



Season's Greetings to all members of the Amwell Society and their families

Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.
Desmond Tutu.

The Amwell Society is run, on behalf of the membership, by a group of volunteers who are elected every year at the AGM in May. We do our very best to raise awareness, take action and care for the very special area of London where we live. Membership is just under two hundred households. We are aiming to build more awareness of our work as well as encouraging members to join our regular events. See the events column on the next page for details and join us even if it's just for a drink in the pub. You can also help us by spreading the word about the Society, especially to people who are new to the area. Some people are wary of joining neighbourhood groups. We try hard to make the Society open, friendly and fun. For that reason membership costs only £10.00 a year. We have a beautiful website. We are always open to suggestions and ideas to support our community ... so keep them coming.

Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration

Tom Walker from QBCI writes ... In October, the Quentin Blake Centre for Illustration began work to restore and repurpose the New River Head – an 18th and 19th century waterworks which was redundant from the 1950s. The work will create galleries, learning spaces and gardens in New River Head's long-abandoned Engine House, windmill and cobbled courtyards.

The Centre will open in Spring 2026. It will realise Quentin's long-held vision for a permanent national centre for the often-overlooked art-form of illustration. It will be jam-packed with stories and ideas – a vibrant celebration of illustration and illustrators through exhibitions, installations, projects and workshops, talks and screenings. Sir Quentin Blake, who is best known for his long-time collaboration with author Roald Dahl, said that the Clerkenwell space "... could not be more appropriate if we'd designed it specially".



The staff at the QBCI in their hard hats.
Note the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund

The QBCI has been developed in collaboration with 35 local organisations including the Amwell Society and will empower people to connect with one another, their community and their local area through illustration.

Clerkenwell Parochial School

The St Mary Magdalene Academy vacated the CPS building in summer 2024 after unsuccessful discussions about an increase of rent. Since then the buildings have been left empty and have now been squatted. The Society is in contact with the freeholders of the school, London Diocesan Board for Schools [LDBS]. We will keep members informed of developments.

The Amwell Society. Campaigning on behalf of the locality for 52 years

Message from our Chairman

Welcome to this newsletter - our last of 2024. I would also like to extend a special welcome to our new members some of whom are also new to the area.

It's been another year of change for our area.

The team at the Quentin Blake Centre of Illustration [QBCI] has commenced work on their new centre at the New River Head site - this is something which I'm sure most of us have been looking forward to. You can read up-to-date news on the front page of this newsletter. The QBCI expects to open for business early in 2026 and the Society is looking forward to a number of collaborations with them - on and off site. We will also work with the QBCI to select a special tree which will be planted to commemorate Jean Elrington, an artist and architect who, with her husband Christopher, was involved in the work of the Society from its inception.

The QBCI will be one of the venues and participants in our Amwell Bicentenary celebrations planned for 2026. Modelled on our successful History weekend and 50th birthday celebrations in 2022, we plan to hold a series of events both social and educational over two weekends in summer 2026.

Our events calendar for 2025 is shaping up nicely. Confirmed so far are a candlelight tour of the Charterhouse in March and our AGM in May - details of these events will follow in an e-mail next month. We will also continue with our bi-monthly pub meet-ups. As always - please check our website for more details on events.

There was less good news this year on the planning front. The Planning Inspectorate appeal for the revised Children's Society Building on Margery Street was held in September. You may recall that after the first refusal on appeal, the developer reduced the size of the proposed building by one storey. This appeal was brought by the developer as the LBI had not come to a decision within the statutory time-frame. In addition to the Council's lacklustre objection, the Society, along with the Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood Forum, the Margery Street Tenants' and Residents' Association and Wilmington Square residents mounted a unified objection once again on the basis that impact on the neighbouring area in terms of encroachment and light reduction was virtually unchanged. Unfortunately, the Inspector sided with the very well-prepared barrister appearing for the developer, which is a US firm with no commitment to or knowledge of our area.

