

[Revised from the version published in the *Camberwell Quarterly* No.86, (Winter 2015/16) under the title "A Camberwell that has disappeared".]

Camberwell in the novels of Mary Elizabeth Braddon

George Gilbert, a young country doctor from "the little town of Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne, in pretty pastoral Midlandshire", has come to London to spend a week with an old schoolfellow, Sam Smith. Sam, who has abandoned a legal career to write sensation fiction and now calls himself Sigismund, has rooms in the Temple, but he lodges in Camberwell with the Sleaford family.

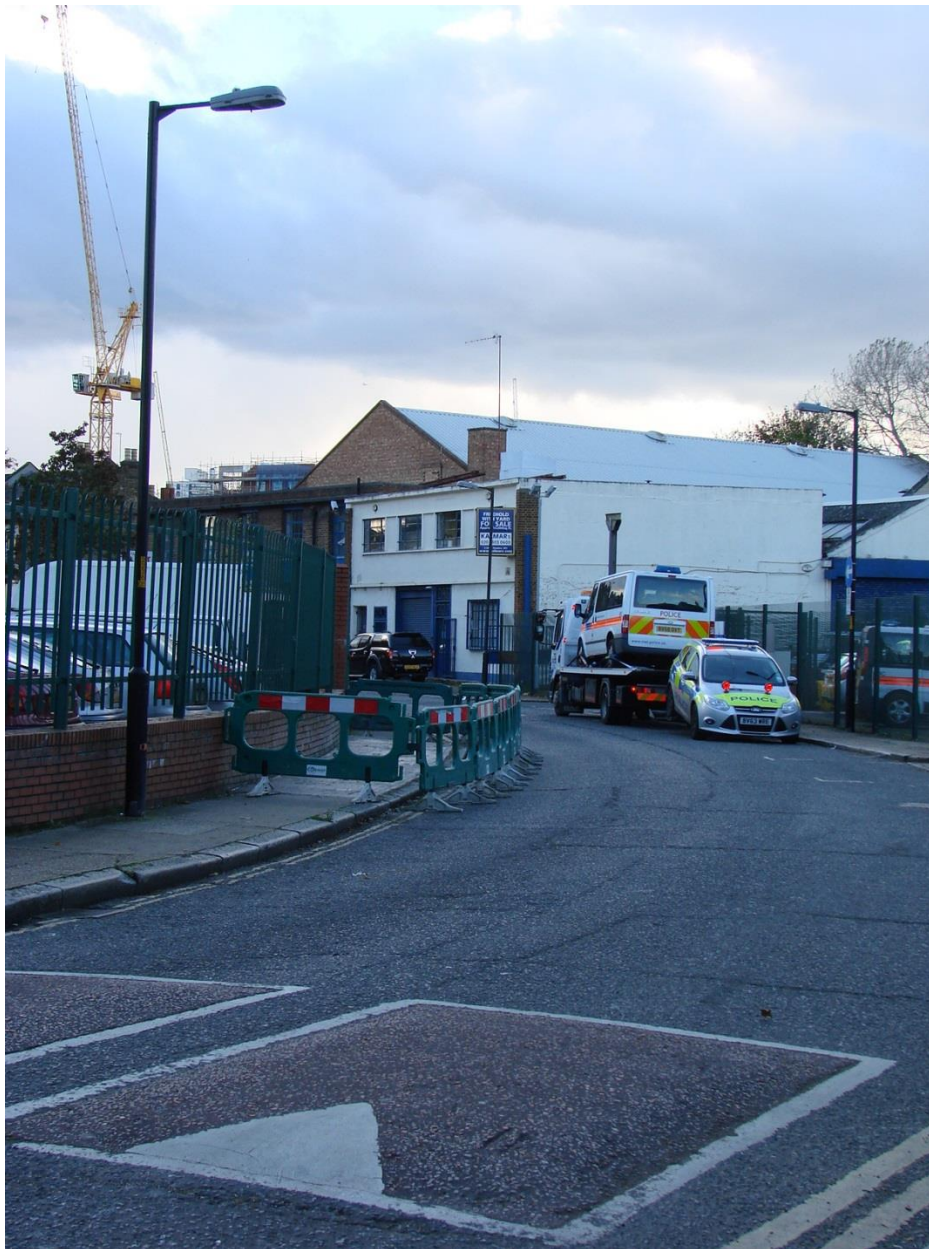
"It was a long walk from the Temple to Camberwell, but the two young men were good walkers, and as Sigismund Smith talked unceasingly all the way, there were no awkward pauses in the conversation. They walked the whole length of the Walworth Road, and turned to the left soon after passing the turnpike. Mr Smith conducted his friend by mazy convolutions of narrow streets and lanes, where there were pretty little villas and comfortable cottages nestling amongst trees, and where there was the perpetual sound of clattering tin pails and the slopping of milk, blending pleasantly with the cry of the milkman. Sigismund led George through these shady retreats, and past a tall stern-looking church, and along by the brink of a canal, till they came to a place where the country was wild and sterile in the year 1852. I dare say that railways have cut the neighbourhood all to pieces by this time, and that Mr Sleaford's house has been sold by auction in the form of old bricks; but on this summer afternoon the place to which Sigismund brought his friend was quite a lonely, countrified spot, where there was one big, ill-looking house, shut in by a high wall, and straggling rows of cottages dwindling away into pigsties upon each side of it."

