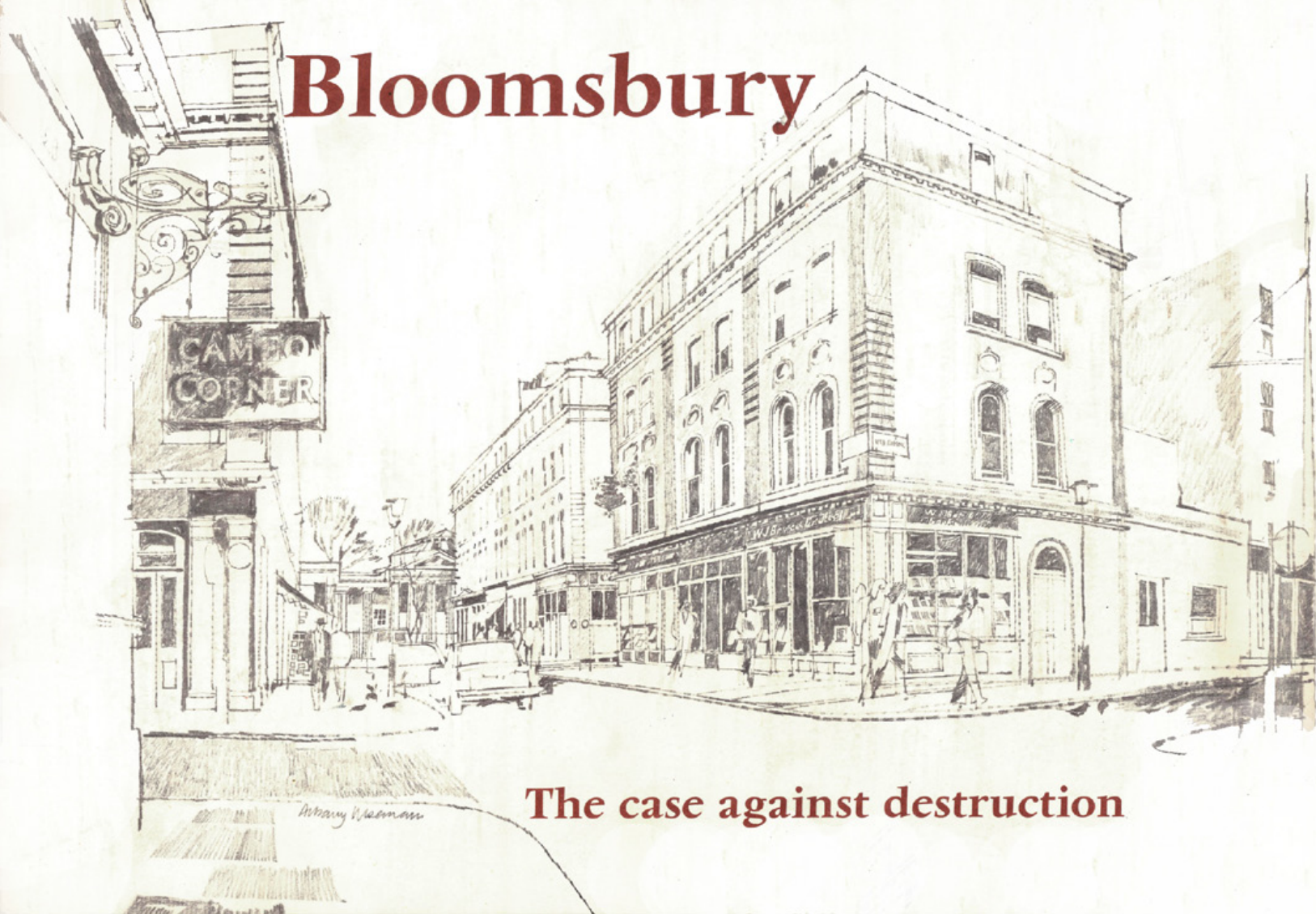


# Bloomsbury



*Amy Newman*

**The case against destruction**



## Bloomsbury

### The case against destruction

These pages are a record of an area condemned to be destroyed. It is the densely populated neighbourhood facing the British Museum.

On this site the Department of the Environment proposes to build the new British Library complex. The development is extensive, the space restricted. Every building except St. George's Church and certain listed houses in Bloomsbury Square will have to be demolished and all streets obliterated.

The area houses hundreds of people. It is the last genuinely residential community in Bloomsbury. Institutional expansion has taken the rest. London University, the Museum, the hospitals and

institutional offices have in the last fifty years swallowed squares, streets of houses, whole residential buildings. Their inhabitants have been driven out.

Woburn Square today epitomises the process. Half the square is blotted out, straddled by a huge new university block, the remainder stands awaiting the bulldozer.

Must this now happen to the Museum area?

