

Central Somers Town

Plots 5+6

Block Naming

Proposed Names

- Mary Shelley House
- Ruth First House
- John Dowling House
- George Padmore House
- Edith Vance House
- Amy Levy House

Biographies

Mary Shelley | 1797-1851



Born in 1797 Mary Shelley was an English novelist who is best known for her Gothic novel *Frankenstein*.

She was raised at The Polygon - a fifteen sided building of 32 houses situated around a garden on Polygon Road which was demolished in 1890. Mary's father William Godwin (a political philosopher) and her mother Mary Wollstonecraft (a philosopher and women's rights advocate) lived at No 29 for a time.

Percy Bysshe Shelley was a frequent visitor to the house. When Percy and Mary began meeting each other secretly it was at her mother Mary Wollstonecraft's grave in the churchyard of St Pancras Old Church. The couple eloped in 1816 but soon returned to England and moved into lodgings in Somers Town.

Mary was always connected to Camden; in 1822, after Percy Shelley's death in Italy, Mary returned to England and lived briefly in Hastings Street, Bloomsbury with her young son, Percy, and in 1824 moved to St Bartholomew Place in Kentish Town.

Over many decades Mary published several dozen reviews, short-stories, and poems, as well as some of her late husband Percy Shelley's works, in prominent London journals and the then popular annuals.

Mary is now considered as a major Romantic figure, significant for her literary achievement and her political voice as a woman and a liberal.

Ruth First | 1925-1982



Ruth First was born in Johannesburg in 1925 to Latvian Jewish parents. Ruth was a journalist, an academic, a teacher, and a public intellectual who contributed to the worldwide understanding of apartheid.

Like her parents, Ruth helped to lead the Communist Party of South Africa which was allied to the African National Congress (ANC), fighting for the rights of Black South Africans. In 1949, Ruth married Joe Slovo, a South African anti-apartheid activist and Communist, and they became the most important of the anti-apartheid activists. Following years of harassment by the state, Ruth was banned from attending meetings or publishing, and could not be quoted. In 1963, she was imprisoned and held in isolation without charge for 117 days. She was the first white woman to be detained under this law.

From July 1966 to the end of 1978, the Slovos lived in exile at 13 Lyme Street, Camden their base, while Ruth's parents lived in a separate basement flat. In London, as she started to become known as a public intellectual and gave public speeches at Trafalgar Square.

On Friday, June 26, 1959, the Anti-Apartheid Movement was founded in Camden at a public meeting in Holborn Hall (since demolished) on the corner of Gray's Inn Road and Clerkenwell Road. Within days of arriving at London Heathrow Ruth started giving public speeches against apartheid and took part in campaigns for the ANC and Anti-Apartheid Movement. Over the next 12 critical years, was a "regular speaker for the AAM" was elected - and re-elected - to the AAM's National Committee.

Ruth was assassinated in 1982 by a letter bomb sent by agents of South Africa's apartheid government while working as the Research Director of the Centre for African Studies, Eduardo Mondlane University in Mozambique.

John Dowling | 1912 - 1980

John Dowling had been on the St Pancras Council permanent building staff as a painter since 1937. John not only helped in the construction of Park View (formerly Cecil Rhodes) House but was a tenant there until he died possibly sometime in the 1980s.

St Pancras Council Direct Building Office was established December 1946 when local authorities established Direct Labour Organisation (DLOs) all over Britain to counter the limitations of the private construction industry and take responsibility for building with their own direct labour forces. Central to the progressive vision was to provide good quality and affordably priced housing, with the DLOs as a service rather than operating as an enterprise, being seen as acting as a check on contractors and as non-profit making.

John Dowling's name was originally put forward by residents for consideration in the renaming of Park View (formerly Cecil Rhodes) House, Goldington Estate and has been reintroduced for this consultation.

The Goldington Estate, just one of the buildings John Dowling and workers in the DLOs actually built, has been praised as a fine example of architectural achievement and quality public housing and yet it is the very skills of these workers that have the most direct impact on people's everyday lives in the most fundamental and necessary things we all need - housing.

George Padmore | 1903 – 1959



George Padmore was a leading Pan-Africanist, journalist and radical activist. He did more than perhaps any other person to ensure African independence from colonial rule in the 1940s and 50s.

George came to London from Trinidad in 1936. He helped foster a radical group of Pan-Africanist intellectuals. With C.L.R James he founded the International African Service Bureau in 1937.

He was a principal organiser of the Manchester Pan-African Congress in 1945, which helped lay the foundations for African liberation movements after the Second World War. The 5th Pan-African Congress demanded the end of colonial rule for countries in Africa and the West Indies and was instrumental in enabling the independence and political liberation of these countries.

By 1966 most African countries had achieved independence. George became a political advisor to his friend Kwame Nkrumah who led Ghana to independence in 1957. He lived in Somers Town, Camden from 1941 to 1957.

Edith Vance | 1860-1930

Edith Vance was a free-thinker, campaigner and womens rights activist; she served as a Ward Councillor for St Pancras Borough Council, was a long-standing member of the National Secular Society and the Legitimation League.

The Legitimation League was an English advocacy organisation in the 1890s, which campaigned for the legitimisation of illegitimate children and free love campaigning for legitimacy and equality of children from non-church or state-sanctioned connections and wider sexual liberation.

In 1906, Edith Vance was Secretary of The National Secular Society (founded in 1866). The NSS principles asserted that "this is the only life we have, and that we should work for its improvement". Notably, along with other organisations she organised collective protests that won the right to sell literature in London parks.

As a councillor in St Pancras, she worked on the Public Health Committee from 1916-1919 and sat on the Ladies Reference Committee. The committee lobbied for provision of deserted single mothers with proper childcare and accommodation, so these mothers could continue to work and not have to place their children in orphanages. The majority of the women were domestic servants or needlewomen. With her commitment to the Legitimation League Vance contributed practical help through her involvement on the Council for single women struggling to bring up their children.

Amy Levy | 1861 - 1889



Amy Levy was a poet, novelist and early feminist who explored Jewish culture and literature as well as lesbian love in her work.

She was part of the New Woman movement of free-thinking, educated, feminist women in Victorian society. Levy was enrolled as the second Jewish woman at Cambridge University, where she studied classical and modern languages and literature.

Her early works present the damaging antisemitism and sexism she faced. It was innovative and challenging to the society of the time. In her short life, Amy produced three collections of poetry, a number of essays and short stories, and three novels.

Amy suffered from severe depression and died by suicide, aged 27 in 1889. She lived in Endsleigh Gardens, Bloomsbury.