

Making daily life ‘as useful and beautiful as possible’: Georgiana Burne-Jones and Rottingdean, 1880–1904

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When in 1880 Edward and Georgiana Burne-Jones bought a house in Rottingdean, Sussex, it was a village relatively unaffected by the rapid pace of change in late-Victorian England. While there had been growth in the fashionable holiday trade spilling over from Brighton, the downland village by the sea retained its rural character with agriculture as still the largest employer of local labour. It was, in fact, the bucolic and unspoilt nature of Rottingdean which attracted Edward and Georgiana as they searched for a second home outside London. Burne-Jones had considered Brighton, but rejected it as too busy and commercial. He found Rottingdean in 1877 and, having recognised the charm of the place, suggested Georgiana take a look when she planned a visit to Brighton in 1880.¹

Characteristically, the energetic Georgiana walked the four miles from Brighton and later described her impressions of the village:

It was a perfect autumn afternoon when I walked across the downs and entered the village from the north; no new houses then straggled out to meet one, but the little place lay peacefully within its grey garden walls, the sails of the windmill were turning slowly in the sun, and the miller’s black timber cottage was still there. The road I followed led me straight to the door of the house that stood empty on the village green, and we bought it at once.²

Time spent at Rottingdean was limited by Edward’s work commitments in London, but gradually the couple became more attached to the place Georgiana described as ‘our haven of rest’, and by 1886 they had named the home North End House, linking it to 49 North End Road, the address of The Grange, their London home.³ By the end of 1888 they had bought the adjoining house, Aubrey

Cottage, which they asked W.A.S Benson to extend and join to North End House, giving Edward a studio and creating accommodation for the extended family which Georgiana loved to have near her, especially their grandchildren. Georgiana's description of herself 'circling round' her family reveals much about the pleasure she took in children.⁴

Acquisition of Aubrey Cottage also meant that the Burne-Joneses were able to stymie what they believed to be expansion plans for the nearby Downlands Seaside Infirmary for Children which catered for juveniles afflicted with tubercular and cutaneous diseases. These children, mostly from London poor law authorities, were sent to Downlands because it was believed that their health would benefit from the seaside environment. Established in 1879, the home experienced financial difficulties during the 1880s leading eventually to bankruptcy and the sale of the institution to Charles Reed, a Rottingdean grocer and draper who with his brother, Samuel, a tax collector, owned land and property on the west side of the High Street and had an eye on possible development. It was these circumstances which Burne-Jones referred to when he told Lady Leighton that they had to buy the property in order to stop it being used as a 'sanatorium for scrofulous orphans'.⁵ At this stage the Infirmary was operated by Julia Hall, but it was owned by Samuel Reed and it is likely that Georgiana had either him or Charles in mind when she wrote to Charles Norton that 'We should not have done this however for anything short of compulsion. We are so fond of our tiny house here – but there was a likelihood of a very tiresome neighbour taking it and that would have spoilt our comfort as we are very close to each other, and we were obliged to do it'.⁶

The Reeds were aspiring members of the Rottingdean establishment which included the *de facto* squire Steyning Beard, with his 3,000 acres (*ca* 1200 ha), the farmer and largest employer of labour, William Brown, the well-connected clergyman of St Margaret's Church, the Rev. Arthur Thomas, and a number of wealthy families living in or close to the gentry houses facing the village green. From these families came the churchwardens, overseers, surveyors and assessors of the parish during the years immediately preceding the Local Government Act of 1894. Beard also represented Rottingdean on the first East Sussex County Council of 1888, thereafter becoming Alderman, and was for a time a member of the Newhaven Union Rural Sanitary Authority, of which Brown was also a member. Also occupying a large house on the village green was the family of Edward L.J. Ridsdale, who in 1880 had been instrumental in seeing that Rottingdean was connected to Brighton's fresh water supply, and whose son E. A. Ridsdale, a free-thinker and author of science books, would become the first chairman of Rottingdean Parish Council and later Liberal MP for Brighton. The Burne-Jones and Ridsdale families were already close – Georgiana and Edward L.J.'s wife Esther were particular friends – when in 1892 they became connected

through the marriage of Georgiana's nephew Stanley Baldwin to Lucy, the Ridsdale's eldest daughter.

These connections, the improved accommodation, and the enjoyment of living in a village they grew to love, encouraged the Burne-Joneses to spend more time there, so that by September 1890 Georgiana could report to Norton that 'It is strange how we turn to the country life now, and get more and more to consider Rottingdean as our main home'.⁷ By this time she was well established and respected in the village owing to her support for local charities, and her having paid during the early 1890s for a local woman to be trained as a cottage nurse and midwife. Evidence relating to this first nursing scheme in the village – a second followed in 1904 – is scanty, but it is likely that it was loosely based on the model of the Cottage Benefit Nursing Association pioneered across the county border in Surrey. Although short-lived, this initiative was remembered fondly by a group of women who wrote to Georgiana lamenting her electoral defeat in 1897.⁸

We know even less about the success or otherwise of Georgiana's informal attempts to encourage the education of villagers through discussion and the distribution of literature for that purpose, but we need not necessarily assume that it was as uncomfortable an experience for those taking part as portrayed by the Burne-Joneses' self-conscious granddaughter Angela Thirkell, in her account of life at North End House forty years later. Once she was elected to Rottingdean Parish Council in 1894, it is more likely that Georgiana's visits to villagers' cottages, highlighted by Thirkell as a source of embarrassment, would have been taken up with practical matters such as allotments and footpaths rather than the merits of Ruskin's *Fors Clavigera*.⁹

Doubtless the earnest Georgiana did feel a duty to introduce villagers to the ideas of those she admired, more often than not meaning William Morris, particularly his ideas relating art and society. We know she ordered multiple of copies of *The Aims of Art* from the Socialist League in 1887, almost certainly for distribution in the village, and correspondence to friends provides ample evidence that Georgiana took every opportunity to spread Morris's ideas.¹⁰ But there is nothing to suggest that she explicitly propagandised for socialism in Rottingdean, or made links with active local socialist groups. Instead, Georgiana's ideas for radical reform in Rottingdean were presented in a way which sat comfortably within the type of advanced Liberalism/progressivism then current, and with which she would be familiar from London, overlaid with a distinctive emphasis on fostering participation by working people in village institutions.

