

THE

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## 'PETER PAN' AND BRUNSWICK SQUARE

By Rosemary Ashton

Ask people which London location they associate with J. M. Barrie and especially Peter Pan, and most will reply not 'Bloomsbury' but 'Kensington'. The mistake is understandable. Peter Pan himself tells Wendy in the opening scene of the play (as published in 1928) that he ran away as a baby to Kensington Gardens. Sir George Frampton's famous statue of Peter Pan was installed in Kensington Gardens in 1912; Barrie lived in the area when he wrote the play; and it was in the Gardens that he befriended the family of boys, the Llewelyn Davies children, to whom the printed text was dedicated. In addition, in several versions and reworkings of the Peter Pan story, Barrie uses Kensington Gardens as a backdrop or starting-point.<sup>1</sup>

However, the fact is that though he met the boys who inspired his play in Kensington Gardens in 1898 while walking his dog Porthos and became friends with the family, who lived nearby in Kensington Park Gardens,<sup>2</sup> and though he based the play's adventures on games they played together there, when he came to write it in November 1903, he placed the Darlings' house not in Kensington, but in Bloomsbury, and specifically on the corner of Brunswick Square. The manuscript of the first draft, written between 23 November 1903 and March 1904, is headed simply 'ANON. A Play'. It has a drawing of the children's bedroom, and the scene is entitled 'The Night-Nursery of the Darling Family'. In his stage instructions Barrie specifies that 'the house is in a London street in Bloomsbury, and the houses opposite may be vaguely seen thro' the windows'.<sup>3</sup>

A typescript of the play, clearly intended for use in the first production at the Duke of York's Theatre from 27 December 1904 to 1 April 1905 (a run of 150 performances), also

specifies that the Darlings live in Bloomsbury.<sup>4</sup> One might wonder why Barrie should name the particular setting for the production, given that a Bloomsbury house is not much different from other London houses built in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, and that unless someone mentions the location in a speech, or some visual clue is given, there is no way an audience could know of it. While there is no obvious *theatrical* reason for the play to open in a house in Bloomsbury, there is an emotional one, which has been largely overlooked by students of the play's complicated textual history.<sup>5</sup> When Barrie printed *Peter Pan* in 1928 he expanded on the Bloomsbury theme, giving the reasons in his stage directions for the opening scene:

The night nursery of the Darling family, which is the scene of our opening Act, is at the top of a rather depressed street in Bloomsbury. We have a right to place it where we will, and the reason Bloomsbury is chosen is that Mr Roget once lived there. So did we in days when his *Thesaurus* was our only companion in London; and we whom he has helped to wend our way through life have always wanted to pay him a little compliment. The Darlings therefore lived in Bloomsbury.

It is a corner house whose top window, the important one, looks upon a leafy square from which Peter used to fly up to it, to the delight of three children and no doubt the irritation of passers-by. The street is still there, though the steaming sausage shop has gone; and apparently the same cards perch now as then over the doors, inviting homeless ones to come and stay with the hospitable inhabitants. Since the days of the Darlings, however, a lick of paint has been applied; and our corner house in particular, which has swallowed its neighbour, blooms with

1. Peter Pan and Kensington appear in the following prose works: *The Little White Bird* (1902), *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* (1906), and *Peter and Wendy* (1911).

2. See Janet Dunbar, *J. M. Barrie: The Man Behind the Image* (London, 1970), p.117.

3. 'ANON. A Play', MS given by Barrie to the American actress Maude Adams; extracts quoted courtesy of the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. Four pages of MS notes leading towards Peter Pan, dated 14 October 1903 and now in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University, do not specify any location (images 1043861-4, Beinecke Digital Archive).

4. Typescript of three-act version of Peter Pan, in the General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University (P45 1904-1905b).

5. The text of the play underwent changes in production between 1904 and its publication in 1928; some of these changes are discussed by Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (London, 1984), and R.D.S. Jack, 'The Manuscript of Peter Pan', *Children's Literature*, vol. xviii (New Haven, Connecticut), pp.101-13. None of them concern Bloomsbury, and I have not come across any discussion of the play's Bloomsbury setting.



47. Grenville House, 8-10 Grenville Street c.1929, now Downing Court (COURTESY OF CAMDEN LOCAL STUDIES AND ARCHIVE CENTRE)





48. The Darlings' house: 'Peter and Jane', one of 12 half-tone illustrations by the artist F D Bedford (1864-1954) for J M Barrie's novel *Peter & Wendy*, first published in 1911 by Hodder & Stoughton.