I think it can be fairly said that this is a Camberwell which has entirely disappeared and indeed, as Mary Elizabeth Braddon acknowledges, was probably already disappearing when her tenth novel, *The Doctor's Wife*, was published in 1864.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1835-1915) was an immensely successful author. For the most part she wrote sensation novels, like those written by Sigismund Smith: they featured secrets, adultery, bigamy, murder, in contemporary middle-class settings. Her own life was not without sensation. She was the daughter of a solicitor who abandoned his wife and family when she was a child. When she was still a very young woman she became an actress to support herself and her mother, but gradually developed a career as a writer. In 1860 she met John Maxwell, a publisher of periodicals whose wife was in an asylum, and he and Braddon began to live together the following year. She became step-mother to his five children, and bore six of

her own, finally marrying him in 1874 after the death of his wife. They settled in Richmond, Surrey, where there are streets named after characters from her novels, and that is where she died.

The crucial fact from our point of view is that while she and her mother Fanny were still living a hand-to-mouth existence, they – like Sigismund Smith - lodged for a time in Camberwell. Rate books in Southwark Local History Library show that some time between January and July 1852 Fanny Braddon moved to Park Street, and she was listed there as a ratepayer at least until January 1855. Park Street is now Parkhouse Street, and is indeed much changed though not in ways Mary Elizabeth could have predicted - an industrial estate runs along both sides of the road for most of its length. There is a small terrace of Victorian houses near the junction with Southampton Way, but these had not been built in 1852.



Parkhouse Street, formerly Park Street

The year in which the Braddons moved to Camberwell, 1852, is the year in which the Camberwell chapters of *The Doctor's Wife* are set: the later part of the novel takes place in and around George's home in Graybridge and describes his marriage to Isabel Sleaford. In 1880 Braddon published *The Story of Barbara; her Splendid Misery and her Gilded Cage*. This also begins in 1852 and gives a rather fuller picture of life in Camberwell. Barbara Trevornock lives, with her mother and her sister Flossie, in South Lane, Camberwell:

"South-lane, Camberwell, is one of those places which progress has doubtless eradicated from the face of the earth. ... It had come into being at an Arcadian period of the world's history, when land about Camberwell was of little more than agricultural value. The houses, villas, cottages, what you will, were various in architecture, and set in gardens that were extensive as compared with the gardens of to-day. The lane described a gracious curve, and made a vista of greenery as seen from either end. Trees grew and flourished – hawthorn and lilac, lime and sycamore, sweet bay and Portugal laurel. There were good tenants and bad, gardens neatly kept and gardens neglected, but the general effect was prettiness and rusticity. ... An old brick wall divided [the Trevornocks'] garden from the canal that flowed outside it. Seen from the upper windows the canal had a picturesque effect. Mrs. Trevornock, who was inclined to see the romantic as well as the humorous side of everything, said the garden and canal in spring-time reminded her of Holland. She had never been in Holland, but that country was vividly represented in her pictorial mind."

