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. 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 and reflect with WH Davies: ‘What is this life if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare?’ 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.

The Bedford 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 the 6th Duchess 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.

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

‘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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