



W9 LITTLE BLACK BOOK

The Coral Room

A favourite with Winkworth's Adrian Philpott, it combines country-house grandeur and London buzz (16–22, Great Russell Street)

Ciao Bella

A 'great traditional Italian restaurant', according to Marion Hardman of Hardman Communications (86–90, Lamb's Conduit Street)

Pentreath & Hall

One of London's most intriguing interiors shops (17, Rugby Street)

London Review Bookshop

Top selection of fiction and non-fiction books, as befits a store owned by London's prestigious literary magazine (14–16, Bury Place)

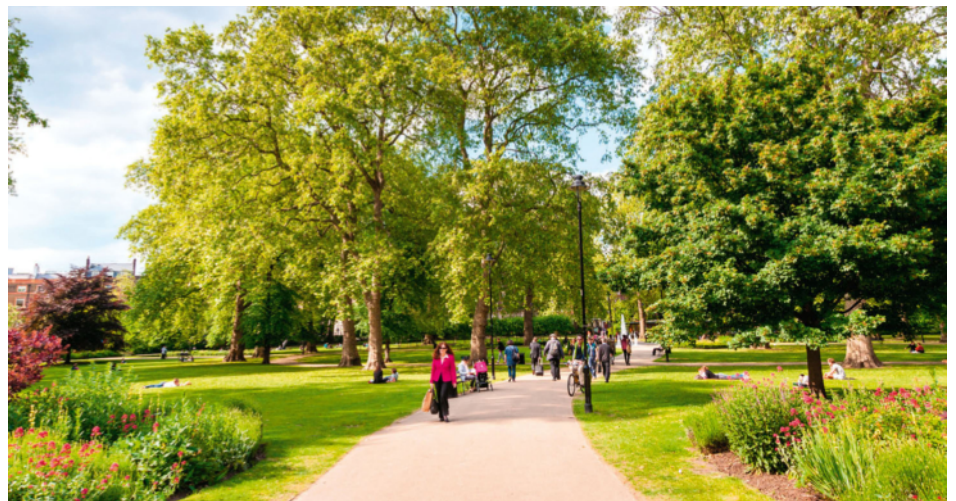
In full bloom

For centuries before literary greats and intellectuals borrowed its name, Bloomsbury was a bucolic slice of countryside. Carla Passino takes a look at its history

THE British Museum gleams in the morning light, dwarfing the much taller buildings that surround it to tower like a novel Parthenon. But where the Parthenon was the apogee of Classical Greek culture, the British Museum was the foundation on which Bloomsbury's intellectual fortunes were built.

Life started humbly for this venerable cradle of British Arts and literature—as vineyards and woods for at least 100 pigs, according

to the Domesday Book—and continued peacefully for many centuries, the Dissolution of the Monasteries proving a mere disturbance that saw Bloomsbury pass from the hands of the Carthusian monks to those of a sequence of aristocrats, who built themselves houses to match their title's grandeur. One of them, Montagu House, became notorious both for the many duels fought in the fields behind it and for one of its residents: Elizabeth Monck, Duchess of Albemarle. The immensely rich,



but mentally ill widow of Christopher, 2nd Duke of Albemarle, she had declared that she would only marry again to a monarch—so Ralph, 1st Duke of Montagu, passed himself off as the Emperor of China to court her. ‘Until her decease, she is said to have been constantly served on the knee as a sovereign,’ wrote John Timbs in *Oddities of History*.

About 25 years after the Duchess’s death, Montagu House was sold to become the museum that changed Bloomsbury’s history. It started with royal physician Sir Hans Sloane’s voracious appetite for collecting. After he passed away, his treasures—more than 80,000 ‘natural and artificial rarities’, some 40,000 books and manuscripts and about 32,000 coins and medals—were bought for the nation to create a free, public museum, which opened in 1759. The collection soon outgrew the original building, which was replaced with Sir Robert Smirke’s Grecian confection in the 19th century.

Since then, the museum has continued to embrace new objects (now numbering at least eight million) and new architecture with equal gusto: in 2000, sleek white lines and a tessellated roof made with more than 3,300 individually shaped panels of glass enveloped the old Round Reading Room to form Europe’s largest covered public square.

‘They lived in squares, painted in circles and loved in triangles’

In the years immediately following the museum’s opening, Bloomsbury remained rural—in his late-18th-century recollections, John Thomas Smith wrote of a Russell Street farm inhabited by two sisters who found

‘spiteful delight’ in riding ‘with a large pair of shears after boys who were flying their kites, purposely to cut their strings’ or seizing the clothes of those who trespassed on their premises to bathe.

