

THE BLOOMSBURY PROJECT

By Rosemary Ashton

For a century, Bloomsbury has been celebrated as the home of the ‘Bloomsbury Group’ of writers and artists in the early decades of the twentieth century. The UCL Leverhulme-funded Bloomsbury Project, ‘Bloomsbury and Reform in the Nineteenth Century’, is dedicated to the study of the area *before* this group settled there. A striking number of pioneering nineteenth-century institutions are to be found in the space bounded by Tottenham Court Road in the west, Euston Road to the north, Gray’s Inn Road to the east, and New Oxford Street to the south. Why and how so many centres of learning emerged in the immediate area of the British Museum (founded in 1753 but much extended in the nineteenth century), turning Bloomsbury into an intellectual powerhouse, are questions the project addresses. The beginning and end dates are 1800, when Francis Russell, fifth Duke of Bedford, obtained two acts of Parliament to develop his Bloomsbury estate, and 1904, when Virginia Stephen, later Woolf, moved into the area after the death of her father Leslie Stephen, so beginning the ‘Bloomsbury Group’.

The Bloomsbury project is multidisciplinary, involving research in many fields: intellectual, cultural, political, social, economic, geographical, architectural, legal, educational, medical, religious, and literary history. Collaborators and advisors already attached to the project include colleagues at UCL in English, History, the History of Medicine, the Built Environment, and Geography; outside UCL, we number collaborators from Birkbeck, Central St Martin’s, the British Library, the British Museum, the Dr Williams’s Library, the Swedenborg Society, and Camden Public Library. Between us we have expertise in nineteenth-century literature, journalism, architecture, medicine, science, law, urban geography, economics, politics, and education, as well as intimate knowledge of the rich variety of archival materials about nineteenth-century Bloomsbury contained in libraries and museums in the area which are the chief sources of research material for the project.

The project asks how different reform-minded individuals and interest groups - radical politicians, reforming lawyers, sanitary campaigners, women’s rights supporters, pioneering medical reformers, experimental scientists, dissenters, Jews, agnostics, Swedenborgians, artistic rebels like the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and socially conscious writers from Dickens to Mary Ward, founder with John Passmore Edwards of a centre for education and play for the area’s poor children in Tavistock Place – interconnected with one another as they pursued their lives and careers in Bloomsbury.

Two significant individuals, Jeremy Bentham and Henry Brougham, in addition to being prominent legal and political reformers, were influential in the founding in 1826 of London’s first university, established to allow access to higher education for students who were unable to graduate from Oxford or Cambridge because they were not confessing Anglicans. The University of London, opened in 1828 and soon to be renamed University College London, also extended the traditional curriculum to include subjects such as modern languages and literatures, geography, architecture, and a number of sciences not taught at Oxbridge.

After the founding of University College, other progressive educational establishments in Bloomsbury followed, including the Ladies’ College in Bedford Square in 1849; the Working Men’s College, opened in Red Lion Square in 1854, and subsequently moved to Great Ormond Street; and the Working Women’s College, founded in Queen Square in 1864. Archival study is set to illuminate the history of these institutions, and their relation to one another and to the British Museum, which had been, since 1753, the symbolic treasure-house of national culture. By studying the Museum’s own archives, the project will ascertain how significant the accumulation of educational institutions in the area around the Museum was in moving its Trustees towards progressively opening its doors to the general public rather than the privileged few. The other great eighteenth-century Bloomsbury institution, the Foundling Hospital, also comes under our

scrutiny; though much studied for its connections with its founder Coram and its famous benefactors William Hogarth and George Frederick Handel in its early days, it has received little attention till now for the changes in its principles and administration during the nineteenth century. Through close attention to its voluminous archives, the Bloomsbury Project will add substantially to our knowledge of the Foundling's progress in the nineteenth century.

A number of hospitals dedicated to experiment and progress were established in the area. The first was University College Hospital, where in 1846 Robert Liston performed the earliest operation in Europe using ether. Others were Great Ormond Street Hospital for children (1851) and the hospital for women established by Elizabeth Garrett Anderson in 1871. Less well known, though interesting in terms of nineteenth-century thought and movements, are the Homoeopathic Hospital, which started in Soho and moved to Great Ormond Street in 1859, the Italian Hospital in Queen Square (1884), and a number of smaller specialist hospitals in the Queen Square area.

The Bloomsbury Project aims to analyse and disseminate the history of nineteenth-century Bloomsbury as a significant location in the intellectual life of London by pursuing extensive research in libraries, exploring manuscript and underexploited material, and using electronic resources such as the *Times Digital Archive*, ODNB, *Science in the Nineteenth-Century Periodical*, censuses, and *Literature On Line* databases, in order to offer a rigorously researched, wide-ranging, and original account. At the end of the three-year funding period, in September 2010, the findings will be disseminated to a wide audience through an electronic database giving comprehensive information about institutions, streets, archives, and inhabitants of nineteenth-century Bloomsbury, accompanied by portraits, maps, photographs, and images of objects from repositories in Bloomsbury. Papers delivered to the three annual conferences of the Project will also be reproduced online. There will be a section entitled 'Did You Know?' offering snippets of miscellaneous information such as the fact that a horse called Bloomsbury won the Derby in 1839; that Dickens's father died in the house of his doctor in Keppel Street on the night of the 1851 census; and that the principle of motion pictures was discovered in 1824 in a basement kitchen in Bernard Street by Peter Mark Roget, later famous as the author of the *Thesaurus*.

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For information about the Bloomsbury Project go to www.ucl.ac.uk/bloomsbury-project or contact Dr Deborah Colville, d.colville@ucl.ac.uk.