We think another way could have been found for this site. The old building could have been repurposed and adapted, thus saving CO₂ expenditure on new concrete. The Society likes planning proposals that are contemporary and in sympathy with our historic area. If LBI had engaged authoritatively and collaborated with us, the outcome may have been quite different.

Two hundred, not out

Before 1800 the Amwell area was a series of meadows laced with paths, springs and streams. The area north of the City of London around what is now Farringdon Station and Saffron Hill was populated by some of the most dangerous slums in London. When Dickens wrote *Oliver Twist* in the 1830s, it was there that Fagin's den with its community of juvenile pickpockets was located. Meanwhile less than a mile further north the New River Company and the Lloyd Baker family had already built fashionable dwellings for those who sought fresh air and less overcrowding outside the City. Remember, this was before the arrival of the railways and thirty years before the first underground trains between Baker Street and Farringdon.

So, to mark this bicentenary the Amwell Society is planning a Festival in 2026 to celebrate the Amwell area. We are already busy planning the events which, we hope, will give a new slant on how and why this spot of London appealed so much to developers - the enthusiasm for the Classical elements of Georgian house-building style and stories about the pleasure gardens, medicinal springs and open air gymnasium that existed just before building began. We also plan to include all kinds of events and will be working very closely with the QBCI which will, at that time, be in the first year of its operation. We are planning a day out to Great Amwell, near Ware in Hertfordshire which is the source of the New River. There will be numerous walks, talks plus an extra special event with families in mind. We are busy planning and will announce the programme in spring 2025. So watch out for developments. Remember, the Bicentenary Festival will be held in the summer of 2026. Watch this space.

Everything you wanted to know about a string quartet, but were afraid to ask.

If you think listening to late 19th century string music isn't for you, think again. To begin the New Year we are inviting members to join us for a special evening. On **Thursday 23 January at 7.15 pm** a newly formed quartet will play at the Meditatio Centre at St Mark's Church, Myddelton Square. This will be no ordinary concert. The young artists are preparing Claude Debussy's only string quartet written in 1893. This complex, passionate and impressionist work will be preceded by a description of how a string quartet works. For example, there are four players but how do they collaborate to create one musical voice? Is one person in charge, or is making this music a truly co-operative act? What is the distinctive character of each instrument? What is unique about Debussy? **Tickets are £10.00 including a glass of wine.** All income will go to the young musicians. We will send booking information to all members by e-mail after Christmas.

The Amwell Society campaigns to protect and promote the area and its architectural heritage and to encourage a sense of community.

The Society serves Pentonville Road, Penton Rise, King's Cross Road, Farringdon Road, Rosebery Avenue and St. John Street and all the streets within the area.

The Society is open to all residents. For information about becoming a member, e-mail info@amwell.org.uk

President, Jane Wainwright. Chairman, Peadar Sionoid. Secretary, Joanna Ward. Treasurer, Keith Baker. Newsletter editor, David Sulkin.

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Amelia Edwards. Egyptologist.

Amelia Edwards lived at 19 Wharton Street as an English Heritage blue plaque testifies. She was no ordinary person. Born in 1831 in Islington, she became well-known as a novelist, journalist, traveller and Egyptologist. Her literary output included nine novels. *The Phantom Coach* - a ghost story [1864] *Barbara's History* [1864] and *Lord Brackenbury* [1880]. Her travelogue *A Thousand Miles up the Nile* [1877] was republished in 2022 by the Egypt Exploration Society. Copies can be ordered online from Blackwells for £29.75 [postage free]. The book can also be borrowed from Finsbury Library. Look in the travel section 916.204.

When young Edwards showed a distinct talent as an artist and came to the attention of George Cruickshank, who lived nearby, in Amwell Street, he gave her lessons. She also became interested in composing [piano and organ] as well as singing. She also took up pistol-shooting and riding.

