



ENGLISH
HERITAGE

VIA ON-LINE PORTAL - E-MAIL application

London Borough of Camden
Heritage and Planning Officer

LBC: Covering Letter – HERITAGE STATEMENT

12 March 2021

Dear Sir or Madam

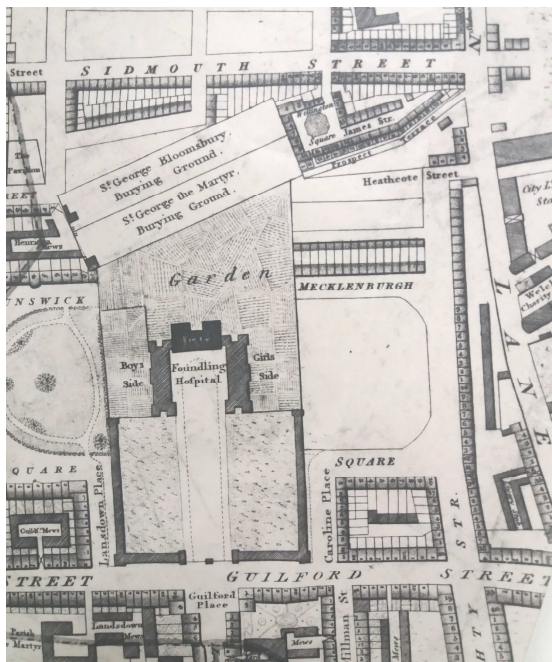
Blue plaque: Helena Normanton (1882-1957)

The proposal: I am writing to advise you that English Heritage's Blue Plaques Panel has approved the recommendation that if consents are agreed, a blue plaque be erected to: Helena Normanton, at **22 Mecklenburgh Square, Bloomsbury, WC1N 2AD, in the London Borough of Camden**. This is a listed Grade II* building in the Bloomsbury Conservation Area.

BUILDING STATEMENT

The current building history:

Number 22 Mecklenburgh Square is part of the distinctive east side of the square, the full terrace numbered 11-26 (consecutive), built on land originally owned by the Foundling Hospital, which they released for house building development in 1790. Mecklenburgh Square was laid out by Joseph Kay the Surveyor to the Foundling Estate, the south side completed (1808-1810), and the east side of the square built by developer builders (numbered south to north), Thomas Penthrin (nos.11-19, 30-34) and George Payne (Nos. 20-29) from around 1810-1820. Mecklenburgh Square is shown laid out on the Horwood map of 1819, the long east terrace of houses a continuation of Doughty Street, shown as part-plot numbered, (No.11 up to No. 29), with the remaining run of houses on the east side laid out but not yet marked as numbered, nor those of the returning north side, which was not completed until 1825.



Detail of Horwood map 1819

Step into Tompkins's story



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The square by 1889 in Booth's Poverty Map, is coloured Red and therefore marked as 'well-to-do'. Suffering bomb damage during the Blitz, in around 1950, the north end of the east terrace was rebuilt (Nos. 27-34), the ground floor entrance doors removed except for number 26, and the upper floors rebuilt in facsimile, now numbered as single 26 Mecklenburgh Square, the rebuilding maintained the full terrace unified elevation designed on a grand classically inspired, palatial composition. Built of stock brick and stucco, of four storeys, plus basement, visually the full east side of the square is compositionally decorated with end elevations of full stucco, each with a pair of engaged Ionic columns rising through the first and second floors and a central pavilion section with central four engaged Ionic columns, flanked by stucco facades decorated with pilasters, inset swags; the houses between these stucco façade blocks are of brick, with stucco rendering to the ground floor.

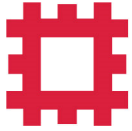
Number 22 Mecklenburgh Square is one of the five houses located within the central pavilion section of the terrace, (Nos. 21-25), an entrance door to the right, in an arched recess with fanlight; two ground floor sash windows to the left, the ground floor channelled stucco, the full basement stucco of plain render; the first floor has three long sash windows, one above the entrance door and set within two pilasters, the two long sash windows to the left are located inset between the engaged Ionic columns; with cast-iron balconies; a running stucco decorative panel of swag wreaths above the second floor with projecting cornice, and upper attic storey.

The whole terrace is listed grade II* and lies within the London Borough of Camden's Bloomsbury Conservation Area, Sub Area 12.

Biographical summary of Helena Normanton

Helena Florence Norminton (sic) was born in Stratford, east London on 14 December 1882 into a by no means prosperous family. Her father, William Alexander Norminton, was a piano tuner – a step down in the world from the pianoforte manufacturer he had been before his bankruptcy in 1878. He had married Jane Amelia Marshall in 1881; born in West Ham, she had previously been a milliner. In 1895 Helena won a scholarship to York Place Higher Grade School in Brighton. She left the school in 1900, to return as a pupil teacher, and in 1903, Normanton (she had settled on this spelling by now) went to Edge Hill College, Liverpool, for teacher training. While working as a teacher from 1905, in her spare time she studied for an external history degree at London University, passing in 1912 with first-class honours. In 1916 she became a University Extension Lecturer at the University of London; she wrote articles for *India*, the weekly organ of the India National Congress, to become its editor in 1918 or 1919; an active campaigner, Normanton was a speaker, and writer for equal rights for women and belonged to the Women's Freedom League.