Unlike Morris, Georgiana was encouraged by the political circumstances following election of Gladstone's administration in 1892, and wrote to her friend Rosalind Howard:

To think that there should be such a compact majority at this moment on the side of truth and justice, is invigorating. We do live in wonderful times. My faith increases in the progress of the world, and in the idea that all things and people help towards it ... I am quite out of the political world – as I always was – but I am intensely interested in the struggle going on in it now, which is a type of bigger thing'.¹¹

That the Liberal administration was formed with the support of Irish Nationalist MPs was undoubtedly of significance to Georgiana because she had opposed British policy in Ireland throughout the 1880s, but had not joined any campaign or organisation of opposition. She made her views clear in a letter to friend Catherine Holiday who in November 1890 was observing social conditions of the poor in County Donegal:

Thank you for letting me know that you have started for Falcarragh. I feel humiliated to be here in my easy home while you have gone there – but I send you my love and respect and sympathy. I have just been reading a letter from Sir John Swinburne in the *Daily News* about the Olphert evictions, which he says are to begin today, and putting the case against it for the 1,000th time ... one would believe no human being could turn another out of house and home at this season for any cause – it is monstrous, and yet those of us who do nothing against it almost seem to approve of it by silence.¹²

At the time Georgiana was expressing these feelings of a guilty conscience for her lack of engagement with causes close to her heart, she was finding her way in practical activity as a Council member of the South London Art Gallery, where she joined Edward in 1890. If Burne-Jones's presence on the Council was that of a figurehead, the same could not be said of Georgiana, who threw herself into its work; raising funds, appealing publicly and privately for the loan of paintings, organising exhibitions, and crucially by 1893 mediating between conflicting views of the Gallery's management as its chairman Lord Leighton attempted to prise the institution out of the loving but limiting grasp of its founder, and transfer responsibility to the local authority.¹³

Galvanised by this activity, enjoying a period of independence within her marriage, released from some of the secretarial duties she undertook for Edward, and now confident in her ability to conduct public work, Georgiana seized the opportunity to help shake things up in sleepy Rottingdean when election by secret ballot for the first Parish Council was declared during the first week of November 1894.¹⁴ She was able to put her name forward for election because she was listed on the local government electoral register as the married female occupier of North End House. Georgiana's contest was not undertaken alone, but was part of an organised challenge by village progressives to the Rotting-

dean establishment group which had traditionally dominated parish affairs. Although the progressive group did not identify itself as such, that is what they were, and they declared their collective intention to contest the election during early November, when a meeting led by E. A. Ridsdale and Stephen Welfare, a hotelier and omnibus proprietor, put forward an outline manifesto including plans for municipal allotments.¹⁵ An approved list of progressive candidates was quickly assembled and endorsed by a well-attended public meeting held at Welfare's White Horse Hotel. As well as Ridsdale, Welfare and Georgiana, the progressive 'slate' included a chemist, a Congregational minister, two shopkeepers and a number of working men, but significantly no agricultural labourers.¹⁶ The establishment figures, who obviously expected an easy ride during the elections, reacted angrily to the challenge accusing the progressives of bringing 'party politics' into the village, and suggesting that a number of their candidates had only recently become interested in Rottingdean, whereas *they* had a proven track record in parish affairs.¹⁷

Georgiana was particularly energetic during the election campaign, knocking on doors, entering public houses and speaking at meetings, prompting Burne-Jones to write 'She is so busy – she is rousing the village – she is marching about – she is going like a flame through the village'.¹⁸ The final week of the campaign saw the publication of Georgiana's *Open Letter to the Electors of Rottingdean about Parish Councils*, an exposition of the legislation introducing elected parish councils, and a reasoning for why that reform was important. Crucially, the *Open Letter* argued, elected parish councils gave villagers who were entitled to vote the chance to replace the outdated system of church-based parochial administration with democratic and representative local government, carrying powers to improve the quality of village life. Concluding with a challenge to Rottingdean's electors to make a 'fresh start', Georgiana wrote:

I am not asking you to vote for me or for those who think as I do; but I speak because I want you to know what is offered to you, and I am sure many of you have not been told what it is. Many a man goes across the world to find a fresh chance to better his life, and here is one brought to our doors. Shall we take it?¹⁹

The *Open Letter* contributed to what was obviously an intense political debate in the village during the week leading up to the poll on 17 December, with a Brighton newspaper reporting that 'The contest has excited the greatest interest in the village. Poems and pamphlets were flying about in all directions, and considerable feeling was manifested on both sides'.²⁰ Such energy clearly transmitted itself to the voters, because there was a 79 per cent turnout in the election which saw eight progressives elected, six of them, including Georgiana, heading the poll, and only three establishment candidates returned. Among those defeated were a Baronet, a retired colonel of the Indian Army and a clergyman

who finished bottom of the poll. To complete the rout, two progressives were elected from Rottingdean ward to the newly-established Newhaven Rural District Council. Georgiana recounted details of these victories the following day in a letter to Catherine Holiday remarking that it had been 'a strong pull, but successful, and I am happy, though very tired'.²¹