The Council's answer is 'no'.

It publishes this booklet to acquaint people with the kind of place it is, how it comes to be threatened and to give reasons why and how it can be saved and improved.



Published by the  
London Borough of Camden

**We print letters from the leaders of the Labour and Conservative parties  
of the Council and the Member of Parliament for the constituency.**

It is a primary duty of the elected representatives of the residents of Central London to resist any further measures of depopulation. The venerable plan to house the national library collection in buildings next to the British Museum would involve the destruction of one of the few remaining mixed communities in the centre of London. Camden Council is most willing to help the authorities locate the library buildings elsewhere, including other sites in Camden, but it bitterly opposes the present proposals.

We wish to improve those dwellings on the site which are sub-standard and to build on the old bomb sites more homes and shops in place of those Hitler knocked about a bit. We want to add further life to Bloomsbury, not further sterile acres.

We ask for the support of all who wish to keep London a living city. We ask you to oppose the unnecessary destruction of south Bloomsbury.



COUNCILLOR FRANK DOBSON  
LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Once again Camden is on its own resisting outsiders who want to replace people, this time by books. While the plans for the British Library have developed, the Bloomsbury area has deteriorated and those living there have been neglected.

If we are to have the library eventually, and as Parliament has voted the necessary money this seems unfortunately all too likely, then we must ensure we have decent new homes as well.

If the existing homes and shops could be replaced by new ones at comparable rents as part of a new British Library development, without people having to move, even temporarily, from Bloomsbury, then this might be a reasonable compromise.

Is this too much for us to demand? If books are essential for this part of Camden so are people. Therefore let us have plans that give us both, and let's have them quickly.



ALDERMAN MARTIN MORTON  
LEADER OF THE CONSERVATIVE MINORITY PARTY

Nobody who cares about our country's heritage of world learning can deny the need for a new National Library. But our generation is equally responsible for preserving and improving, for the present and the future, other aspects of our inheritance in the heart of London.

Communities are built up over the centuries. They do not belong only to those who live in them or who visit them. They are part of the fabric of society and all of us are responsible for cherishing them or for destroying them.

I do not oppose the Government's plans on parochial grounds. I believe that this unique area belongs to the whole country and in many ways to the world beyond, because it is part of the warp and weft of world literature. It would be a bitter irony if, in the name of learning, Bloomsbury itself with its world-wide literary connotations were finally to be destroyed.

The objections of Camden Council and myself are not negative. Other sites have been suggested and seem to have been turned down by mandarins who insist that the new Library must be adjacent to the British Museum. Lord Boyle once defended this view as ensuring 'the whole conspectus of our culture' in one place. This monolithic

attitude is unreal and uncivilised. The Louvre is not next door to the Bibliothèque Nationale. The splendid Library of Congress does not suffer from not being next door to a museum of artefacts. Scholars will still need to go to Venice for the best Homer MSS, to Florence for Herodotus. Probably the most superb library of Oriental literature is in the Vatican. The riches of the world's scholarship are scattered throughout the world. A scholar must be ready to go where they are - take a train to the early Christian literature at Oxford, a plane to Padua or a bus to South Kensington. The world's culture will never, thank goodness, be all in one place. We could make a desert ten times the size of Bloomsbury and into it we would fail to squash even the little finger of the body of world scholarship.

A fine building in the King's Cross area, in Covent Garden, or in St. Katherine Docks could provide a new focus of scholarship in less book-saturated neighbourhoods. And around the present Museum building there could flourish the most vulnerable and irreplaceable phenomenon of our time - a living, diverse community, its future assured because its roots are deep.



MRS. LENA JEGER  
MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT FOR HOLBORN AND ST. PANCRAS SOUTH



GREAT RUSSELL STREET, SOUTH SIDE



*'This is the last genuinely residential part of Bloomsbury; and not only that,*



*it is also one of the sweetest-running fragments of London. There is just enough of everything, not too much of anything: a local butcher, cafés,*

Camden Council supported by both political parties locally has consistently opposed the construction of the British Library on Great Russell Street.

It opposes it because the site is overwhelmingly residential. Because it means a serious housing loss, the most serious of all to Bloomsbury where only residential pockets remain.

It opposes the plan because it involves destruction of a long-settled London neighbourhood and part of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area.

It opposes it because the scheme is contrary to its planning policy. That is to resist the transfer of housing land and housing premises to non-residential use.

The site covers seven acres. Visitors in countless



BURY PLACE, WEST SIDE



GREAT RUSSELL STREET, SOUTH SIDE



*three pubs — including the famous Museum Tavern, which must have*



*staked the thirst of a million academics. And, also, the publishers and antique shops which fit so well the needs of the Museum visitors.*

thousands walk through it every year to the Museum. To many, Museum Street with its garlanded facades and medley of shops is one of the most familiar streets in the world.

