

Life & Times

Gordon Square Gardens:

a hidden history

A HAVEN CLOSE TO THE COLLEGE

On leaving the RCGP headquarters in Euston Square, turn right, cross Euston Road, walk a couple of blocks down Gordon Street, and you will arrive at a special place — Gordon Square Gardens.

Gordon Square is best known and celebrated because of its history of famous residents, including members of the Bloomsbury group, who *'lived in squares and loved in triangles'*, such as the Bells, the Stephens (Virginia Woolf), Lytton Strachey, and the economist John Maynard Keynes and his Russian ballerina wife Lydia Lopokova.¹ Less well known, there is something else quite special about Gordon Square Gardens.

Its twin garden in Tavistock Square, 200 metres to the east (across from BMA House), has a formal Georgian design, dividing the space into four quadrants. In stark contrast, Gordon Square Gardens only has right angles in its corners, where they cannot be avoided. The rest of the space has little formal design, with curving paths, open grass, and scattered trees. The effect is informal and relaxing, with an ambience that is unusual in Central London. A kiosk selling Viennese coffee and light lunches makes it a pleasant place to sit for a while

Georgiana Russell (née Gordon), Duchess of Bedford by Samuel William Reynolds, after John Hoppner, published 1803 © National Portrait Gallery, London.



An image of Gordon Square Gardens as taken by the author.

and reflect with WH Davies: *'What is this life if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare?'*² Many of the surrounding street names, such as Woburn Place, Endsleigh Street, Tavistock Square, and Russell Square, are familiar to doctors visiting the BMA and RCGP. Less well known is their common connection to the Duchy of Bedford, which owned and developed this part of London in the early 19th century. Woburn Abbey is the main residence of the dukes of Bedford. Tavistock and Endsleigh were Bedford properties in Devon. The family name is Russell.

THE BEDFORDS

Gordon Square was named by the 6th Duke of Bedford after his wife's family. His mother-in-law was born Jane Maxwell in Edinburgh, the daughter of minor aristocrats, whose notoriety began as a teenager riding a pig down Edinburgh's High Street. By marrying the Duke of Gordon, she became a duchess, based at Castle Gordon near Fochabers in Banffshire. On entering high society in London, she entertained riotously, wearing tartan when it was still proscribed, introducing Highland dancing to the capital, and becoming a favourite of George III. Famously, she won a wager with the Prince Regent, recruiting 1000 men to the Gordon Highlanders by offering each recruit a guinea and a kiss. After her

death in 1812 she was buried at Kinrara near Aviemore where her memorial stone records, on her instructions, the marriages of her four surviving daughters — to three dukes and a marquis, a matchmaking achievement that may never be equalled.

The youngest daughter, Georgina Gordon, married the 6th Duke of Bedford, one of the richest men in England, followed her mother into London society, and lived flamboyantly, extravagantly, and generously at home and abroad. The Russells were Whigs. As the Duke's second wife, she was stepmother to Lord John Russell, who steered the 1832 Reform Act through parliament, became prime minister, and whose grandson was the philosopher Bertrand Russell. She had a long affair with Edwin Landseer, the Victorian painter, who was 20 years her junior and by whom she is said to have had a child.

Mother and daughter often returned to Scotland for prolonged stays at Kinrara, a cottage, and the Doune, a small country house, which still stand in the glorious surroundings of pine forests, heather moors, green pastures, lochs, hills, and mountains next to the river Spey. They frequently entertained, subjecting visitors to traditional Highland hospitality, with whisky, fiddling, piping, and dancing in large measure.

The 6th Duchess had a penchant for rural tranquillity, which with the Duke's

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Books

money she was able to recreate, most notably at their retreat at Endsleigh (now a prize-winning country hotel) on the edge of Dartmoor. She also had built a remote hamlet of huts and bothies (of which only vestiges remain) far up Glen Feshie, on the western side of the Cairngorm mountains, where she and Landseer could disappear for weeks at a time.

