

In the footsteps of Amelia B. Edwards: a walking tour with the EES Eleanor B. Simmance

Unless you are in the business, so to speak, sights of Egyptological interest in London are surprisingly hard to find (aside from the galleries of the British Museum, of course). Even the Petrie Museum (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums/petrie>), in the heart of University College London's Bloomsbury campus, is generally unknown to tourists. In order to reveal some of the lesser known sites with Egyptological connections, the Egypt Exploration Society (EES) organised a walking tour of Clerkenwell and Camden on Saturday 21st March. This event served also to celebrate the unveiling of the English Heritage blue plaque at 19 Wharton St., London to commemorate Miss Amelia B. Edwards, author and co-founder of the EES. This event took place on Thursday 19th March and a report can be read here: <http://ees.ac.uk/news/index/303.html>.



The house of the young Amelia B. Edwards at 19 Wharton St., now sporting its English Heritage Blue Plaque [all images in this report © E. Simmance]

The tour was led by John J. Johnston, who drew upon his research into the significant figures of late 19th and 20th century British Egyptology to provide information and anecdotes at each location, the first of which was the blue plaque itself. We heard about Amelia's early years at Wharton St. and her first interest in Egypt as a young girl reading John Gardner Wilkinson's *Manners and customs of the ancient Egyptians*. We then moved on through St. George's Gardens, a cemetery in which can be found one of London's earliest Egyptianizing monuments: an obelisk dating to 1729 (pre-Napoleonic). There is surprisingly very little Egyptianizing architecture in London, so this was a particular highlight of the day. Members of Birmingham Egyptology may remember a Forum session in which we discussed the Egyptianizing architecture of Birmingham [12th July 2013 'The reception of ancient Egypt through modern architecture': <http://birminghamegyptology.co.uk/forum/previous-sessions/>].



Left: the 1729 obelisk in St George's Gardens. Right: John J. Johnston explaining the significance of various locations and persons within British Egyptology

John led us past the house of author Jerome K. Jerome, whose only connection to the subject is a brief mention of an unfortunate Egyptologist in his memoirs (John suggested this was possibly Francis Llewellyn Griffith), and that of Mary Chubb, author of *Nefertiti lived here*, who was assistant secretary for the EES in the 1930s and who excavated with them at Tell el-Amarna. We also stopped at Tavistock Square, which was home not only to the EES offices at one time, but also author John Wyndham and scholar George Wilkinson. Most famously, however, Sir Alan Gardiner lived here, and John told several amusing stories about the precocious child who grew up to be a rather difficult – albeit brilliant, rich and influential – adult who contributed much to the EES. Notable was his rather tenuous acquaintance with Sir E.A. Wallis Budge at the British Museum.



Arriving in Tavistock Square

Passing by the house in which W.M. Flinders Petrie lived during his tenure as Edwards Professor at UCL, we were told that in correspondence Petrie complained that he could not sleep because of the noise of the sparrows outside his window. One wonders if he

was simply too close to his place of work for his liking! This also brought to my mind the tale of Hyksos king Apophis complaining to Seqenenre Tao about the noisy hippos at Thebes disturbing his rest – might this be a parallel to warring academics...? John did suggest that British Egyptology was made up of rather odd characters, recounting the opinions of American scholar J.H. Breasted, who was scathing of practically all bar Gardiner, although even he did not escape criticism for his lack of service during World War One.

At the Petrie Museum, we heard about the history of the collection, which narrowly escaped bombing during World War Two, and of Egyptology at the university, including public mummy unwrappings and Petrie's annual exhibitions and sales in what is now the UCL Art Museum. The Neoclassical portico of the Main Building of UCL would have been a suitably grand entrance for the public to view the Egyptian treasures which were displayed within at these events.



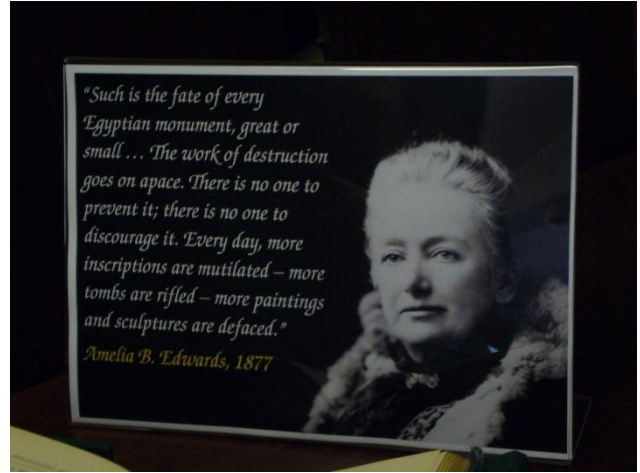
The Main Building of University College London, a key location for understanding the role of Egyptology in British universities

The tour walked along to the British Museum, with John relating further stories about Petrie's life and marriage, as well as comments on the surrounding architecture. We also passed close to the houses of Grafton Elliot Smith (who was perhaps Petrie's closest rival) on Gower St. and Arthur Conan Doyle in Montague Pl, whose interest in spiritualism meant he held rather questionable and biased views about ancient Egyptian society.

Coming toward the end of the tour, John summarised the scope of his research (1729-c.1930s) in the shadow of Hotel Russell, where the Russell Group of universities was founded and where George Bernard Shaw (who was fascinated by Petrie's work and corresponded with him) often stayed.

The group then headed to the Egypt Exploration Society office at 3 Doughty Mews, where we all warmed our fingers, which had suffered from the cold wind, with hot drinks, and where a selection of archival material relating to Amelia Edwards had been laid out, including a reproduction of her watercolour, portraits, letters and a copy of *A thousand miles up the Nile*. To end the day, we watched the hour-long 1984 biopic of this

remarkable woman, *For the love of Egypt*, with Margaret Tyzack as Amelia, which documented her life starting from the publication of her book on Egypt in 1877: the foundation of the Egypt Exploration Society (then Egypt Exploration Fund) and her struggles asserting herself in the male-dominated world of academia (in particular with the sceptical Dr Samuel Birch of the British Museum), gaining funding for excavation, work with Edouard Naville, W.M. Flinders Petrie, F.Ll. Griffith, Kate Bradbury and William C. Winslow, finishing with her lecture tour around America and death in 1892.



Archival material on display at the Egypt Exploration Society

It was a pleasant end to an informative day, and I would like to thank the EES for arranging the tour, in particular Carl Graves, Dr Valerie Billingham and John J. Johnston. More information about the EES and the work they do can be found at their website (<http://ees.ac.uk/index.html>) and on Twitter (@TheEES). For more details on the places we visited and the people mentioned, please contact John through the EES.

E.B.S.