Despite the progressives' clear majority on the Parish Council, they found it difficult to implement election commitments because of opposition and delay from those with vested interests who resented the passing of the old system of parochial administration. Transfer of overseers' responsibility for collection of rates to the parish was completed in the absence of previous office holders, which Council chairman E.A. Ridsdale said was 'an example of the way in which things had been conducted in the past'.²² Attempts to take control of local charities met with obfuscation and fending off, as when Beard, one of the three establishment figures elected to the Council, was forced to reveal that his 'gift' of the village Reading Room to the parish in 1885 was made with no deeds or details of trustees. When the Parish Council proposed compensation of £250 to transfer ownership of the Reading Room to the local authority, Beard rejected the offer.²³

There were similar difficulties securing land for allotments, the issue for Ridsdale 'that really the election turned on ... (and which) ... the village spoke with no uncertain sound upon ...'.²⁴ Following repeated attempts to persuade Beard and Brown, also an establishment parish councillor, to release land for rent at realistic prices, Georgiana proposed that the issue be referred to East Sussex County Council for compulsory purchase.²⁵ At this point, the Marquess of Abergavenny, a County Council Alderman with over 15,000 acres (6000 ha) in Sussex including a large portion of Rottingdean land, offered a 2½ acre (1 ha) cow-field adjoining the village school at £6 per acre which was accepted but not without Georgiana stating that it was overpriced, a view confirmed by a contemporary survey, which found a maximum rent of £4 in a comparable Sussex parish.²⁶

Land ownership was also at the heart of what was to prove the most controversial and intractable problem facing the first Rottingdean Parish Council. The issue surfaced in August 1889 when two strips of waste ground either side of the Woodingdean Road were enclosed with posts and chains by Beard and his tenant farmer Brown. Across these strips ran a series of footpaths used by farm workers and villagers and there had been at one time a small wooden bridge across a watercourse providing access for pedestrians. Beard claimed he possessed authority to enclose the land because of an award of a steward's copy grant dating from March 1866 to his uncle Charles Beard, by the Lord of the Manor, the Marquess of Abergavenny, effectively transferring ownership of the land. If there was village resentment at the enclosure in 1889, as Georgiana suggested seven years later, it was not publicly expressed, doubtless because of the deference shown to Beard who owned rented property as well as land, and the economic power of

Brown as the largest employer of farm labour in Rottingdean.²⁷ This authority was confirmed by the appointment of Beard and Brown as joint surveyors in the parochial administration before 1894.

It was precisely this kind of arrogant and acquisitive action which Georgiana believed could be prevented with the introduction of elected parish and district councils. Indeed, she argued it was their ‘duty’ in Rottingdean to raise the issue, which she and the progressive majority duly did at the first opportunity, challenging the legality of the enclosure and petitioning Newhaven Rural District Council for removal of the obstructions. The Parish Council was encouraged in this by advice from the Local Government Board to district councils in January 1895 that they possessed a duty to protect public rights of way threatened with enclosure. Considerable energy and resources were put behind the challenge including seeking the opinion of Queen’s Counsel who advised that the case for enclosure was unsound, and the gathering of witness statements confirming continued and unfettered public use of the land during the years between the copy grant issue and the erection of post and chain obstructions.

Ultimately, the case failed, for two reasons. First, a majority of the Newhaven Rural District Council – among them Steyning Beard’s son Ernest, who represented Telscombe ward – accepted the case put by Beard in a private meeting with the Council Clerk, that the copy grant entitled him to enclose the land.²⁸ Second, subsequent referral of the case to East Sussex County Council occurred concurrently with the second Rottingdean Parish Council elections during March 1896, which led to the progressive majority being overturned, and with it the political drive to pursue the issue. Therefore, when the County Council considered the matter in October 1896, it was advised that while there was sufficient evidence to justify an action against the enclosure, it recognised ‘the changed attitude of the Parish Council’, that no public right of way had been interfered with, and the matter was duly dropped.²⁹ Following this episode, the Burne-Joneses’ son Philip remonstrated by removing the chains, announcing this act in the local press and advising Beard that he would take the matter up with the Commons Preservation Society.³⁰ A watching brief was kept by the Society, but it probably decided against supporting legal action because in 1892 a very similar case had been lost.³¹ Georgiana also took to direct action as protest, with an annual picnic and procession on the land during which she was forced to contend with jets of water directed at her by Brown’s wife, Mary.³² The value of the enclosed land was eventually estimated at £250 in 1910, when the estate was sold following Beard’s death.³³

The parish election of March 1896 was a setback to Georgiana and the progressives, with the majority passing to the establishment candidates who elected Beard as chairman. The turn-out of 53 per cent was particularly disappointing, and was the main reason for the loss of progressive seats. While it was the case

that there had been, and would continue to be, a good deal of across 'party' agreement on a number of plans for local services, the radical direction of the Parish Council which had attracted wider attention was lost.³⁴ Henceforth, proposals to introduce genuinely forward-looking policies for the parish and the district, such as the attempt in 1896 to petition the District Council to adopt building bye-laws for basic standards of drainage, daylight and ventilation, were voted down by Beard and his supporters.³⁵

This particular decision was almost certainly perceived by the Burne-Joneses as indicative of a growing willingness to open the village, and to remove any perceived barriers, to expansion and commercialisation. Charles Reed, elected to the Parish Council in 1896 and the District Council in 1898, with his brother Samuel, who had been appointed Parish Clerk in 1895, began house building during these years, and were directors, with a number of other Parish councillors, of the Steam Laundry Company which partnered New & Mayne, the electric lighting and power company whose noise and smoke pollution forced Edward into the Chancery Division of the High Court in November 1895.³⁶ When New & Mayne failed at the end of the decade, the Reeds, and other local businessmen, were on hand to take over its operations. Beard was also a founding director of the company which operated the seashore tramroad linking Brighton to Rottingdean which was so despised by Edward that there was 'rejoicing' in the Burne-Jones home when a storm wrecked the equipment in December 1896. For Burne-Jones, allowing the link was a case of Rottingdean behaving as a 'silly little village, always bursting itself to join Brighton'.³⁷

