

'Homes of Hope': Efforts for the reform of 'fallen women' in 19th century Bloomsbury

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It is generally understood that the 'fallen woman', especially the common prostitute, w

women suffering from venereal diseases were isolated in Lock Hospitals which quarantined them away from the rest of society. Public attitudes towards 'fallen women' reflected these institutions. 'Once fallen, forever lost' was the prevailing sentiment.

Thus, in 1857, the missionary zeal of the *LFPRI* to 'reclaim' these women to society was seen to be a real attempt at reform. The society founded itself on Christian principles of redemption and argued that women, even if 'fallen' from grace, deserved compassion and, stained as they were, could reform enough to become members of society. This approach in fact harkened back to earlier attitudes in the mid-18th century which had seen the foundation of four charities for reformed fallen women, including the Magdalen Hospital. I won't belabour the point here, but attitudes late in the 18th century had hardened and prostitutes had become society's pariahs by the early 19th century. In 1857 the 'fallen woman' as social victim was still a novel notion. Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*, for example, published just a few years before in 1853, h

The language of both *The Story of the Homes* and *London by Moonlight* professing to ‘reclaim the wanderer’ may sound sensational to us now, but the precepts of this group were in fact forward-thinking for the period. Melodrama did inform much of the way in which these groups chose to describe their efforts since it helped to identify the ‘fallen woman’ as vulnerable victim, rather than more conventionally as the culpable scourge. It would take too much time to elaborate on this now or to quote any passages at length, however I have included in my handouts a copy of a flyer for another organization founded in Bloomsbury with very similar sentiments which can give a flavour of the language these organizations adopted.

The flyer is for the *Homes of Hope* on Regent Square.

at Hart Street, Great Coram Street and on Tottenham Green. She bought these properties and clearly had an eye for a bargain. One of these, the house on Great Coram Street, had been the scene of a notorious and bloody murder. Miss Stride purchased it when no doubt very few others would have wished to do so and refitted it to her purposes. Unfortunately she did not pay the builder who took on the work whether because by that point, as she claimed, she could not or whether she was simply unscrupulous enough not to as was claimed by others. Certainly according to the *Daily News* early in 1874 she was being sued for payment by the builder.

By that point Miss Stride and her homes had become the centre of controversy brought about by the investigations of a group calling themselves then the *Society for Organizing Charitable Relief and Repressing Mendacity*. This group took it upon themselves to send what was effectively a private investigator to Miss Stride's homes and his reports, if they can be trusted, were damning. Miss Stride had the support of a clergyman, the Rev Hough, chaplain of Millbank Prison and the reports describe Miss Stride and Rev Hough as living together in one of the homes in luxurious comfort with a few 'fallen women' as domestic servants, not the many undergoing reform as Miss Stride's advertisements claimed. This investigating society eventually came to be called the *Charity Organizing Society* and appear to have been a precursor to our own Charities Commission. They pursued their enquiries relentlessly, uncovering what they put forward as evidence condemning Miss Stride and her confederate; the

the charges against her or an innocent victim of a spiteful campaign waged by those envious of her success and perhaps resentful of her independence as a woman. Certainly her purchase of the Great Coram Street house points to a woman of unusual character, either so independently-minded and devoted to her cause that she could overcome any natural distaste for such a place in order to take advantage of a low sales price or one arrogantly indifferent to public opinion and rapacious. The ostentatious stationery which Miss Stride used for her correspondence from Hart Street, presumably at the expense of the homes, suggests the latter but this is pretty