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10. Risk and reputation: the London blue plaques scheme*

Anna Eavis and Howard Spencer

The London blue plaques scheme has been running for just over 150 years. During this time more than 920 plaques have been installed across London, commemorating historically significant individuals on the buildings in which they lived or worked.

The enduring popularity of the scheme is testament to the strength of the concept at its heart, which – like most good ideas – is a very simple one; it celebrates the connection between a famous or significant person and a place. It was first proposed by the Liberal M.P. William Ewart, a reformer who also campaigned for the public funding of free libraries and the abolition of capital punishment for such minor crimes as cattle stealing. In July 1863 he addressed the house of commons on the subject of London's rich historical associations and suggested a scheme to inscribe 'on those houses in London which have been inhabited by celebrated persons, the names of such persons'.¹

This suggestion by Ewart – whose name has since been immortalized in two London plaques – was enthusiastically taken up by Henry Cole (another plaque recipient), former chairman of the Society of Arts, who persuaded the Society to launch a scheme to erect what were then referred to as 'memorial tablets', in 1866. The Society of Arts was to be the first of four organizations responsible for the scheme. It was followed by the London County Council (L.C.C.) in 1901, and the Greater London Council (G.L.C.) in 1965, which brought the plaques to the wider area administered by the new council, which included most of Middlesex and parts of Surrey, Kent, Essex and Hertfordshire. On the abolition of the G.L.C. in 1985 the plaques scheme passed to English Heritage, which continues to run it today.

Broadly speaking the aims of the scheme have not changed much over all this time. It is designed to commemorate historically significant individuals

* This article draws on Emily Cole's introduction to *Lived in London: Blue Plaques and the Stories Behind Them* (2009).

¹ *Hansard*, Parliamentary Debates, clxxii (17 July 1863), col. 986.

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who have lived or worked in London buildings. Preference has always been given to authentic buildings connected with the figure, and for the last fifty years the survival of such a building has been a pre-condition. This does serve to limit the scope of the scheme and means that some individuals go uncommemorated; however, it chimes with one of the key intentions of the scheme's founders, which is that the plaques would act as an incentive for the preservation of historic buildings. While Ewart's original proposal doubtless owed something to the flourishing civic and national preoccupation with commemoration, which found expression in public monuments of various kinds, his suggested link between a person and a building was something rather different. It not only celebrated individual achievement, but acknowledged the historical significance bestowed upon a building by association. For those interested in – and concerned about safeguarding – London's architectural heritage, the proposed scheme offered the possibility of identifying and helping to protect the city's historic buildings by increasing 'the public estimation for places which have been the abodes of men who have made England what it is'.²

From the outset, those awarding the plaques have had to grapple with the question of reputation – both in determining overall historical significance, and in trying to work out whether an apparently worthy individual has any skeletons poised to fall out of the cupboard. The Society of Arts sought to honour individuals 'connected with historical events' and eminent in the fields of arts, manufacture and commerce. The L.C.C. was initially broader in its definition of significance, stating in 1903 that the scheme should celebrate famous Londoners and visitors to London.

The decision about who is, essentially, famous enough has – from the outset – been taken by a committee. The Society of Arts' first committee on 'memorial tablets' numbered among its members Joseph Bazalgette, George Street and Henry Cole and initially worked from lists of candidates prepared by the Society's treasurer George Bartley. In June 1866 it agreed to plaques for Lord Nelson, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Benjamin Franklin and Lord Byron. It also accepted suggestions from donors to the scheme, including the first to a woman – Sarah Siddons – and from the press. The composer Algernon Ashton – a prolific writer of letters to the newspapers – successfully urged the commemoration of figures including John Ruskin, Charles Dickens and Benjamin Disraeli. In 1901 the L.C.C. inherited some of these candidates. Thereafter suggestions came in unsolicited – much as they do today – from private individuals, professional and learned societies, metropolitan borough councils, and representatives of foreign countries. In this organic

² E. Cole, *Lived in London*, p.5, quoting a statement made by the Society of Arts in 1866.

fashion, the scheme rapidly became an enterprise substantially driven by public suggestions, and this has remained the case. These suggestions were judged in turn by a bewildering number of L.C.C. and G.L.C. committees, including those devoted to the consideration of records and museums, parks and planning. The dedicated Blue Plaques Panel that currently deliberates dates from 1989, and grew out of the London Advisory Committee.