Buildings and terraces, typical of London, are a jumble of architectural styles ranging over two and a half centuries. Here live some 620 people. In addition, there are a Y.W.C.A. residential hostel for 350 girls and staff and two hotels with 244 rooms and staff living quarters.

The site is the centre of the book and publishing trade. It also contains more than 100 small businesses, widely varying in kind, from those of architects and solicitors to a lacquer restorer and butterfly specialist.





GREAT RUSSELL STREET, SOUTH SIDE



*It is another of London's villages and a very good one, even though*

Blight over twenty years has naturally not encouraged improvements. Some housing lacks full amenities, some is run-down. But the blocks of solid, if old-fashioned, flats where most of the people live are fully equipped, comfortable and sought-after.

Blight has also frozen the empty spaces left by the war. These would readily lend themselves to rebuilding in like manner to the whole, a blend of housing, book trade and West End uses.

The area, in character miscellaneous, socially mixed and somewhat village-like, stands out in lively contrast to the acres of institutions and offices which surround it. Despite its chronically uncertain future, it has held together and flourished, busy to a standstill



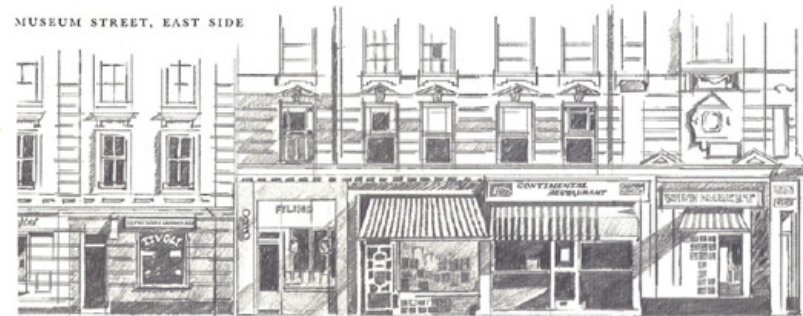
*the buildings are nothing much to look at. Imagine the difference to London if the Tate or the V and A had a similar village on its doorstep, instead*



LITTLE RUSSELL STREET



GREAT RUSSELL STREET, SOUTH SIDE



*of being bleakly surrounded by hospitals and institutions. — Ian Nairn*



MUSEUM STREET, WEST SIDE

during the day with its own mild sort of pub and cafe life at night.

Commenting on its particular character, Sydney Cook, Camden's first Director of Architecture, says: 'To me it has an indefinable quality that I as an architect couldn't create'.

Under the library plan, all this will vanish.

The Council fully recognises the need for the new national libraries. It has proposed other sites. These, one in Camden, meet the requirements of the National Libraries Committee, set up under Dr. F. S. Dainton in 1967, that the British Library be situated in Central London.

For the Council does not accept that a justifiable



MUSEUM STREET, EAST SIDE



case has been made for building the Library on Great Russell Street, on the grounds that readers need also to use the Museum. The Dainton Committee's report says plainly that 'the overwhelming majority of the library's users do not need to make use of the antiquities departments . . .'

This Committee's report came out in 1969. On the site question, it says it 'examined carefully all the arguments' put before it. It also commissioned surveys in the British Museum Library itself 'to obtain as much factual information as possible . . .'

The results of the survey suggest that immediate access to the antiquities departments from the four library departments is important to only *a very small*





BURY PLACE, EAST SIDE



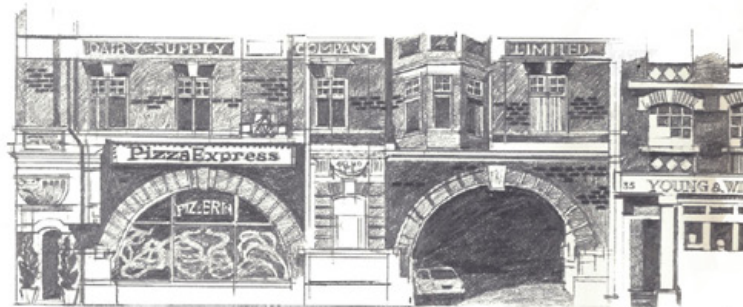
STREATHAM STREET, SOUTH SIDE

*minority of library users: only three per cent considered it essential to their work.*

As to those wanting to use both museum and library and having little time available to do so, '... we examined the number of library users regarding the use of the antiquities departments as essential to their work who, having come a considerable distance, were spending only a single day in the British Museum before returning to their place of origin'. They formed *only half of one per cent* of all visitors to the library.

The Committee also 'found no factual evidence to support the view that the union of the library and antiquities departments on the same site is an essential condition for the effective performance of





LITTLE RUSSELL STREET, NORTH SIDE



LITTLE RUSSELL STREET, SOUTH SIDE



BURY PLACE, EAST SIDE



COPTIC STREET, WEST SIDE

the duties of the museum staff'.