Eccentrics would soon become a memory; a development wave saw the area turn into an upper-middle-class haven, with another of its grand mansions, Bedford House, growing into ‘a new city’ where squares, streets and churches covered the fields that had once been famous for peaches and snipes. As Edward Walford noted in *Old and New London*, the streets around Bedford Square and Russell Square—conveniently close to the Inns of Court—were particularly popular with ‘gentlemen of the long robe’.

It was this distinguished set of residents that attracted a young Charles Dickens. ‘He was very conscious of his poor background, and wanted to create the sense that he →

was someone of means,' says Cindy Sughrue, director of the Charles Dickens Museum, which is situated at 48, Doughty Street (where he wrote *Oliver Twist*, now the subject of an exhibition running until March 13, 2022). 'Bloomsbury was a seat of knowledge, culture and artistic sensibility, and he wanted to absolutely be at the heart of that.'

However, poverty rubbed shoulders with wealth, with the streets south of the British Museum housing 'a floating population of 1,000 persons who had no fixed residence,' according to Walford. For Dickens, this was a constant source of inspiration. 'He needed both the grittiness and the glamour to feed his imagination,' says Dr Sughrue.

A tireless social reformer, he must have felt a particular affinity for the Foundling Hospital, which was only a few steps away from Doughty Street. It had been founded in 1739 by Capt Thomas Coram, who had campaigned for 17 years to open a place that could take care of London's abandoned babies and had kept it going with help from William Hogarth, who donated money and artwork, and George Frideric Handel, who ran annual concerts that raised almost £7,000 over the years. But even Coram couldn't have imagined the impact his initiative would have: in the 215 years in which it operated, the hospital

educated about 25,000 children. Today, it has morphed into a group of charities, Coram, that continues to support vulnerable children and the Bloomsbury building (redeveloped in the 1930s) has become the Foundling Museum, which tells the story of those who grew up between its walls. No wonder that Dickens, in the words of *Little Dorrit's* Mr Meagles, described Coram as 'a blessed creature'.

Where Dickens first trod, many other literary greats soon followed. In 1904, siblings Vanessa, Virginia, Thoby and Adrian Stephen moved to 46, Gordon Square, where, on Thursday evenings, they entertained a circle of young intellectuals. Artist Clive Bell, whom Vanessa married in 1907; essayist Leonard Woolf, who married Virginia in 1912; writer Lytton Strachey (*pictured with Virginia Woolf, preceding pages*); civil servant Saxon Sydney-Turner; painters Roger Fry and Duncan Grant and economist John Maynard Keynes were all part of this Bloomsbury Group.

Together, they championed a new approach to Arts and literature, a greater role for women in culture, gay rights, bisexuality and open marriages—as American writer Dorothy Parker pithily put it: 'They lived in squares, painted in circles and loved in triangles.' Their unconventional thinking fuelled some of the most influential works of early-20th-century

THE UPS AND DOWNS

Residents love the eclectic mix of Georgian, Victorian and modern architecture and the history of the area

Residents like Bloomsbury's scholarly atmosphere, accepting culture and a vibrant, but less frantic lifestyle than the rest of the West End

Residents could do with greater protection from unsuitable development

Britain, from Keynes's *Economic Consequences of the Peace* to Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and Roger Fry's *Vision and Design*.

Although they eventually moved on, their former headquarters at Gordon Square remains one of London's culture engines to this day. Bought by the University of London in 1951, it houses several departments—from University College London's Urban laboratory at No 29 to the Birkbeck's School of Arts in the very building where the Bloomsbury Group started. With the British Museum only eight minutes away, no other area of London brings together in such close proximity the past and future of British culture. ↪

At home in Bloomsbury



Great Ormond Street, £4.95 million

This early Georgian house, which is listed Grade II, is 'a historic reminder of Bloomsbury's more bucolic times', according to the selling agents: it has a walled garden and ancient sheep pens that can be used for storage.

The interior encompasses three to four bedrooms, three reception rooms, gym, games room and sauna.

Winkworth (020-7240 3322;
www.winkworth.co.uk)



Duke's Road, £2.3 million

Duke's Road, says Nick Moore is 'a pretty cobbled street with a distinctly Dickensian feel' and this Grade II*-listed, late-Georgian townhouse is the perfect place to enjoy it. It has three bedrooms, three reception rooms and many original features. Outside is a Yorkstone paved walled courtyard garden that enjoys views of St Pancras New Church.

Knight Frank (020-8022 7427;
www.knightfrank.co.uk)



Bloomsbury Street, £1.5 million

It's hard to beat the location of this bright penthouse in Bloomsbury Plaza, which is minutes from the British Museum, Covent Garden and three different Tube stations.

It has three bedrooms on the fourth floor and kitchen, dining room and sitting room on the fifth—both reception rooms open onto a delightful west-facing terrace. *Chestertons*

(020-3040 8300;
www.chestertons.co.uk)