he and Edith variously went shopping at Oetzmann's and at Shoolbred's on Tottenham Court Road.⁴¹

Epilogue

Had Gissing first settled elsewhere in London he would still have become familiar with Bloomsbury through his regular visits to the museum; but he might not have acquired the intimacy with the area's distinctive townscape or with its lodging-houses. But he was "a man from the north": he entered London through King's Cross, so the first cheap lodgings he found were south of Euston Road rather than in, say, Lambeth or Pimlico. Yet for all his wanderings through and employment of Bloomsbury streets, houses, shops and pubs, I can only find a couple of uses of the word, *Bloomsbury*, in his writing. On 18 September 1890, he "walked about Bloomsbury with a headache, and got rid of it"⁴² and in one of his last novels, *The Crown of Life* (1899), Piers Otway receives a letter from his brother, Alexander, who "wrote from the neighbourhood of Bloomsbury Square". In fact, Alexander, who had "begun life as a medical student, but never got so far as a diploma" and had drifted into "irregular journalism", occupies "the top floor of a great old house in Theobald's Road". Alexander is likeable, slightly eccentric, bookish in a randomly eclectic way. And he is perpetually short of money.⁴³ The personification of the eternal Bloomsbury.



⁶ *New Grub Street*