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LONDON BRANCH REPORT 1991

By Graham Handley and Beryl Gray



Although the London Branch undertook nothing specific this year, it was represented by Graham Handley, Beryl Gray, Michael Forrest and Margaret Wolfit at a pleasant ceremony in Richmond on 22nd April 1992, when a plaque commemorating George Eliot was unveiled on the site of 8 Park Shot. The following address was given by Mr. Tim Britton, Chairman of Richmond Magistrates' Court:

Mr. Mayor, Madam Mayoress, Ladies and Gentlemen - on behalf of the Richmond bench it gives me great pleasure to welcome the Mayor of Richmond, Councillor McKinney and the Mayoress to our ceremony this afternoon. We are pleased to welcome members, officers and staff of the Local Authority as well as my colleagues and staff from the Court. We also have members of the George Eliot Fellowship, and to all of you who have taken the time to come here, I extend a warm welcome.

We are all very sorry that Derek Jones, Head of the Borough's Library Services, is unable to be with us, particularly in view of his enthusiasm and concern to see this task completed. We are delighted that the Mayor has agreed officially to unveil this commemorative plaque to that famous authoress and novelist, George Eliot.

Just before I hand over to you, Mr. Mayor, I want to say a few words about this distinguished woman whom we are remembering today, and who once lived in a house on the site of the present Court buildings. The name on this plaque is

‘George Eliot’, a name which is world-renowned in the literary sense, but it was not the name she was either born with or carried to her grave. She was Mary Anne Evans when she was born near Nuneaton in 1819. Her literary career began in 1846, when she translated Strauss’s *Life of Jesus* for the publisher John Chapman. In 1851 she became Assistant Editor of the *Westminster Review*. In that year she also met George Henry Lewes, with whom she formed a lifelong union in 1854.

On 3rd October 1855 they took lodgings at 8 Park Shot, Richmond, where they occupied a room on the second floor. Their landlady here was a Miss Croft who, according to Mary Anne, kept everything ‘in the pink of order and cleanliness’. A description of the house as it was at the turn of the nineteenth century, not long before it was demolished, states that it was, and I quote, ‘an unpretentious-looking Georgian house, ivy-clad but suitable on account of its quiet and seclusion, though in close proximity to the railway station ... At the back was a long narrow garden, enclosed by a high, ivy-covered wall ...’ During her period at Richmond, Mary Anne Evans began her first fiction, ‘The Sad Fortunes of the Revd. Amos Barton’, and assumed the name George Eliot. Works published during her stay at Richmond were the other *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ‘Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story’ and ‘Janet’s Repentance’. Almost the whole of *Adam Bede* was written at Richmond.

George Eliot loved walking in Richmond Park and, like many writers before and after, was impressed by the famous view from the hill; on one occasion she described it in the following way:

On our way to the Park, the view from Richmond Hill had a delicate blue mist over it, that seemed to hang like a veil before the sober brownish-yellow of the distant elms As we came home the sun was setting on a fog-bank, and we saw him sink into that purple ocean - the orange and gold passing into green above the fog-bank, the gold and orange reflected in the river in more sombre tints.

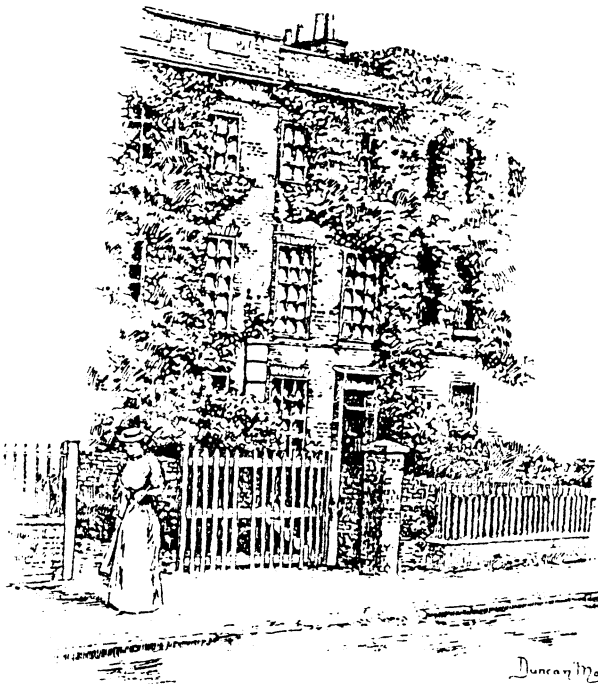
The couple left Richmond in February 1859, and moved to Holly Lodge, South Fields, Wandsworth, where she completed *Adam Bede* (published in the same year) and began to write *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). Her partner George Henry Lewes died in 1878, and in 1880 she married John Walter Cross, a banker whom she had first met in 1869. Later George Eliot and her husband took up residence at 4 Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, and it was here that she died, on 22nd December 1880.

The Richmond-Upon-Thames commemorative plaque scheme has been promoted to commemorate former residents whose association with the Borough falls outside the criteria of the London blue plaque scheme. Our plaque is the first of its type in Richmond, and we are all delighted that it commemorates a novelist who ranks so highly and who wisely chose to have her home in this delightful Borough.

It is my pleasure to hand over to you now, Mr. Mayor, to perform the unveiling ceremony

We all enjoyed the ceremony and the relaxed and informal atmosphere over a cup of tea afterwards. We also felt that we had made a valuable contact with an interesting group of people who were themselves interested in George Eliot, and we particularly wish to thank Mr. Lowdell, Clerk to the Magistrates; Sheila Harden, Central Lending Librarian; and Grace Kempster, Assistant Head of Libraries and Arts Services.

In November 1992 we hope to hold another **George Eliot Supper Evening** at St. Philip's, Earl's Court Road, W.8. The principal guest will be Margaret Wolfit, who will give a programme of readings from George Eliot. Date, details and cost will appear in the next newsletter.



*Marian Evans and
George Henry Lewes
lived on the second
floor of this house from
3rd October 1855 until
11th February 1859.
Here she wrote Scenes
of Clerical Life and
most of Adam Bede.*

*George Eliot's house
Richmond*