

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF SWINBURNE

an investigation by WALTER BROOKES

SOME time ago, before I came to England, the Editor of the *New Zealand Listener* told me that there was a story that when Swinburne called at the Rose and Crown on his daily walk across Putney Heath—during the last 30 years of his life, when he lived with Watts-Dunton at The Pines, Putney Hill—he had more than the one glass of beer, which he was officially allowed. There was a bottle of Burgundy upstairs as well.

Here in London was the chance to look into all this. I was living right in the heart of the Swinburne country of the 1873-1879 period, the heyday of the poet's Bohemian life before Watts-Dunton had to intervene and take him away to Putney. Swinburne's first lodgings in this area, taken in 1873, were at 12 North Crescent, just round the corner from where I lived in Gower Street, the second, taken later in the same year, were 3 Great James Street, about a quarter of an hour's walk away. The third—and about these there is some mystery—were at 25 Guilford Street, about half way between the other two. The British Museum is conveniently near all these.

Having got the addresses one evening at the Holborn Library, which keeps records of famous people who have lived in the borough, my wife and I set out for a tour of inspection. I am afraid it was a disappointing one. The whole of North Crescent was now occupied by a telephone exchange; 3 Great James Street was covered with scaffolding and in the process of being incorporated into the Barclay's Bank building next door; and 25 Guilford Street had completely disappeared—it had been sliced off the end of its terrace and its place taken by a modern building with a notice "Child Health Institute."

Still, from this visit and further ones, as well as inquiries, I can give some idea of these houses. I can only say that those in North Crescent were considered of some architectural interest before they were demolished many

years ago—this tenancy lasted less than a year, anyhow. The houses in Great James Street were built in 1721, and are quite impressive. They have obviously had a great deal of work done on them to keep them in repair, but they seem to retain their original appearance. I noticed in No. 3 that the timber in the old staircase is being taken away with each piece numbered, to be repolished and replaced.

Swinburne lived here from 1873 to 1879, when alcoholism had reduced him to such a state that some action became necessary. The authorities had forbidden him the use of the British Museum, with which his name is so closely associated, and where the bulk of his manuscripts were ultimately granted welcome admittance. His condition was desperate, and Watts-Dunton, with the consent of his family, removed him to his house, No. 2 The Pines, Putney Hill (now No. 11 Putney Hill).

As I said, the address 25 Guilford Street presents a mystery. I am indebted to a member of the staff of the Holborn Library for pointing out to me in the London County Council Survey (that monumental and as yet uncompleted work which is still carrying out a task initiated by William Morris) an entry which reads under this address: "1879-1880, Algernon Charles Swinburne," but bewilderingly adds: "Swinburne moved from 3 Great James Street in 1879 to Mr Theodore Watts-Dunton's house in Putney." The Dictionary of National Biography records the move from Great James Street, but has nothing to say about Guilford Street.

The only explanation I can suggest, and I came to this conclusion in the end, is that life at The Pines, especially in the earlier years, was not nearly so rigid as the legend makes out, and that at first lodgings may have been engaged in London (at Guilford Street)

for occasional visits. Another member of the Holborn Library staff, as it happens, lives at Putney, and said that he always had the impression that "there was a good deal of moving backwards and forwards" at first. He cannot say how he gained this impression, but he did gain it. Swinburne's life is just now passing beyond reliable living memory; people will tell you a lot they have heard, but they do not know where they have heard it.

It may be mentioned that this terrace in Guilford Street, rather shabby now, was built in the 1790's. The houses are of the classical late 18th century type round this district, with a basement, three floors and an attic. They are stylish examples, and it is a pity they have been neglected. It does not matter much that No. 25 is missing. There is a photograph of Nos. 25-31 in the Survey, and it is just like the others.

At Putney, at The Pines, I made a most astonishing discovery. This famous house is occupied by a New Zealander, Mr Hugh Nayland Anderson, a dental surgeon formerly in practice in Wellington. His father was Dr W. Anderson, who was Director of Education in New Zealand from 1913 to 1918, and his grandfather was an early Canterbury settler, who arrived there in 1850. Mrs Anderson is an Englishwoman. She invited us in when we timidly made our inquiries and said where we came from.

Here we were, then, sitting in a room that must have seen many gatherings of famous literary figures. The room is still substantially as it was, though a mantelpiece that from the photograph looks as though it had been designed by Morris or Rossetti or one of their clan has been taken away. The view is through French windows which give on to the long narrow garden with a brick wall on either side—exceedingly attractive.

The Pines is a pair of semi-detached houses with a basement and three floors above it. They were built about 100 years ago in the grey brick so much used at that time—the idea often

seems to have been to imitate stone. A square tower housing the staircases runs up in the middle. There are a couple of plaques of sculpture by Rossetti in the front porch. Not a pine tree in sight; whether there ever were any I do not know.

Mrs Anderson spent some time in New Zealand. "I did 12 years there," I'm afraid was the way she put it, adding that her husband was now doing his time in England. She said that they were acquiring the freehold of both houses, as they had feared that the



ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE
Did he have only the one glass?

one next door—where, she said, Swinburne and Watts-Dunton lived for the first six months of their stay—was going to be turned into a rooming house.

She went off to fetch her husband, who was doing some weekend carpentry round the place, leaving us with some very pleasant reflections. The Pines, this historic house with great literary associations, in the hands of a New Zealander who wasn't going to let any part of it be turned into a rooming house—a true New Zealander, too, who could do a job of work about the house. Nothing could be better.

When they came back we mentioned how famous the place was.

"Yes," said Mrs. Anderson. "We had an American girl who is doing a thesis out here quite recently. And—I don't know whether it is near Swinburne's birthday or what, but a group of old men—very old men—came up and stood in front of the door one day and took off their hats and then went away."

The reader may be beginning to wonder, as we did as we went round these places:

Would a ghost not rise at the strange guest's hand?

Well, we still had to go to the Rose and Crown, on the other side of Putney Heath and Wimbledon Common. It was no disappointment. An oblong brick building, about three stories, more or less (these old buildings squeeze a



THE ROSE AND THE CROWN
"It has a well-kept and prosperous look"