In 1954 the L.C.C. adopted a set of formal selection criteria against which candidates for plaques could be assessed. Their eminence within their own profession or sphere of activity – as judged by their peers – was regarded as a given. It was also seen as preferable that a commemorated figure's name should be recognizable 'to the man of the street of the succeeding generation' – though it was admitted that account needed to be taken of cases where their historical significance was not concomitant with their public profile. Crucially, the new criteria made explicit the necessity for benign and beneficial achievement – commemorated figures should, it was decreed, have made some important and positive contribution to the welfare or happiness of humanity'.³ The tone might be somewhat Reithian, but this criterion was continued by the G.L.C. after 1965 and, in slightly amended form, is still applied by English Heritage. The assumption of a 'positive contribution' was strongly implicit even prior to 1954 – as may be deduced from the presence of a victor's laurel wreath or garland in the design of the early (from 1903) L.C.C. plaques.

It is undoubtedly more difficult to establish – and, for more recently deceased figures, to predict – lasting significance than it is to record transient fame. Ideas of historical significance evolve over time, and although the perceived importance of some of those commemorated – Mozart, Van Gogh, Gandhi, for example – seems likely to last well beyond our own era, the scheme is bound to reflect the values of each generation responsible for it. In terms of the areas of human endeavour covered, the blue plaque scheme has – right from the outset – shown a clear preference for commemorating figures active in the arts, and in the field of literature in particular. The relative absence of technological innovators and business people was commented on in 1983, when the G.L.C. commemorated a man who was both – Sir Richard Arkwright. More plaques in this vein have followed, but there is still less representation than might be expected for those active in the engine room of Britain's economic development in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Whether this is down to the primacy of the north of England in this development, or is linked to the prejudice against industrialism detected by some scholars (notably Martin Wiener)

³ Cole, *Lived in London*, p. 16.



Figure 11.1. George Eliot's L.C.C. plaque of 1905 in Wimbledon Park Road, Wandsworth, with the wreathed border design. It was the first put up by the L.C.C. to a woman – and the first official plaque to go south of the River Thames.

among the British elite is a moot point. It could simply be that achievements in the arts are – for non-specialists – easier to comprehend and therefore to judge than those in scientific or technological fields. Inevitably, for the public facing scheme, the bias of the suggestions received plays a part too.

There are – or were – other threadbare patches in the scheme's rich tapestry. Before 1986 only one sporting great – W. G. Grace – was represented; now, some two dozen are honoured, from racing car drivers to promoters of the body beautiful. The first footballers to be commemorated as such – Bobby Moore and Laurie Cunningham – did not get their plaques until 2016, a dearth partly explained by the dominance of clubs from the north of England in the early years of the professional game. But popular culture in general was given fairly short shrift until the 1960s, when the G.L.C. put up a slew of plaques to stars of the music hall, including Marie Lloyd, Dan Leno and – despite considerable dissent on the selection panel, which was then the G.L.C.'s Historic Buildings Board – Old Mother Riley. More recently, pop musicians such as Jimi Hendrix, John Lennon and Freddie Mercury have joined the pantheon of blue roundel recipients.



Figure 11.2. Wilkie Collins was rejected for a blue plaque in 1910 after the clerk of the L.C.C. advised that his writings were 'not of a high order'. His reputation having revived, his rectangular plaque went up in Gloucester Place, Marylebone, in 1951.

