

COMMEMORATIVE BLUE PLAQUE
TO ROBERT AICKMAN
AT 11 GOWER STREET, LONDON WC1



Robert Aickman

LISTED BUILDING CONSENT APPLICATION
DESIGN AND ACCESS STATEMENT

JULY 2014

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Robert Aickman 1914-1981

Robert Aickman was born and brought up in London, the son of an architect and grandson of Richard Marsh a popular Edwardian novelist. Despite excelling at classics and demonstrating a remarkable talent for writing he left school at seventeen and started to assist at his father's architectural practice. The practice closed in 1937 and Aickman subsequently managed to obtain a small income from writing theatre reviews.

During the late 1930s his father became ill leaving Aickman to look after a substantial family home in Stanmore. Aickman's rather bohemian life in London came to an end at the outset of the war and in 1941, at the age of twenty-seven, he married Ray Gregorson and together they set up a literary agency at their flat in Bloomsbury.

Aickman's interest in the theatre took him in 1945 to Stratford-on-Avon where, during a walk, he discovered the neglected state of the local canal. At this time he was reading LTC Rolt's recently published book *Narrow Boat* and Aickman corresponded with the author. Aickman visited Rolt on his narrow boat *Cressy* at Tardebigge and the two decided that a body should be formed to promote the regeneration of the canals.

It was not until 1946 that the first meeting of the new campaigning organisation was held at Aickman's office and home in Gower Street. Robert Aickman became Chairman and Tom Rolt the honorary secretary of The Inland Waterways Association (IWA). The direction and leadership of the Association were to absorb most of Aickman's energy and time over the next eighteen years. The IWA went on to fight numerous battles to prevent the destruction of Britain's canals and in the formative years of the Association this victorious campaign was largely masterminded by Aickman.

During the early years of the Association some members felt that limited funding resources required a compromise in which some sections of the canal system should be kept open while others would have to be abandoned. Aickman firmly resisted this approach, strongly believing that the Association should fight to preserve or restore every mile of Britain's surviving waterways. His conviction was proved correct when many canals, which were previously considered lost causes, were taken back into navigable use.

Robert Aickman believed that a secure future for Britain's canals would be obtained when the entire system could be under the control of a single conservancy. His vision was partly realised in 2012 when responsibility for much of the canal network was transferred from British Waterways to the newly formed Canal & River Trust. In co-founding The Inland Waterways Association, Aickman, together with a small group of enthusiasts, had started Britain's most successful environmental campaign to date and succeeded in restoring and reopening much of the original canal network.

Aickman retired from the Association in 1964 to devote more of his time to writing and editing. As a writer he was best known for his supernatural fiction, which he described as "strange stories". Aickman died of cancer in February 1981.

A biography of Robert Aickman from the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography is attached at Appendix A.

11 Gower Street

11 Gower Street is one of a group of four terraced properties, built c1780, between Store Street and Gower Mews numbered 9 to 13 from south to north. The building consists of three storeys with an attic and a basement. The street elevation is in darkened multi coloured stock brick with a rusticated stucco surround to the ground floor entrance door. The property is in the ownership of The Bedford Estates and is Grade II listed.

Robert Aickman's occupation of 11 Gower Street

Robert Aickman lived and worked at 11 Gower Street between 1943 and 1973. The inaugural meeting of The Inland Waterways Association was held in February 1946 in the large living room of Aickman's two-floor apartment. Over the following five years this room, which became known as the 'Waterways Room', was the office of the new campaigning organisation.



The 'Waterways Room' in Robert Aickman's Gower Street house

Address verification

Gower Street was entirely renumbered between 1861 and 1871, with odd numbers on the west side and even numbers on the east side; no house retained its original number. The 1886 Bedford Estates Survey Plan shows the numbers 9-13 on the west side of Gower Street between Store Street and Gower mews.

It is therefore evident that the same numbering has applied from 1886 to the current day and the current property numbered 11 is the one leased in part (second and third floors) by Aickman from 1943 to 1973. An extract from the Borough of Holborn 1957 Electoral Register (Appendix B) shows Aickman and his wife Ray as residents of 11 Gower Street.

Blue Plaque Design

The Inland Waterways Association are proposing to privately sponsor a blue plaque at 11 Gower Street to commemorate Robert Aickman's contribution to the co founding of the IWA and his years of successful campaigning to prevent the destruction of Britain's canals.

As this is a privately sponsored installation the proposed plaque will be cast in aluminium and use a blue to match the IWAs own house colour (Pantone 285). The design will thus be differentiated from the slip clay blue roundel normally installed by English Heritage in the London area. The plaque will be surface mounted to avoid the modification of the building fabric required by a recessed plaque. The plaque will be fixed to the brickwork using concealed plug and screw fixings.

The plaque will be located centrally on the brick pier between the two ground floor windows. This is location has been used for other blue plaques installed in Gower Street. The owners of 11 Gower Street, The Bedford Estates, have given their consent in principle to the installation of the plaque.

The architectural character of this listed building will not be affected by the installation and the historic interest of the property will be enhanced.



Proposed location of the plaque between the ground floor windows

Access

The blue plaque will be visible from the highway and therefore no new access is required.