In February 1918 Normanton applied to join Middle Temple. Her application was rejected, essentially on the grounds that women could not be admitted. Normanton appealed the decision, yet was again rejected, but, on 24 December 1919, the day after the passage of the Sex (Disqualification) Removal Act, Middle Temple accepted her application, making her the first woman to be admitted to an Inn of Court.



Supporting herself by her editorship of *India* and by letting rooms in the house she had taken in Mecklenburgh Square, Normanton studied, and passed her bar finals on 26 October 1921, and on the same day she married Gavin Bowman Clark. Called to the Bar on 17 November 1922, Normanton was now forty years old, and practised law for the rest of her working life. Many of Normanton's cases were dock briefs – given directly by a prisoner to one of a panel of barristers waiting in the courtroom; from 1934 she obtained prosecution briefs as regular counsel at the North London Sessions, and she continued to supplement her income with public speaking, writing magazine articles and books, including *Everyday Law for Women* (1932), as she always believed that women should have the basic legal knowledge to prevent them from getting the worst end of any deal. In 1949 she and Rose Heilbron became the first women in England and Wales to be appointed King's Counsel.

Normanton retired in 1951, and died on 14 October 1957 in a Sydenham nursing home, in her will she left the residue of her capital to support the foundation of the University of Sussex.

Historical reputation:

Helena Normanton was a pioneer in the eyes of the contemporary press and many women's groups, she always espoused equality feminism – equality in pay, employment, and equality for married women, with equal parenting and legal rights in divorce cases. She scored a remarkable number of firsts in her legal career: first woman to be admitted to an Inn of Court and first female law student in England; although not the first to be called to the bar, she was the first woman in England to practise as a barrister; in 1922 she was the first female counsel to lead in a case at the High Court; the first woman to accept a dock brief and to run a trial at the Old Bailey – apparently the defendant believed he had selected a male barrister; she was the first woman in the English courts to lead murder trials, both for the defence and the prosecution. In 1949 she was one of the first two women to take silk. Married to Gavin Bowman Watson Clark, in 1921, though using the title Mrs, she never took her husband's name and therefore the first married woman in Britain to hold a passport in her maiden name. There were disappointments – Normanton was not appointed to the General Council of the Bar until 1946 and she never became a judge, her advancement hampered by entrenched prejudice, as a woman in a man's world, and class prejudice; her family background did not help in a field where networking was so important.

Judith Bourne's biography, *Helena Normanton and the Opening of the Bar to Women*, (2016), has pointed out, Helena Normanton's 'practice broke down barriers and paved the way for later women'; while Normanton's place in '*The First 100 Years*', a history project that has successfully publicised the journey of women in the law since 1919, goes further, endorsing the idea that 'Normanton should be to women lawyers what Neil Armstrong is to astronauts'. For further information the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography entry is an attached document.



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Connection of 22 Mecklenburg Square to Helena Normanton:

Normanton's connection with Bloomsbury began in 1918, when she was living at 11 Coram Street (not extant), until July 1919, when she took a twelve-year lease on 22 Mecklenburgh Square, Bloomsbury. Electoral registers show that Normanton lived in this house, letting some rooms to help fund her studies to pass the Bar. It was from Mecklenburgh Square that she launched her pioneering legal career and worked on her publications. She lived here until 1929 when she moved to 25 Aldersmead Road, Beckenham, her tenancy however retained until 1931.

The proposed inscription on the blue plaque is:

**HELENA
NORMANTON
1882-1957
Barrister
and advocate for
women's rights
lived here
1919-1929**

Our proposal for the positioning of the inset mounted blue plaque is for it to be sited at ground floor level, to the left of the fanlight of the entrance door, the plaque to be symmetrically centred to straddle the stucco channel; the vertical height aligned to correspond with the two blue plaques located on the adjacent house, at No. 21, (commemorating R. H. Tawney, historian, teacher and political writer; and Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Muslim reformer and scholar). The submitted positioning documents of the surveyor orthophotos - scaled 1:50; and the perspective oblique views take the role of architect drawings, and demonstrate the proposed positioning. The size of the plaque is the standard 19.5-inch diameter, inset into the brickwork and stucco by a depth of 50mm. The materials and methodology for the installation of the plaque are considered under accompanying documents.

Consents: Recent consultation with the freeholders, Goodenough College, has resulted in positive support and their final approval for the design and positioning of the blue plaque as shown attached. The Historic England Conservation Architect has approved the positioning and the brickwork and stucco can support an inset plaque.

I should be grateful if you would let me know whether you have any observations on our proposal. If you would like to discuss the matter further, or require any additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me. I hope that – all being well with our planning application, we would install the plaque autumn 2021.

Yours faithfully

Cathy Power

Blue Plaques Manager

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