Edwards' first travel adventure was to the Dolomites in Northeast Italy with a friend, Lucy Renshaw [1833 - 1919]. At the time, the Dolomites were described as 'terra incognita'. This journey is described in her book *A Midsummer Ramble in the Dolomites* (1873), later renamed *Untrodden Peaks and Infrequent Valleys*.

Edwards, with Lucy Renshaw, visited Egypt in the winter of 1873-1874. They set off southwards from Cairo in a hired dahabiyeh (houseboat). The two women visited Philae and went on to Abu Simbel, where they spent six weeks. This is when Edward planned *A Thousand Miles up the Nile*. Her travels in Egypt made her aware of increasing threats to ancient monuments from tourism and modern development. It was about this time that Edwards abandoned other writing in favour of her interest in Egyptology. She contributed to the 9th edition of Encyclopaedia Britannica and in 1889 - 1890, undertook a strenuous lecture tour of the USA.

Along with her commitment to scholarship, Edwards had an intriguing personal life. In January 1851 she became engaged to a Mr Bacon. In December of the same year she broke off the engagement. Subsequently Edwards formed emotional attachments with women. From the 1860s she lived with Drew Brasher [1804 - 1892] who was twenty-seven years her senior. Another person in her life was Ellen Byrne. Edwards was also on friendly terms with the writer and activist on gay issues, John



Addington Symonds and the sexologist, Havelock Ellis who later wrote the preface to Radclyffe Hall's 1926 vilified novel, *The Well of Loneliness*.

Edwards was also close to the painter Marianne North [1830 - 1890], who was Symonds' sister-in-law, to Lucy Renshaw who was her regular travelling companion, and to Kate Bradbury who would become the executrix of Edwards' will.

In October 1891 Edwards was supervising the unloading of antiquities arriving from Egypt at London Docks and subsequently contracted a lung infection. She died of pneumonia on 15 April 1892 at Weston-super-Mare and was buried on the 18 April with Ellen Drew, who had died only a few months earlier, and Ellen's daughter, Sarah [1832 - 1864]. A large Egyptian 'ankh' - a sign of life - was added to the grave to reflect Amelia's fascination with Egypt. You can see the ankh lying on the grave in the photograph below.

She left her library as well as many Egyptian artefacts to University College London along with £2,500 [about £270,000 in 2024] to establish a Chair in Egyptology which was first awarded to her friend and colleague, Flinders Petrie. At the end of her life, Edwards was also Vice-chair of the Society for the Promotion of Women's Suffrage.

The monument, now Grade II Listed, can be found at the Churchyard of St Mary the Virgin, Church Close, Henbury Bristol BS10 7QF

There are several books about Amelia Edwards, her passions and energy. Look for *Amelia Edwards, Traveller, Novelist and Egyptologist* by Joan Rees [1998] and *Amelia Blanford Edwards 1831 - 1892* by Barbara S Lesko. Also *Women on the Nile: Writings of Harriet Martineau, Florence Nightingale and Amelia Edwards* also by Joan Rees [2008]. Thanks to Bibra Ronalds for suggesting this article.



The Listed Property Show. 31 January to 2 February at Olympia

Most houses in the Amwell area are Grade II Listed. If you want to know more about caring for your Listed house, go to this show. Meet the biggest collection of Listed building suppliers and experts under one roof. If you are maintaining, altering or renovating your house, **The Listed Property Show** is a must. It will include a crucial focus on Energy Efficiency highlighting the challenges and solutions of sensitively retrofitting a Listed property and ways to fit double glazing and solar panels, when planning permission is required.

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Committee update 2024 - 2025

- Diana Aurisch. Naorji Street.
- Keith Baker. Treasurer. Amwell Street.
- Charles Cook. Naorji Street.
- Grant Costello. Percy Circus.
- Sally Hull. Myddelton Square.
- Katrina Fialko. Great Percy Street.
- Tony Relph. Amwell Street.
- Peadar Sionoid, Chair. Bartholomew Close.
- Rowena Smith. Tysoe Street.
- David Sulkin. Newsletter editor. Wharton Street.
- Paul Thornton. Lloyd Square.
- Joanna Ward. Secretary. Great Percy Street.

