

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)

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,

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

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,

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

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 hou

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 – oQ3c0 0 rg /F1 12 Tf

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*.

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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

And not to be aping their betters.¹⁷

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*

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

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

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.