In those days, it took 3 weeks to get to their Scottish retreats. Now, leaving every weekday at 21.15, the Caledonian sleeper from Euston does it in 10 hours, the station announcement being nothing less than a tone poem (*'calling at Stirling, Dunblane, Gleneagles, Perth, Dunkeld and Birnam, Pitlochry, Blair Atholl, Dalwhinnie, Newtonmore, Kingussie, Aviemore, and Inverness*).

Gordon Square Gardens were designed in the early 1830s, with an informal layout including curved paths. Although it was 60 years before the current layout was fully established, it is tempting to suggest that it was the Duchess's wish to create a rural idyll in London, in keeping with their properties in Scotland and Devon.

Robert Burns, one of whose early patrons was the Duchess of Gordon and who visited Castle Gordon in 1787 when Georgina Gordon was 6, caught the sentiment precisely:³

'My heart's in the Highlands, my heart is not here

My heart's in the Highlands, a chasing the deer

Chasing the wild deer, and following the roe
My heart's in the Highlands, wherever I go.'

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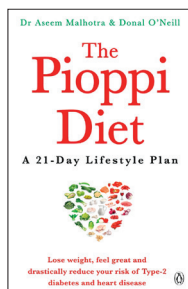
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The Pioppi Diet: A 21-Day Lifestyle Plan Aseem Malhotra and Donal O'Neill

Penguin, 2017, PB, 384pp, £8.99, 978-1405932639



IT'S NOT JUST A DIET: IT'S A LIFESTYLE

This is not just a diet book; it's a healthcare manifesto.

Both my parents are Maltese, and although I have spent the vast majority of my life outside Malta I return on a frequent basis to visit my elderly mother. At 87 years old and despite recent falls she is still going strong. She enjoys playing bridge and taking the sea air. She comes from a long line of women in her family who have lived well into their 90s. I am not sure the same is going to be said of the next generation on this tiny, beautiful Mediterranean island. Malta leads the European obesity tables according to the World Health Organization report of 2015 and obesity is the major public health problem facing this island.¹ The problem does not just lie with adults though; nearly 40% of all children are overweight or obese.² So, despite being in the heart of the Mediterranean, the people do not practise what they preach; no longer are they eating a diet rich in olive oil, fish, vegetables, and fruit. Instead, it's more likely to be fast food, fizzy drinks, pastizzi (a traditional savoury pastry filled with ricotta or mushy peas), or my childhood favourite, deep-fried pastry covered with sugar. A short hop across the Mediterranean is a small southern Italian village, Pioppi, which is the subject of perhaps one of the most jargon-free, informative, and game-changing books on health I have ever read.

The Pioppi Diet written jointly by a London-based cardiologist and an ex-Northern Irish international athlete and documentary filmmaker, Donal O'Neill, marries the secrets of the world's healthiest village with the

latest cutting-edge medical, nutritional, and exercise science to bust many myths prevalent in today's weight loss and health industries.

The book explores, using examples drawn from the 200 or so residents of Pioppi (whose longevity is ascribed to their healthy diet), why we are all getting fatter. This is not simply down to the food industry, nor to declining levels of exercise, but to the complex, interrelating factors linked to our relationship with food, diet, and health. Included in this is the confusing and conflicting messages we get around nutrition, especially on sugar and fat, and why our obsession with lowering cholesterol — as if this was the end in itself — has paradoxically made our health worse.

The book is not just a guide for individuals to rapidly improve their health from making simple lifestyle changes but also explains why policy changes to improve the food environment and our dependence on medicines also needs to happen. In addition, a revision of dietary guidelines is required to reverse the UK's obesity epidemic and sustain the NHS.

Professor Dame Sue Bailey, the Chair of the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, has described the book as a *'must have for every household and a must read for every medical student and doctor'* — I couldn't agree more.

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<http://www.pioppiprotocol.com/medical-facts/>

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