Our honorary president is Jane Wainwright who was a founder member of the Society in 1972.

We are always interested in members' observations and suggestions.

You can contact us at info@amwell.org.uk

Christmas drinks. Do try this at home.

In the past we have suggested several 1920 and 1930s cocktail recipes. Last year we included a Dickensian winter warmer. Here is one that is based on an Art-deco concoction but is also bang up-to-date.

The Snowball is a mix of Advocat, lime, lemonade and ice - a 'retro beverage of dreams'.

- 60ml Advocat - think Warninks
- Juice of ¼ - ½ lime to taste
- Lemonade to top up
- 3 cocktail cherries to serve.

Fill a tall glass with ice. Pour over the Advocat and lime. Stir with a long-handled spoon and top up with lemonade. Put the cherries on to a cocktail stick and lay the stick across the glass for a good yellow and red contrast. Drink. Eat the cherries as you go.

SPAB

Another organisation which provides backup and information about old buildings is the Society of the Protection of Ancient Buildings [SPAB]. The SPAB website is fascinating in itself as it covers current issues connected with older Listed buildings, the challenges of climate change as well as history and scholarship to help us preserve and conserve our built heritage. There are courses to sign up for and visits to go on. All SPAB activities are aimed at homeowners, conservation professionals and history lovers. SPAB was founded in 1877 by William Morris in response Victorian architects whose enthusiasm for harmful restoration caused irreparable damage. Today, SPAB helps train new generations of architectural professionals and building craftspeople to develop both sensitivity and skills. SPAB works with local authorities and also campaigns to protect old buildings at risk. www.spab.org.uk/about-us

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A warm welcome to new [and some rejoining] members in 2024

- David Baker. Amwell Street.
- Jonas Balsevicius & Matteo Frontini. Amwell Street .
- Oliver Bennett & Helen Healey. Farringdon Road.
- Ian Collis & Kevin Cleary. Wharton Street.
- Nokuthula Dube. Central Street.
- Sam Ellis & Adam Lewis. Myddelton Square.
- Jeffrey Erlich. Cruickshank Street.
- James Gardiner & Neil Bartlett. Myddelton Passage.
- Alice I Gyllenkrok. Myddelton Square.
- Melanie Johnson. Great Percy Street.
- Helen Jones. Wharton Street.
- Mark McMahon & Richard Alam. Ingelbert Street.
- Josephine Morrison. Wharton Street.
- Bingo O'Neill. Amwell Street.
- Victoria Rock & Stephen Swift. Prideaux Place.
- Micaela Soar. Lloyd Square.
- Amma Solomon-Browne & Kinquaid Malik-White. Amwell Street.
- Cath Thorpe & Robert Hogarth. Great Percy Street.
- Chris Tiernan & Ben Higgins. Amwell Street.
- Mike Tonkin & Anna Liu. Wilmington Square.
- R Ward. Claremont Square.
- Amy Webb. Myddelton Square.
- Lorraine Wise. Great Percy Street.

A reminder to all ...

Subscription renewal - 1 January 2025

Membership and subscriptions

- **Standard membership.** Newsletter delivered by hand. £10.00 pa [84p a month]
- **Postal membership.** People further afield. £15 pa
- **Honorary membership.** Those who have served the Society in a special and significant way. Free.

Standing orders

Standing orders help us with our administration. So, if you can, please set up a standing order with your bank for £10.00 to be paid every 1st January, then we won't chase you for your subscription. Our bank details are:

Account: Amwell Society

Account number. 65192526

Co-op Bank

Sort code 08-92-99

If you know your membership number, please quote it when completing the standing order.