This is recognisably the same area as the one through which George and Sigismund walk on their way to the "lonely countrified spot" where Mr Sleaford lived with his family. There are other details which link the two novels. The Trevornocks do their shopping in Walworth Road. The Sleafords' landlord is in Albany Road, which is also where the Trevornocks go "to pay a horrid tax, a thing which wrenches seventeen-and-ninepence out of one without rhyme or reason, but which must be paid on pain of summonses and all manner of grisly horrors" – and it may be relevant that the rate books show that in 1854 and 1855 Fanny Braddon was in arrears with her rates. Charming as this part of Camberwell is said to be, it is evidently a place where the Sleaford and Trevornock families – like Fanny and Mary Elizabeth Braddon – are living because they are poor.

Braddon doesn't mention it, but George and Sigismund would have passed the Walworth Workhouse on their way to Camberwell. In 1852 the Workhouse stretched back from Walworth and Camberwell Roads to the west. The Camberwell turnpike, which was on the boundary between Walworth and Camberwell, crossed the road from outside the Workhouse to what was then called Boyton Place.



Part of the Greenwood map of 1826. The Walworth Workhouse is at the top left of the image. Beresford Street (now John Ruskin Street) is a little to the south of it. The Grand Surrey Canal stretches eastwards towards the bottom of the image. St George's church is beside the canal at the right-hand side of the image.

The Workhouse has long gone and Westmoreland Road now runs where Boyton Place used to be but the Red Lion, which was on the north side of Boyton Place, is still there. Turnpikes were abolished by law in 1865, but the name has endured: the railway station which opened in 1863 just north of Beresford Street (now John Ruskin Street) was called Camberwell Gate, before its name was changed to Walworth Road. The Local History Library has a postcard – probably early twentieth century - of the area to the north of where the turnpike used to be showing that it was then called Camberwell Gate, and just to the west of the area depicted there is now the Gateway Housing Estate.



Postcard of Camberwell Gate, probably early 20th century



Camberwell Gate in 2015

Having passed the turnpike, Sigismund and George turned left. A contemporary map shows that there were many turnings they might have taken. One possibility is Boundary Lane, which ran eastwards between Walworth and Camberwell just to the south of Boyton Place and still exists, although it is much shorter than it used to be. But in truth the area was a maze of lanes and houses, and I think it would be impossible to follow their route. However, the “tall stern-looking church” which Sigismund and George passed on the way to Mr Sleaford’s house is certainly St George’s Church, Wells Street (now Wells Way).



Burgess Park, showing the route of the Surrey Canal and former bridge, with St Georges church, Wells Way, in the background

In 1852 St George's was on the south bank of the Grand Surrey Canal, close to a bridge. The Canal had its own tollhouses and one of them was on this bridge, which is still to be found in Burgess Park crossing the footpath which marks the route formerly taken by the Canal. The 1851 census informs us that the Collector of Tolls was called William Pike and that his wife and daughter, both called Mary Ann, sold milk. His son John William was a "Carman and Cow Keeper". So this may account for the sound of the slopping of milk which Braddon mentions. I have been unable to find in the census any pig-keepers who could account for the pigsties near Mr Sleaford's house. However, it does record a Butcher in Neate Street, north of the Canal, where there was a cluster of houses rather separate from those near Camberwell and Albany Roads, so possibly this is the area which Braddon had in mind.

As to South Lane, where the Trevornocks lived, it resembles Park Street in being curved. However, no part of Park Street was adjacent to the Canal so Braddon cannot have been describing the house in which she lived.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon had a great narrative gift. The events she describes are often preposterous, but her characters are vividly described and the reader keeps turning the pages. A number of her novels are still in print and others may be read online. Camberwell Library has both *The Doctor's Wife* and *The Literary Lives of Mary Elizabeth Braddon: a study of her life and work* by Jennifer Carnell, which does not have much to say about Camberwell but describes Braddon's acting career in some detail.

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