The building of a new private school during 1893–94 at the northern edge of the village by establishment figures George and Henry Mason, on land sold by Beard, to designs by architect and local conservative Samuel Thacker, possessed a whiff of cronyism, and when a public footpath was taken in by landscaping of the school's playing fields Philip 'put up posters all over the village during the night inciting the people to stick up for their rights'.³⁸ With the support of the Brighton and District Footpaths Preservation Society, Burne-Jones was himself involved in negotiations to agree a new footpath which although an improvement on what was first proposed, was still noticeably less pleasant for walkers than the now lost ancient right of way.³⁹ Other building developments also concerned Edward and Georgiana, including the very large St Mary's Home for Female Penitents, and the row of cottages built by Steyning Beard in the area known as Court Ord, which Burne-Jones believed 'had ruined the place. They have dwarfed the valley'.⁴⁰ Increasingly, Georgiana felt that the character of the village was being lost. She sometimes left the place when it was busy with tourists during summer, and at one stage it was thought that she might move elsewhere.⁴¹

Those with local business interests began to dominate the Parish Council after 1896 as the local Primrose League, a body linked to the Conservative Party, and

therefore linked to the Conservative Party, organised and successfully delivered the establishment vote. As this went on, the progressive vote fell away, with the 1897 election marking a watershed as Georgiana, Ridsdale and Welfare all lost their seats. Dismayed by these results, and by wider events, Georgiana told Sydney Cockerell that the reverses had 'made me realise how slow is the growth of freedom in the world even more than I usually do'.⁴²

Such events certainly influenced Georgiana's thinking as she turned her attention to encouraging the involvement of villagers in local institutions. She was the driving force behind the Rottingdean Agricultural Credit Society set up in September 1896 in order to provide a village bank based on cooperative principles. When in 1897 a village meeting was called in order to plan an event to celebrate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, Georgiana's proposal, amid a clamour for bonfires and memorials, was for a district nurse to be appointed to serve the local community.⁴³ She made an appeal for working-class men and women candidates to stand in the Parish elections in order to ensure that their authentic voices were heard and their interests represented, reflecting that 'If I had lived in one of the worst cottages in the village during the two years that I was on the Parish Council, I know that I should have done better for you than I did—for I don't think I should ever have let the subject drop, and that is needed everywhere in order to get things done'.⁴⁴ Georgiana advised villagers to use their collective voice through Parish Meetings which she believed could guide and influence elected councillors. The emphasis here was on villagers taking pride in and responsibility for their own community through meetings at which all could have their say, sentiments not unlike those expressed by Morris in 'How Matters are Managed', Chapter XIV of *News from Nowhere*, which we know Georgiana was re-reading at precisely this time.⁴⁵

That Georgiana was held in high regard by the Rottingdean progressives and their working class supporters was demonstrated by the decision that she stand in the 1898 Parish Council election, not as a candidate in the village, but for one of three seats in Black Rock ward, created following the 1896 election. Black Rock, east of the village and bordering on Brighton, was included in Rottingdean parish but had traditionally been regarded as an outpost. As a consequence, its needs had often been neglected. Its population was overwhelmingly working-class with many employed in the nearby gas works and in market gardens. Working-class progressive candidates had been returned from Black Rock since 1894, but subsequent debate gave rise to the suggestion that with voters required to travel up to three miles (4.8 km) to the village to vote, the parish be divided into two wards, one for Rottingdean village, the other for Black Rock. The proposal was endorsed by the County Council, and at the 1897 election Black Rock returned three progressives. Designation of one of these 'safe' seats in the 1898 election for a titled lady from one of the village green properties illustrated the esteem in

which Georgiana was held, and the degree of organisation of those progressives living in Black Rock ward.

Notwithstanding Georgiana's return to the Parish Council in 1898, the group of four progressive councillors were to exert little influence on policy as Beard, now seemingly elected as perpetual chairman, ensured that the parish was rate-conscious, non-interventionist and acted in accord with Newhaven Rural District Council and East Sussex County Council, both dominated by coalitions of business and landed interests. Georgiana kept up an excellent record of attendance – she was even present at a meeting in the month following Burne-Jones's death in June 1898 – and maintained her commitment on footpaths and allotments, but the excitement of the first fifteen months of Council work was now only a memory. She was elected again in 1899 and 1900, but decided to stand down in 1901 when the tenure of office of Parish councillors was extended to three years. As if to symbolise the change and how little she could now achieve on the Council, the final proposal made by Georgiana for the regulation of the village green and the area by the coast where there is a break in the cliffs known as 'The Gap', was successfully countered by Brown and George Mason, with a motion that 'it lay on the table'.⁴⁶

Georgiana also found herself out of step with villagers, including her nephew Rudyard Kipling, over British government policy in South Africa, and more generally her opposition to all forms of militarism. Kipling, the son of Georgiana's older sister Alice and her husband John, settled in Rottingdean with his wife and young family during 1897, renting a large house only yards from North End House. Georgiana loved having the Kipling family on her doorstep, but she did not approve of Rudyard's imperialist views and was unhappy when he became a focus of local support for military action against the Boers towards the end of 1899. Kipling's sponsorship of the Navy League branch in the village, establishment of a rifle club with indoor and outdoor ranges, and support for a company of Rottingdean volunteers who marched and drilled on the green across from North End House, all heightened feelings of jingoism and imperialism so abhorrent to Georgiana.⁴⁷ She would also have been disappointed that these activities brought Kipling into alliance with her political opponents, the nexus of business and landed interests associated with the Primrose League and the Westminster constituency MP, Sir Henry Fletcher. Although Georgiana still looked forward to visits of the Kipling family to her home, she recognised that her views were incompatible with Rudyard's, and after a while avoided discussion of the war. As she wrote to Charles Norton in January 1902 (quoting Swinburne), 'Rudyard as dear as ever, but alas, the heart's division divideth us'.⁴⁸