OXFORD DICTIONARY OF NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY

Aickman, Robert Fordyce (1914–1981)

Writer and campaigner for inland waterways

by C. A. R. Hills

Aickman, Robert Fordyce (1914–1981), writer and campaigner for inland waterways, was born on 27 June 1914 at 77 Fellows Road, Hampstead, London, the only child of William Arthur Aickman (d. 1941), an architect, and his wife, Mabel Violet (c.1890–1943), daughter of Richard Marsh, born Bernard Heldmann, the prolific Victorian author of popular fiction. Robert Aickman's father was a man of unknown origin and age, though he was perhaps in his mid-fifties when his son was born, and the surname is believed to be Scottish. His mother's family was originally German, deriving from a certain Heldmann who had fled from Bavaria to Nottingham in 1848 and made a fortune from textiles. Richard Marsh met William Arthur Aickman in the gentlemen's lavatory of a grand hotel in Edwardian Eastbourne, and was soon to encourage his marriage to his younger daughter, thirty years William Arthur Aickman's junior. The marriage, and Aickman's childhood, was predictably unhappy, though the family lived in a substantial house, Langton Lodge, at Stanmore, Middlesex. Aickman attended Highgate School and began to be interested in writing there, but he did not then go up to Oxford or Cambridge, as might have been hoped. He entered a period of youthful drifting, writing some theatre reviews for the periodical *The Nineteenth Century and After*, but eventually finding himself alone at Langton Lodge after his mother left his father, who then fell terminally ill and ended his life in a nursing home.

Aickman was eventually rescued from the severe depression this isolation caused when he began to attend the queue for tickets at London's Covent Garden Opera, and acquired a series of female friends and lovers. The outbreak of the Second World War brought this lifestyle to an end, but he declared himself a conscientious objector and won total exemption from war service. On 5 September 1941 he married (Edith) Ray Gregorson (1913/14–1983), a secretary whom he had met through the opera queue, but more from sympathy than love. They set up a literary agency together, and moved to 11 Gower Street in Bloomsbury, which was to be Aickman's home for much of his life. They divorced in 1957, and she later became an Anglican nun.

In 1946 Robert and Ray Aickman, with Tom (L. T. C.) Rolt and Rolt's wife, Angela, set up the Inland Waterways Association, to preserve and enhance the canals of Britain, which were at that time in such a state of neglect as seemed likely to end in their ultimate disappearance. Aickman was chairman and Rolt secretary, and the organization quickly gained momentum and influence, becoming in many ways a model for the many campaigning pressure groups of post-war Britain. Aickman remained active and superbly energetic in the waterways campaign until 1964, and although his autocratic style of leadership provoked much dissension, it is nevertheless agreed that the salvation of Britain's canals owes more to him than to any other person.

In 1951 Aickman and Elizabeth Jane Howard published *We are for the Dark*, a volume of six ghost stories, where each contributed three, but did not identify who had written which. Aickman was eventually to publish eleven more volumes of what he called 'strange stories', and he succeeded in giving new life to what had been classically an Edwardian genre.

Barry Humphries describes his quality:

To all his uncanny tales he brings his peculiar erudition; his elegant elliptical style. Some of his most disturbing stories are not without flashes of humour and a sly, morbid eroticism. Above all, he can evoke in a few lines of concentrated prose the tenebrous and oppressive atmosphere of a very bad and inescapable dream.

(Humphries, 10)

Between 1964 and 1972 Aickman edited the first eight volumes of *The Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories*, to all but the sixth of which he contributed learned and stimulating introductions. His other published works included two fantasy novels and two volumes of autobiography, and many stories and plays remained unpublished. He was an inveterate leader and joiner of organizations relating to his interests in transport, theatre, orchestral music, opera, and ballet.

Aickman was a shy man, who blossomed in public life: constitutionally solitary, he derived lifelong solace from relationships with women. He died at the Homeopathic Hospital, Camden, London, on 26 February 1981, of cancer, showing great courage in the face of death, and was cremated at Putney Vale. At odds with the modern world, he left a permanent mark on it through his two disparate but oddly linked fields of endeavour.

C. A. R. Hills

Sources D. Bolton, *Race against time* (1990) · R. Aickman, *The attempted rescue* (1966) · V. Colby, ed., *World authors, 1980–1985* (1991) · R. Aickman, *The river runs uphill* (1986) · B. Humphries, 'Foreword', in R. Aickman, *Night voices* (1985) · personal knowledge (2004) · private information (2004) [E. J. Howard; J. Sutherland; A. Sutherland] · b. cert. · m. cert. · d. cert.

Archives Boat Museum, Ellesmere Port, collection of canal images · Bowling Green State University, Ohio, corresp., literary MSS, and papers · **TNA: PRO**, corresp.; papers relating to inland waterways, PRO 30/82 | **CUL**, corresp. with Sir Peter Markham Scott

Likenesses P. Scott, pencil drawing, 1949, repro. in Aickman, *The river runs uphill* · I. Kar, photograph, 1956–9, **NPG** [see illus.] · drawing (as a boy), repro. in Aickman, *Attempted rescue*, frontispiece · photograph (in later life), repro. in Colby, ed., *World authors*

Wealth at death £55,904: probate, 18 May 1981, **CGPLA Eng. & Wales**

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

C. A. R. Hills, 'Aickman, Robert Fordyce (1914–1981)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008
[<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/60658>, accessed 22 July 2014]

Robert Fordyce Aickman (1914–1981): doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/60658