Other changes of emphasis over time have affected the number of plaques to women and to figures belonging to minority ethnic groups. It is perhaps unsurprising that only four of the original thirty-five plaques erected by the Society of Arts were for women. More startling is the fact that as early as 1907, this imbalance was perceived as enough of a problem by the L.C.C.'s chief clerk Laurence Gomme for him to write a paper listing some of the notable women who could be commemorated – and some of them were. Even today, the proportion of women commemorated accounts for just 13 per cent of the overall total; this compares with 10 per cent included in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, as revised in 2004. The first person from an ethnic minority to be commemorated with a blue plaque was Mahatma Gandhi, in 1954; twenty-five years later, just four others had joined him. Under the G.L.C. in the mid 1980s, this rapidly doubled, and subsequent collaboration with the Black and Asian Studies Association helped to take numbers into the twenties. The current total of plaques to black and minority ethnic figures is thirty-four, which accounts for less than 4 per cent of the overall total: efforts to boost the number of nominations in this area are ongoing.

In judging historical significance, there are, of course, questions of degree – John Keats, who was commemorated as long ago as 1896, has undoubtedly maintained his lustre, but how do Arthur Hugh Clough or Raymond Chandler measure up in terms of lasting literary reputation? Both writers were approved in fairly recent years by the Blue Plaques Panel. Careful attention is paid to the composition of the Panel, members of which are selected for their expertise in key subject areas to ensure as broad a view of cases can be taken as is possible. Views are bound to differ on the merits of candidates, but to ensure that – hopefully – wise and informed decisions are made, and that proposals are given the attention they deserve, all suggestions are researched and evaluated by an in-house historian, supported as required by further research commissioned from external historians.

Research has underpinned the scheme since its earliest days, perhaps because of its emphasis on the identification of historic buildings in the changing London landscape. In 1903 the L.C.C. stated that the scheme – in addition to honouring famous Londoners – was designed to provide accurate information about London's history, taken from official records. It became known, until the Second World War, as the Indication of Houses of Historical Interest in London. If the scheme was to contribute to an understanding of London's history, it required investment in research. The L.C.C.'s approach, overseen by the clerk of the council, was meticulous and rigorous, including detailed analyses of rate books and directories, and involving the staff of the council's library division. At times however – usually when resources have been tight – independent research has been skimmed on, and the testimony of interested parties apparently accepted without verification. This happened at certain points in the 1980s, for example – a period which saw several instances of poor or even incorrect choices of building for commemoration, and some errors and omissions in plaque inscriptions.

Nor were the 1980s unique in producing plaques with some unfortunate choices of words. In 1931 Sir Francis Galton was celebrated as 'founder of Eugenics' in a private plaque erected by admirers. The plaque was adopted into the official scheme by the L.C.C. in 1959, as was then done on occasion. It is surprising that the council had no qualms about this, as the term eugenics was by that time irredeemably tainted by its association with the racial policies of the Nazis. Galton's plaque may be defended on the basis of his achievements in biostatistics and the advances he made in the study of heredity – but any plaque to him being considered now would – surely – not mention eugenics. An association with or interest in eugenics – once very common – would not, it should be noted, be regarded as a disqualification

for a plaque. Several of its one-time devotees have been commemorated for other important achievements, including George Bernard Shaw and Marie Stopes.

The case of Ezra Pound, whose reputation as a poet presently appears unassailable, is more complex. He was first considered for a blue plaque in 1988 by English Heritage, who considered that 'in view of Pound's involvement with Fascism and his support for Hitler and Mussolini, it was too soon to take a dispassionate view of the case for commemoration'. In 1999 it was decided that despite the 'severe stain on his character ... his significance as a major poet of the 20th century was sufficient to justify commemoration'. A plaque to Pound duly went up in 2004 at his former home in Kensington Church Walk. The case is illustrative not only of the need for well-informed consideration of evidence, but of the importance of the passage of time arriving at a dispassionate assessment of historical significance. It was a point that was understood from the early years: in 1903 Lord Rosebery, former chairman of the L.C.C., suggested that no plaque