Georgiana had declared against British military action in South Africa during October 1899, when she was a signatory of a national petition in favour of a

‘patient and pacific policy’ of negotiation.⁴⁹ This petition gave rise to the South African Conciliation Committee, which Georgiana joined with Philip, an essentially middle-class organisation which sought to achieve ‘the rational refutation of irrational arguments’ and ‘consciously restricted itself to shedding truth upon imperialist distortions’.⁵⁰ The Committee included a women’s section in whose activities Georgiana participated.⁵¹ Georgiana also did what she could in everyday life to persuade people that the war was irrational and unjust, but this task was not easy, particularly as reports of loss of life reached the village. Never one to shirk what she believed was a moral duty, she made a final protest against the war on the day in June 1902 when the village was celebrating victory by hanging from a bedroom window of North End House a banner bearing the words ‘We have killed and also taken possession’.

A good deal of mythology and confusion surrounds this event, not least its repeatedly incorrect dating to 1900. This confusion has almost certainly happened because the account by Rottingdean historian Seaburne Moens, places it following the Relief of Mafeking in May, 1900.⁵² Successive historians and biographers – but not it must be said those Kipling scholars who correctly date the event – have used his account as their guide: hence the muddle.⁵³ Moens also suggested, and again this has been repeated by others, that had not Kipling been summoned to address the assembled crowd, an attack on North End House might have resulted. Probably the most comprehensive and reliable contemporary report was included in a local daily newspaper and is reproduced below:

Several versions have appeared in London papers of incidents at Rottingdean on ‘Peace Monday’. What actually occurred is thus related by our correspondent. It is a well-known fact that Lady Burne-Jones is a sympathiser with the Boers. Her nephew, Mr Rudyard Kipling is not. On ‘Peace Monday’ while the people of Rottingdean were at the thanksgiving service in the Church, Lady Burne-Jones had placed on the wall facing the main street, just underneath her bedroom window, a large black board on which was the following inscription in bold white letters: ‘We have killed and also taken possession’. No doubt this would have been taken down by the young men of the village, but the discreet village constable advised Lady Burne-Jones to have it taken down and at five o’clock in the evening it disappeared. In the evening, on the village green in front of North End House, a large number of people gathered and treated her ladyship to ‘free entertainment’. Later, the crowd was augmented by a rougher element and it was then that Mr. Kipling came out from The Elms. He did not address the crowd, but carried on a wordy war with a few of the men. He then went home, followed by a crowd singing ‘He’s an absent minded beggar’, to the accompaniment of boos and hisses. For an hour or more the crowd serenaded him and then dispersed. The next morning a notice to the effect that gymnasium would be closed to the

villagers until further notice was put up. It was also expected that the rifle-range would be closed but Mr. Kipling had no power to do that. Lady Burne-Jones left the village on the following morning early.⁵⁴

These events occurred while Georgiana was working on the second volume of the biography Burne-Jones had requested she write. He had died unexpectedly on 17 June 1898 and his ashes were laid in a grave in the churchyard of St Margaret's, Rottingdean, the Church where a number of his stained glass windows were located. Less than a week had passed when Sydney Cockerell visited Georgiana and noted that she had 'that air of determined resignation that I had seen in her days after Morris's death. She was very well, she said, and was very thankful to have known the two men as others had known them, and we must pay for the wine that we had drunk'.⁵⁵

Having given over the lease of her London house to Charles Fairfax Murray in October 1898, Georgiana's permanent home became North End House where she made Edward's studio her 'sanctum'. Here she would work most days on the biography until three in the afternoon.⁵⁶ After some delay, owing to an extended period of illness in 1903, she wrote the final words at the end of March 1904. This was followed by editing, proof-reading, indexing and dealing with the publisher, with which she was helped by her daughter Margaret, Margaret's husband J. W. Mackail, Cormel Price, and Philip. Publication of the biography in November 1904, two volumes of *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, 'by GB-J', was a relief to Georgiana but also the cause of some sorrow as she described to Cockerell three days after it appeared 'I expect you will understand the profound sadness which accompanies the fulfilment of my purpose, and how much I miss the daily labour at it – and how it seems to me that I have parted with something precious – almost lost it – sharing it with everyone'.⁵⁷

Towards the end of her life Georgiana reflected on time spent and concluded that 'I find in looking backwards that my life falls into decades, and I reckon myself to have been more or less reborn in them'.⁵⁸ In relation to her years of both part-time and permanent residence in Rottingdean, the 1890s stand out clearly as a decade of activity and engagement, a contrast to the first ten years when her presence in the village passed by with few highlights. Not that Georgiana was unconnected to politics during the 1880s, which in fact was a 'long' decade of political discovery for her. It began alongside Morris during the agitation of the Eastern Question Association of 1876–1877, where she was impressed with the politicised workers who sang Morris's 'Wake, London Lads', so much so that nearly two decades later she believed they could be roused again by the song as a demonstration against British government policy in Crete approached.⁵⁹ These experiences determined

Georgiana to ‘renounce patriotism’, a stance she held for rest of her life, notably – as we have seen – during the South African war of 1899–1902.⁶⁰ She was also alive to the ferment of radical political ideas during the 1880s, including Henry George’s proposals for a single tax on land as a way of achieving land restoration, which through Michael Davitt, was connected to the plight of the Irish landless poor and the case for Home Rule, both of them issues close to Georgiana’s heart. She was impressed with George at his London meeting of January 1884 but told Norton that ‘for my own part I believe in no *one* cure for the evils of the present state of society, nor have I made up my mind on the subject of compensation, but fair would I try any reasonable and just plan for bettering the relations of human beings to each other’.⁶¹