A new library building, says the Committee, should be in Central London, despite the high cost of land, and its site should be convenient 'particularly to those colleges and institutions in Bloomsbury and Aldwych with which the largest group of the British Museum Library's readers are associated'. If the library were moved to such a site, 'Almost certainly, the number of people seriously inconvenienced . . . would be very small'.

Does the convenience of these few warrant the wholesale destruction of a favourite area and the loss of hundreds of homes and business premises?

The southern part of Camden has already



BURY PLACE, WEST SIDE



BLOOMSBURY WAY, NORTH SIDE



LITTLE RUSSELL STREET, NORTH SIDE



COPTIC STREET, EAST SIDE

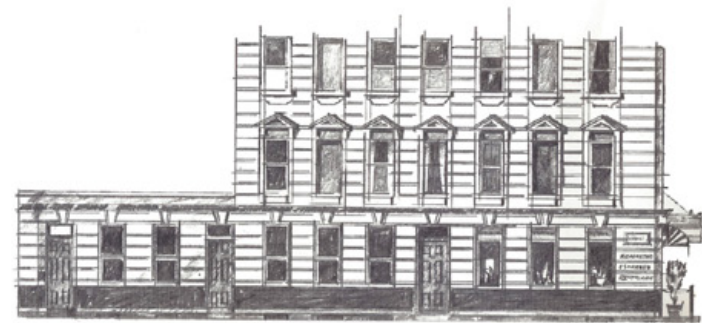
surrendered a great part of its living accommodation to institutions and commerce. Bloomsbury proper houses the British Museum, the University of London, University College Hospital and the offices of countless national organisations.

The exodus of people goes on. The Borough is trying to arrest it, to hold on to the residents who are left. To try and hold on above all to the working population who need to live centrally because of their jobs. Many such workers live on the Museum site. They work shift hours in the West End late into the night and have to walk home.

The Council, however, does admit the pressing need for the British Library. It has, therefore, suggested



LITTLE RUSSELL STREET



WILLOUGHBY STREET, WEST SIDE



LITTLE RUSSELL STREET, NORTH SIDE



GILBERT PLACE, SOUTH SIDE

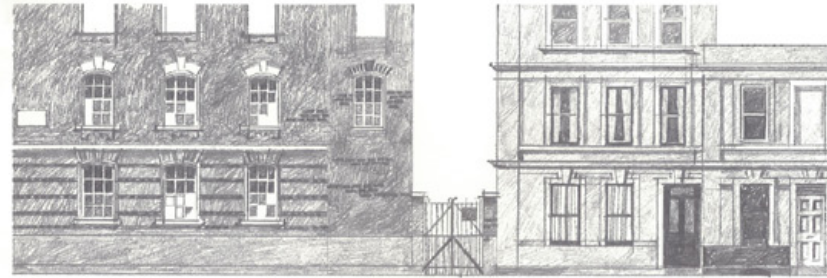
another site - in Camden, in Central London. This is on the vacant railway lands at King's Cross.

The site does not impose any of the harsh conditions of Great Russell Street: the necessity to displace hundreds of people; the severe height restrictions involving costly tunnelling for space underground and the extravagant horizontal spread above; a long-drawn-out 13-year building programme.

Large residential settlements are also proposed for the King's Cross lands. Here the library buildings would create an architectural focus, give atmosphere and quality to a new area. For library readers, close to mainline stations, tubes and buses, this site is ideal. They could come from Birmingham on a day ticket -



GREAT RUSSELL STREET, SOUTH SIDE



COPTIC STREET, WEST SIDE



BURY PLACE, EAST SIDE



BLOOMSBURY WAY, NORTH SIDE

and farther.

Another suitable place for the British Library is Covent Garden, forming a cultural link with the opera and theatre.

Both these can be reached easily from the academic centres of Bloomsbury and Aldwych and from the patent agents around Chancery Lane, as the Dainton Committee recommends.

Briefly, Camden Council's case is that the new Library does not need to be alongside the Museum; that the Dainton Report proves this; that to destroy the neighbourhood is not justified; and that there are other sites and they should be considered.



GILBERT PLACE, SOUTH SIDE



LITTLE RUSSELL STREET, NORTH SIDE



BURY PLACE, WEST SIDE



MUSEUM STREET, WEST SIDE



ST. GEORGE'S CHURCH WILL BE PRESERVED







Alternative sites have been suggested

The King's Cross railway lands.....

.....and the area of Covent Garden





- Existing Buildings
- St. George's Church
- Vacant sites

The area marked in colour will be destroyed, except for St. George's Church

North

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NEW OXFORD STREET, NORTH SIDE