Figure 11.3. The unveiling of Ezra Pound's plaque in Kensington Church Walk took place in 2004.

should be erected for a living person – although his primary concern was apparently to protect the putative living plaque-holder from unwanted public interest. Only one individual – Napoleon III – has ever been given a plaque while still alive – in 1867, while he was still ruling France (the plaque is the oldest to survive). Draft regulations drawn up by the L.C.C. in 1903 proposed that no plaque be installed until twenty-five years after death and from 1912 a ‘twenty-year rule’ is mentioned in Council papers. In 1947 it was reported that ‘it has not generally been the practice to erect a memorial tablet to any person within twenty years of death’. The exceptions included W. E. Gladstone (1908), John Ruskin (1909), T. H. Huxley (1910) and Earl Roberts (1922). In 1954 the ‘twenty-year rule’ was adopted as part of a formalization of the scheme’s procedures by Sir Howard Roberts, clerk to the council. For Roberts this period allowed ‘a breathing space in which a man’s reputation and achievement can be considered dispassionately’.⁴

For some figures, even twenty years is not enough for a dispassionate and informed judgement to be made. In 2007 English Heritage rejected the case for Wallis Simpson having concluded that that a recent biography’s suggestion that she had passed vital information directly to the Nazi and German foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop could not be dismissed as merely scurrilous. Additionally, government papers relating to the abdication crisis remain closed until 2036, meaning that vital information is not yet in the public domain. Aside from these considerations it is not entirely clear how Wallis Simpson measures up against the ‘positive contribution’ clause – and the choice of occupational descriptor for her on a plaque could pose a dilemma too.

This principle of ‘wait and see’ is a particularly important safeguard against commemorating an individual whose reputation takes a major dive after death. The obvious cautionary example from recent years is Jimmy Savile, whose plaque in Scarborough (erected within weeks of his death by the local civic society) was defaced and then removed as the truth about him emerged over the course of the following year. There are, fortunately, no analogous cases in the London plaque scheme, and it is to be hoped that continued adherence to the twenty-year rule will guard against such mistakes from being made. The downside of the rule – that many of a chosen figure’s associates and contemporaries will not be around to enjoy the accolade – is probably a price worth paying.

From 1965 until 2013 it was possible to commemorate candidates ‘of exceptional fame and longevity’ under the official London scheme if they were deceased and 100 years had passed since birth. In practice this meant

⁴ Cole, *Lived in London*, p. 16.

the consideration of people who had only died a very few years before. It proved impossible to make an effective and credible judgement on the longevity of their significance, given that insufficient time had passed to allow for the emergence of any significant downsides to their reputation. The 'centenary provision' was thus abandoned when the criteria were revised in 2013, though existing cases that had already been shortlisted were not dropped.

The blue plaques scheme's insistence on (to use the present wording) 'some important positive contribution to human welfare or happiness' has been criticized. It has been asked how certain commemorated individuals can reasonably be reckoned to have crossed that hurdle – and with some, like Hiram Maxim, whose best-known invention was the first fully automatic machine gun, it is not an easy question to answer. More generally, the criterion has been attacked as an archaic hangover from the era of whig history. Such criticism fails to take account of the particular challenges of running the scheme, which is currently financed by charitable donations and has in the past been run on public money: either way, the use of such funds to commemorate the merely notorious would be unlikely to work to the long-term advantage of the plaques scheme. Perhaps an even more practical consideration is that the vast majority of buildings commemorated are in private hands, and the plaques are there by the grace of their owners – another barrier to the celebration of the infamous. This is more than a theoretical possibility. In East London, a building survives that Josef Stalin apparently stayed in as a young man; curiously, no blue plaque suggestion has so far been received. If one were to come in, there would be a solid and immediate reason for refusing it and – whig history or not – that might seem like a prudent idea.