Georgiana’s discussions with Morris concerning socialism are well documented, and need not be repeated here.⁶² We know that Morris approved of her first *Open Letter*, and was pleased when she was elected to Rottingdean Parish Council, but he remained unconvinced of electoral contests as a route to socialism.⁶³ She, for her part, possessed no ideological objections to contesting elections, and was encouraged that a group of Rottingdean progressives emerged with whom she could collaborate. As far as one can identify, there was no autonomous socialist or trade union activity in Rottingdean during these years, so that its progressivism was led by Liberals who were, nonetheless, receptive to promptings to adopt radical policies. The stated priorities of the first Rottingdean Parish Council were close to many of those proposed by Herbert Samuel, a radical Liberal, in his *Questions for Parish Council Candidates*, issued by the Fabian Society in August 1894. Although we cannot be certain because she never spoke or wrote on the subject, it is likely that Georgiana would have had some sympathy with ideas expressed by Fabian Society members. She would certainly have been aware of the Fabian Society, as part-architects of progressive policies then being implemented by the London County Council and a number of other metropolitan vestries.

Nevertheless, just as she probably remained outside organised political parties all her life, believing them ultimately to represent the ‘partition of mankind’,⁶⁴ Georgiana did not join the Fabian Society. She also circumscribed her political activity to Rottingdean village, never seeking nomination to the District Council or participation in campaigning organisations such as the Women’s Local Government Society, supporting progressivism at parish council level, in which her friend Rosalind Howard was prominent. The village was a wide enough canvas for Georgiana where she believed, after the Parish Council was established, a real difference could be made.

Initial enthusiasm of the progressive majority was soon countered by stalling and opposition of those with vested interests who meantime organised themselves for future elections. The progressives’ loss of control of the Parish Council

in 1896 came as a major disappointment, and was compounded by the knowledge that it had occurred because of a decline in the turnout of those who had enthusiastically voted for change in 1894. Georgiana's reference to these processes, in her letter to village women during July 1897, went some way toward identifying her own failings, and by association, those of other progressive councillors, to represent Rottingdean's working people, particularly on issues of housing and provision of drains for cottages. The shortage of affordable housing had been raised by the progressives during 1895, but they did not go beyond a feeble appeal to landowners to build new homes.⁶⁵ The poor condition of the village drainage system had been apparent for many years, with successive warnings from the Medical Officer for Health about possible risks as a consequence, of diphtheria and typhoid.⁶⁶ Predictably, during the years immediately preceding local government reform in 1894, Rottingdean's establishment resisted calls for major drainage works, fearing the effect on the local rate. When in control of the Parish Council, the same mentality meant delay, so that work was not completed until 1901, and even then a number of cottages had not been connected to the mains and still relied on common privies or earth closets.⁶⁷

On these matters Georgiana identified a missing voice on the Parish Council, that of 'working women who know by experience exactly what is wanted to make a home healthy and comfortable and therefore would be a useful member of a council one of whose duties is to report unhealthy and wretched dwellings to the Medical Officer of Health'.⁶⁸ In spite of these exhortations, and an increase in the number of women listed on the local government electoral register, no working women were elected to the Council in this period, and in an ironic twist the second woman to win a seat, in 1899, was Penelope Lawrence, a founder of Roedean School. Unable now to influence public hygiene, during 1904 Georgiana turned her attention to matters of personal health with the setting up of a village nursing service.

Her direct involvement with Rottingdean Parish Council and other civic institutions convinced her of the need for working people to represent their own interests. This policy inevitably, in a village setting, required erosion of deference and fostering of participation in decision-making, tasks to which she gave increasing attention after the loss of the progressive majority in 1896. If Georgiana was at one with Morris on what perhaps we can describe as the broadly educative precondition for social change, she differed on the importance of reforms. Unlike Morris, Georgiana believed wholeheartedly in the value of making reforms which improved the lives of working people – she never viewed them as palliatives – and it is not fanciful to suggest that she understood piecemeal change which challenged inequality, protected the environment, improved health, and engendered a sense of citizenship, communality and public service untainted by the cash nexus, particularly in a rural village setting, as prefiguring the socialism

described in *News from Nowhere*. In a letter to Charles Norton in 1906 Georgiana wrote of her desire to make daily life ‘as useful and beautiful as possible’, a sentiment which not only expressed a debt to Morris, but also revealed that alongside an unashamed reformism there was present in her thinking an idealism which, to be properly realised, required ‘a new order of things’.⁶⁹

NOTES

1. Fiona MacCarthy, *The Last Pre-Raphaelite: Edward Burne-Jones and the Victorian Imagination*, London: Faber & Faber, 2011, pp. 303–304. (Afterwards MacCarthy)
2. Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones, Vol. 2, 1868–1898*. London: Macmillan, 1904, p. 110. (Hereafter GBJ and *Memorials*) Georgiana and her son Philip were at Rottingdean early during February 1880, presumably before the Burne-Joneses bought the house; Frank Sharp & Jan Marsh, eds, *The Collected Letters of Jane Morris*, Woodbridge: Boydell, 2012, p. 108. The author is indebted to Jan Marsh for clarification on this point.
3. Traditionally, accounts of the Burne-Joneses’ house purchases in Rottingdean date the naming of North End House as 1889, following acquisition of the adjoining property, but Georgiana’s correspondence reveals that the name was being used by the summer of 1886; GBJ to Charles Norton, 29 August, 1886; Norton Papers, Harvard Houghton Library, Harvard, MS Am 1088 (820). Hereafter Norton Papers. *Page’s Brighton Directory*, 1888, p. 95, confirms the early use of the name. Anthony S. Payne and Eddie Scott, in their *Rottingdean in Old Picture Postcards*, Zaltbomme: European Library, 1895, photograph 56, state this accurately. See also Richard Coates, *A Place Name History of the Parishes of Rottingdean and Ovingdean*, Nottingham: English Place Name Society, 2010, p. 128
4. GBJ to Rosalind Howard, 4 February 1884; Castle Howard Archive, J22/27/172.
5. MacCarthy, p. 395.
6. GBJ to Charles Norton 10 May 1889; Norton Papers (828).
7. GBJ to Charles Norton, 20 September 1890; Norton Papers (834).
8. Printed letter from GBJ, 15 July 1897; Archives of the Rottingdean Preservation Society, The Grange, The Green, Rottingdean, Sussex, BN2 7HA, www.rottingdeanpreservationsociety.org.uk; afterwards Printed Letter. (The author is grateful to the Rottingdean Preservation Society, particularly its Curator Marcus Bagshaw, for access to GBJ’s publications).
9. Angela Thirkell, *Three Houses*. London: Oxford University Press, 1931, pp. 78–79.