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awful freshness as if the colours had been discharged upon it through a hose. Its card now says 'No children', meaning maybe that the goings-on of Wendy and her brothers have given the house a bad name. As for ourselves, we have not been in it since we went back to reclaim our old *Thesaurus*.<sup>6</sup>

Barrie's reason for placing the Darlings in Bloomsbury was thus twofold: Peter Mark Roget of *Thesaurus* fame had lived there, and so had Barrie himself on arriving in London in 1885 from Scotland, a shy young man intent on making a living and a name. Roget, who died in 1870, was a GP in Bloomsbury, living for many years in Bernard Street, which links Russell Square to the west with Brunswick Square to the east. He was nearly seventy when he published his celebrated *Thesaurus* in 1852. Barrie himself had lived in slightly run-down Grenville Street (the 'rather depressed street in Bloomsbury' he describes), very probably in the house on the corner where it meets the south-west corner of Brunswick Square, the 'leafy square' specified in the stage directions to *Peter Pan*.<sup>7</sup> (fig. 47)

Barrie's description of his arrival in London is striking. In his idiosyncratically titled autobiography, *The Greenwood Hat* (1930), he tells how he travelled by overnight train on 28 March 1885, arriving at St Pancras station on Euston Road 'gauche and inarticulate, as thin as a pencil but not so long' – a rueful reference to his very small stature, about which Barrie was obsessively anxious. He gives a thumbnail sketch of his younger self, amused and patronising but at the same time honestly revealing the hurt he still felt about his lack of height:

Wears thick boots (with nails in them), which he will polish specially for social functions. Carries on his person a silver watch bought for him by his father from a pedlar on fourteenth birthday (that was a day). Carries it still, No. 57841. Has no complete dress-suit in his wooden box, but can look every inch as if attired in such when backed against a wall. Manners, full of nails like his boots.

Ladies have decided that he is of no account, and he already knows this and has private anguish thereanent... Pecuniary asset, twelve pounds in a secret pocket which he sometimes presses, as if it were his heart.<sup>8</sup>

The young Barrie set about finding cheap lodgings. He knew London only from maps, and as he hoped to become a frequenter of the Reading Room at the British Museum, he stayed in the immediate area, at first finding temporary quarters in Guilford Street, then moving after a short while to 'little Grenville Street' round the corner. Grenville Street joins Bernard Street at the angle of the south-west corner of Brunswick Square. Barrie remembers spending 'many months' of poverty in Grenville Street, 'emerging to dine quite agreeably on four provocative halfpenny buns from a paper bag', before moving, when his financial circumstances improved, to a better room than the one at the back in which he started, which 'looked on to a blank wall'.<sup>9</sup> In commenting in his autobiography on his early pieces written in Grenville Street, Barrie remembers 'having been so pestered by the Waits [messengers sent by the editor] that he buried them in Brunswick Square'.<sup>10</sup>

As *Peter Pan* enjoyed its successful first run in the theatre, one Bloomsbury resident in the audience in January 1905 noted in her journal that the play, though sentimental, was 'imaginative & witty like all of his', and all in all 'a great treat'.<sup>11</sup> Virginia Stephen (later Woolf) and her circle were to become synonymous with 'Bloomsbury', cementing the area's reputation as the home of intellectual, literary, and artistic pursuits, a reputation which in truth it had already acquired during the nineteenth century, when Dickens, Thackeray, William Morris, Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, and Du Maurier were among its inhabitants. To that list we must add J. M. Barrie, the man who celebrated Bloomsbury by giving it a place in his most famous and enduring work, *Peter Pan*. (fig. 48)

8. J.M. Barrie, *The Greenwood Hat, being a Memoir of James Anon 1885-1887* (London, 1937), pp.8-9. Greenwood was the editor of the *St James's Gazette*, in which Barrie published his early journalism.

9. *Ibid*, pp.17-20.

10. *Ibid*, p.153.

11. Virginia Stephen, Journal, 25 January 1905, *Virginia Woolf, A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals 1897-1909*, ed. Mitchell A. Leaska (London, 1990), pp.227-8.

6. *Peter Pan and Other Plays*, ed. Peter Hollindale (Oxford, 1995), p.87.

7. For details of Bloomsbury's streets and squares in the nineteenth century, see the UCL Bloomsbury Project website, [ucl.ac.uk/bloomsbury-project](http://ucl.ac.uk/bloomsbury-project).