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GEORGE ELIOT BIRTHDAY LUNCHEON
November 24th 1991
THE TOAST TO THE IMMORTAL MEMORY
by Gina Quant

Moving house - that worrying, complicated, exciting experience we've all had! - And moving house in November too - not an inspiring month for new beginnings!

But it was just that upheaval of moving house, and just at this time of year, that Marian and George Henry Lewes were undergoing as they moved into their new home, The Priory, 128 years ago. Marian describes in a letter how the domestic problems of moving house were diverting her from the work she so relished:

Before we began to move, I was swimming in Comte and Euripides and Latin Christianity: Now I have a mind made up of old carpets fitted in new places, and new carpets suffering from accidents; chairs, tables, and prices; muslin curtains and downdraughts in cold chimneys.

And we of the Museum staff had a similar upheaval, but in the more optimistic month of April this year, in moving the George Eliot Collections back to the Museum, and in reconstructing part of that very house, The Priory, in the Museum.

But back to the beginning, three years ago. The late Ann Robson, then Curator of the Museum, was masterminding the whole refurbishment and extension plans. She had decided that part of the improvement would include a redisplay of our nationally important George Eliot collection. She felt that the best plan would be to have a fairly straightforward introduction on George Eliot and her deep roots in this area, but have a centrepiece to show George Eliot at the height of her powers, in an authentic setting.

So, with the help and inspiration of the George Eliot Fellowship, the Museum staff began what was to prove a fascinating piece of detective work, culminating in The Priory drawing-room setting we see today.

The obvious starting point for planning the room was the illustration which appeared in John Cross's biography of George Eliot of 1885, showing the drawing-room at The Priory, the Leweses' London home from 1863. This picture shows a pleasant room, with windows at the far end with fire-place to the viewer's right, flanked by another window.

Other sources for information on the furnishing of the room could be gleaned from Marian's and George's letters and journals, and comments of visitors to the home of the famous couple. The job for the Museum staff and the designer was to combine the various sources into some sort of whole with an authentic feel.

One problem was that the 1885 picture had probably been drawn for Cross's biography at least three years after George Eliot had died, and Johnny Cross had left The Priory.

Another line of enquiry was the work of the famous architect Owen Jones, whom we know from George's journal had redecorated for the Leweses when they moved in. So, the Borough council's designer Sarah Moss and Assistant Curator Janet Goodridge went to see an authentic Owen Jones interior which still exists, at 16 Carlton House Terrace in London to get a feel of the Owen Jones style.

In the end it was decided to fix our drawing-room setting in about 1870, combining the general layout shown in the 1885 picture, with an Owen Jones flavour overall.

There is an especially frustrating reference to the newly-decorated drawing-room in G.H. Lewes's journal - including a good atmosphere, but not quite enough detail to help avid Museum researchers!

Thursday 13th November. On Monday week began moving into The Priory. It took us the whole week to get things in and the books on their shelves, though, even now they are not arranged, only put up, and the drawing-room is still uninhabitable. Besides the trouble and vexation incident to moving we have had extra annoyances. The [piano] tuner was sick over our elegant drawing-room paper, which Owen Jones had decorated, and over the carpet! This obliges us to have fresh paper made, as there are no remnants of the old, and it was originally made for us.

One detail we thought we'd like to get right was the view out of the false windows. We had a useful comment by Marian in a letter to Sarah Hennell: 'Cara would think it very pretty if she saw The Priory now with the roses blooming about it'. 'Aha,' we thought, 'Let's have a nice impression of rose gardens painted on our false windows!'

However, in the rather tight schedule of setting up the drawing-room, the painting idea was jettisoned - rather luckily in the end, as to have had roses permanently blooming outside in the garden would have looked rather strange as one viewed the drawing-room perhaps in the middle of December!

The impressive wood panelling and fire-place were made by a local craftsman, complete with rather clever wood grain effect. This was eventually also used on the radiators - it was to prove surprisingly expensive to have the radiators removed, so they've been faded into the panelled background with wood grain finish. Probably the only wooden radiators in existence!

The visitor rail was made by the same craftsman, to blend as much as possible into the room, whilst providing a substantial barrier, and very small children can see through the glass panels.

The rather fine green wallpaper you see is an original design by Owen Jones reprinted by Zoffany. We don't actually know which design Owen Jones created for Marian and George, so our paper is an optimistic guess. We chose the cherry red of the curtains as a lively complementary opposite of the green wallpaper. The Victoria and Albert Museum staff who advised us on several aspects of the room, had suggested that to have curtains to match the wallpaper might have been thought to be too safe a colour scheme by an architect like Owen Jones.

The making of the character figures of Marian, George and John Cross was of course of great importance. The Museum staff sent a package of photocopies of the various representations of the three to specialist modelmakers. And then everyone waited with great interest to see how they emerged. After one or two modifications we received the heads and bodies of the three. There was something rather peculiar about unwrapping George Eliot's disembodied head from its packing for the first time!

So, now we had the three bodies, we needed to clothe them. Due to the intended open display we could not use original costumes, and we were lucky in finding a talented costume designer in Leamington Spa willing to take on the challenge of making outfits. In the two men's cases he used their photographs as a basis. For Marian's frock, he did, of course, have an original dress to work from. The dress had faded and weakened through exposure to the sun, and had to be conserved and restored by a specialist in historic textiles conservation in Warwick. It will now be able to stand the test of time in better condition. Using the original dress as model, the costume maker made a replica, using midnight blue silk of the shade the frock originally would have been. (Unfaded traces of colour can be seen in seam allowances on the inside of the frock where it has not been affected by light.)

Around the walls of the drawing-room we have hung replicas of Lord Leighton's drawings for his illustrations to *Romola*, which we know Marian had on her walls, together with her picture of Dante, in its correct position by the fire-place.

A recent addition to the drawing-room has been sound - a recording of George Eliot's piano being played at a recital of some of her favourite music, given as part of the 1980 celebrations.

The figure of Marian is now also appropriately seated by the piano. She had originally been placed standing up, but her rather unrelenting stare and stiff posture gave her an unnatural and grim appearance. So, if you had happened to enter The Priory drawing-room a few weeks ago, you would have seen a rather startling sight - for Marian was sprawled on the piano stool, showing an awful lot of petticoat, as we grappled with her rather stiff legs to make her sit down.

Two aspects of our George Eliot redisplay which are decidedly not Victorian are the ultraviolet filters you see on the windows, and the large grey humidifiers lurking in the

corners of the gallery. The amount of damaging sunlight coming into the gallery is thus much reduced, and the surrounding environment of such vulnerable materials as the wood of George Eliot's piano, is kept consistent.

I have described some of the background to the redisplay of the George Eliot collection. We have a number of small improvements planned for the future, and some we hope will be suggested by visitors, but the redecoration has already proved popular. The drawing-room setting, especially, seems to catch the interest of children. This is very welcome, as the fascination of George Eliot is not very easy to convey to younger people who have not yet read her books. For instance, we asked some school children in a quiz recently what they thought the three figures were talking about. One thought that John Cross was asking Marian if she would like a cup of tea, while another thought he was asking her what she was earning. Well, amongst all the sparkling conversations which must have gone on in The Priory drawing-room, no doubt more mundane matters such as tea and money must surely have arisen. I hope our display continues to stimulate ideas.