10. GBJ, order for copies of *The Aims of Art*, 1 March 1887; Socialist League Archive, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, 903/3.
11. GBJ to Rosalind Howard, 28 March 1893; Castle Howard Archive, J22/27/187.
12. GBJ to Catherine Holiday, 11 November 1890; Huntington Library, California, MSS HM 3238.
13. Leonee Ormond, 'A Leighton Memorial; Frederick Leighton and the South London Art Gallery', in Giles Waterfield, ed, *Art for the People: Culture and Slums in Victorian Britain*, London: Dulwich Picture Gallery, ca 1994, pp. 19–29
14. *Sussex Advertiser*, 5 November 1894. (All newspapers referred to may be consulted at the British Library Newspaper Collection, London).
15. *Sussex Daily News*, 9 November 1894.
16. *East Sussex News*, 7 December 1894.
17. *Sussex Express*, 15 December 1894.
18. MacCarthy, p. 463
19. *An Open Letter to the Electors of Rottingdean about Parish Councils by Lady Burne-Jones, one of the candidates for the Rottingdean Parish Council*, Brighton: J.G. Bishop, *Herald* Office, 1894, p. 8; in archives of the Rottingdean Preservation Society. The *Open Letter* was quoted at length in the *Brighton Herald* of 22 December 1894.
20. *The Argos* (Brighton), 18 December 1894.
21. GBJ to Catherine Holiday, 18 December 1894; Huntington Library, MSS HM 32392.
22. *Sussex Weekly Advertiser*, 16 January 1895.
23. Minutes, Rottingdean Parish Council, 20 April 1895; East Sussex Records Office (Hereafter ESRO), DB/B/54/1.
24. *Sussex Weekly Advertiser*, 16 January 1895.
25. Minutes, Rottingdean Parish Council, 4 July 1895; ESRO, DB/B/54/1.
26. *Return of Owners of Land*, 1873. Vol. II, HMSO, 1875 (Command 1097.I); *What we have done. A second Open Letter to the electors of Rottingdean by Lady Burne-Jones: A Member of the First Rottingdean Parish Council*, 1896, p.2.; archives of the Rottingdean Preservation Society (Afterwards *What we have done*); Royal Commission on Labour: *The Agricultural Labourer*, Vol. I, part 1, HMSO 1893–4 (Command 6894.I), para 45. The report also observed (Para 42) that in respect of allotments '... few counties are less well supplied than Sussex is'.
27. *What we have done*, p.2; Bob Copper, *A Song for Every Season: A Hundred Years of a Sussex Farming Family*, London: Heinemann, 1971, p. 22; Derek Heater, *The Remarkable History of Rottingdean*, Brighton: Dyke Publications, 1993, p. 22.

28. Minutes, Newhaven Rural District Council, 22 February 1895; ESRO, DL/D/211/1
29. Minutes, East Sussex County Council, Roads and Bridges Committee, 13 October 1896; ESRO, C/C/11/5/2.
30. *Sussex Daily News*, 23, 26 and 30 October, 1897.
31. Commons, Open Spaces and Footpaths Preservation Society, *Report of the Executive Committee of Proceedings, 1897–8*, London, p. 64; Lord Eversley, *Commons, Forests and Footpaths*, London: Cassell, 1910, pp. 155–156.
32. Seaburne Moens, *Rottingdean: The Story of a Village* (edited and arranged by Henry Blythe), Brighton: John Beal, 1953, p. 129. (Afterwards Moens); Laurian d’Harcourt, *Rottingdean: The Village*, Seaford: D.D. Publishing, 2001, p. 138. (Afterwards d’Harcourt)
33. Valuation of Steyning Beard’s estate, 1910; ESRO, BRD 5/18. Part of the enclosed land, on the eastern side of the Woodingdean Road by ‘Challoners’ is to this day marked by posts and chains.
34. Corrie Grant, barrister, author of *The Parish Councillor’s Handbook*, London: Liberal Publications Department, 1894, and Liberal Parliamentary candidate, and regular contributor to the regional press on municipal matters, identified early attempts at reform in Rottingdean (*Worcestershire Chronicle*, 26 January 1895).
35. Minutes, Rottingdean Parish Council, 18 September 1896, ESRO, DB/B/54/1.
36. National Archives, Public Record Office PRO/J15/2143
37. Conrad Volk, *Magnus Volk of Brighton*, Chichester: Phillimore, 1971, p. 126; Mary Lago, ed, *Burne-Jones Talking: His Conversations, 1895–1898, Preserved by his Studio Assistant Thomas Rooke*, London: Murray, 1982, p. 121. (Afterwards Lago)
38. d’Harcourt, p. 139.
39. *Second Annual Report of the Brighton and District Footpaths Preservation Society*, 1894; ESRO, Acc. 6849; *East Sussex News* 3 August, 1894
40. GBJ to William Rothenstein, 29 August 1912; Harvard Houghton Library, Harvard, MS Eng 1148 (5654).
41. GBJ to Sydney Cockerell, 17 September 1901, National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, NAL/MSL/1958/693/30 (Afterwards NAL); GBJ to Charles Norton, 12 July 1902, Norton Papers (846); Rudyard Kipling to Charles Norton, 30 November 1902, in Thomas Pinney, ed, *The Letters of Rudyard Kipling, Vol. 3, 1900–1910*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996, p. 114.
42. GBJ to Sydney Cockerell, 27 March 1897; NAL/MSL/1958/693/6.
43. *Sussex Advertiser*, 24 May 1897.
44. Printed Letter, pp. 3–4.
45. GBJ to Jenny Morris, 22 July 1897; British Library Add Ms 45346f.115.

- Fabian Society Tract No. 53, *The Parish Councils Act – What it is and how to work it*, August 1894, written by Herbert Samuel, suggests (p. 5) that ‘the Parish Council is in many ways merely the executive committee of the Parish Meeting’. John Morrison Davidson, in another guide to the Act, went further, arguing that the village meeting should have conferred on it the name of the parish council, thus making every ‘every adult, male and female a parish councillor’; John Morrison Davidson, *The Villagers’ Magna Charta*. London: Reeves, 1894, p. 23.
46. Minutes, Rottingdean Parish Council, 28 March 1901; ESRO, DB/B/54/1.
47. *East Sussex News*, 1 and 22 December 1899; Andrew Lycett, *Rudyard Kipling*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999, p. 327; *East Sussex News*, 19 January 1900.
48. GBJ to Charles Norton, 31 January 1902; Norton Papers (847).
49. *The Western Times*, 18 October 1899; Georgiana and Philip’s membership of the South African Conciliation Committee is confirmed in the ‘List of Names and Addresses of Members’ published by the Committee, and held at the archive of the London School of Economics and Political Science, D(6)/D114.
50. Richard Price, *An Imperial War and the British Working Class: Attitudes and Reactions to the Boer War, 1899–1902*, London: Routledge, 1972, p. 43.
51. *The Standard* (London), 14 June 1900.
52. Moens, p. 118. Moens includes a photograph of the banner *in situ*.
53. Michael Smith, *Rudyard Kipling: The Rottingdean Years*, Brighton: Brownleaf, 1999, p. 7 identifies the confusion over dates.
54. *Sussex Daily News*, 18 June 1902. Points of clarification from the newspaper report include: ‘Peace Monday’ was June 2 1902; ‘a large black board’, it was, in fact, a cloth banner; ‘He’s an absent minded beggar’ – Kipling’s pro-war poem set to music; ‘a notice to the effect that the gymnasium’ – the gymnasium at St Aubyn’s School, a private preparatory school in the village used by the volunteer organisations – the School’s headmaster, Charles Stanford, was a supporter of the Primrose League and from 1900 a Parish Councillor; ‘rifle range’ – according to Kipling this was located on land which required the permission of ‘the Marquis, the Squire and the Farmer’ (Abergavenny [William Nevill], Steyning Beard, and William Brown); Michael Smith, *Kipling’s Sussex*. Brighton: Brownleaf, 2008, p. 208.
55. Sydney Cockerell, note with correspondence NAL/MSL/1958/693/15. For a description of Burne-Jones stained glass windows in St Margaret’s, Rottingdean, see A.C. Sewter, *The Stained Glass of William Morris and his Circle. A Catalogue*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, pp. 163–164.
56. GBJ to Sydney Cockerell, 24 January 1899; NAL/MSL/1958/693/20.
57. GBJ to Charles Norton, 28 November 1904; Norton Papers (857). For

- Georgiana's work on the biography, see the excellent Introduction by John Christian to the republished *Memorials, Vol I, 1833–1867*, London: Lund Humphries, 1993, pp. vii–xxiv.
58. GBJ to Sydney Cockerell, 28 July 1919; NAL/1958/694/50.
 59. GBJ to Sydney Cockerell, 3 April 1899; NAL/1958/693/7.
 60. GBJ to Rosalind Howard, 5 March 1878; Castle Howard Archive J22/27/117.
 61. GBJ to Charles Norton, 16 January, 1884; Norton Papers (806)
 62. Among them: Penelope Fitzgerald, *Edward Burne-Jones*, London: Michael Joseph, 1975, pp. 193–194; Jan Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood*, London: Quartet, 1985, pp. 340–343; Ina Taylor, *Victorian Sisters*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987, pp. 129–130, p. 155; Isabelle Williams, 'Georgiana Burne-Jones and William Morris: A Subtle Influence', *The Journal of the William Morris Society*, Vol. XII, No. 1, 1996, pp. 17–24; Introduction, Norman Kelvin, ed, *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, 4 vols in 5, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984–1996 (Afterwards Kelvin), Vol. 1, 1984, pp. xxxix–xli; Judith Flanders, *A Circle of Sisters*. London: Viking, 2001, pp. 157, 186; MacCarthy, pp. 463–464, 512–513; Lago, p. 118.
 63. See Morris's letters to GBJ, 14 and 20 December 1894; Kelvin, Vol. II, 1988 pp. 241–243.
 64. GBJ to Sydney Cockerell, 1 March 1906; NAL/MSL/1958/693/62.
 65. Minutes, Rottingdean Parish Council, 23 December 1895; ESRO, DB/B/54/1.
 66. Minutes, Newhaven Union Rural Sanitary Authority, 23 February 1894; ESRO DL/D/211/1.
 67. Minutes, Newhaven Rural District Council, 26 April 1901; ESRO DL/D/211/5.
 68. Printed Letter, p. 3.
 69. GBJ to Charles Norton, 22 September 1906; Norton Papers (866).