Geoffrey Fletcher’s Islington Impressions in time

“Islington, like St Paul’s, is something that has to be seen for oneself: in fact it is a total experience, requiring all the senses and all the faculties”
Geoffrey Fletcher. Geoffrey Fletcher’s London (1968)

The Islington connection
Geoffrey Fletcher was a renowned artist, author and connoisseur of ‘off-beat’ London. He came to love Islington in particular, recording its buildings, streets and people in a life-long affair with this north London district.

In appreciation, the artist donated many of his works and personal ephemera to Islington Library Service. Drawing from this collection, now held at Islington Local History Centre, Fletcher’s work is featured in this retrospective display, which highlights the artist’s impressions of the area captured during the 1960s and 70s.

Geoffrey Fletcher
Born in Bolton, Lancashire on 3 April 1923, Geoffrey Scowcroft Fletcher arrived in London in the summer of 1945 to study at the prestigious Slade School of Art.

As a student, Fletcher lived in the attic of a boarding house in Bloomsbury and it was from here that he first discovered a London overlooked. He embarked day and night on sketching expeditions, drawn to the unusual and eccentric sights away from the tourist track; more interested in drawing ‘on the hoof’ than attending formal classes. The artist later made his home in Ashtead, Surrey.

A self-determined, passionate and successful artist, Fletcher produced a prolific volume of sketches, drawings and paintings. He also wrote and illustrated many books highlighting his particular interests, including eighteen titles with London as their subject.

Geoffrey Fletcher died in Bolton on 22 June 2004.
“Fletcher’s London is both old-fashioned and new-fangled. It is a place of a million small, entirely worthless happenings suddenly observed and their flavour extracted on the instant.” Geoffrey Fletcher. Geoffrey Fletcher’s London (1968)

Fletcher as artist
An accomplished artist, Fletcher’s favourite medium was pen and ink, the tools of the architectural draughtsman. His formal training took place not only at the prestigious Slade School of Art, but also in Italy where he won a scholarship to study at the British School at Rome.

Whilst at Slade he studied with Sir Albert Richardson, a professor at the Bartlett School of Architecture. This opportunity encouraged and inspired the development of Fletcher’s style and his extraordinary understanding of perspective, allowing him to sketch quickly and accurately on the bustling streets of London.

Fletcher believed that only by drawing on the street, in front of the subject, could the artist capture it faithfully. Once he had put enough down on paper he would then seek out a traditional London café to add the final touches.

Fletcher as writer
His drawings began appearing in the Manchester Guardian in 1950 and he was hired in 1958 by The Daily Telegraph to supplement articles with his sketches, most notably the column ‘London Day by Day’ to which he contributed for the next thirty years.

With a written voice as recognisable as his artistic style, Fletcher authored many books. The London Nobody Knows, his most well known book, was published in 1962 and made into a documentary film featuring the British actor James Mason in 1967. No ordinary guidebook, Fletcher leads the reader on tours around London to the overlooked corners he found so intriguing. He often would impart a snippet of history, a personal reflection or anecdote as accompaniment to his drawings.

Conservationist

"Architecture belongs to those who built it and to those who will come after us, ourselves being lease-holders merely, whose only task is to conserve and hand over" Geoffrey Fletcher. Changing London (1969)

Disappearing London
The majority of Fletcher's art and writings derive from his self-confessed 'obsession' with London and a passion for historical architecture.

During the post-war building boom of the 1960s and 70s, Fletcher's contributions to The Daily Telegraph became increasingly focused on the imminent destruction and loss of disregarded, but historic, buildings and street furniture.

His work was enjoyed by those eager to see a different way of looking at a familiar city, and also by those in opposition to the changing landscapes of London. Fletcher did not dislike change and didn't necessarily equate new with bad and old with good. The test for Fletcher was quality and it saddened him to see so much disappear.

Demolition and preservation
Through the column 'London Day by Day', written under the pseudonym 'Peterborough' and illustrated by Fletcher, with some articles written by the artist, he brought much needed attention to the planned demolitions. Although mostly unsuccessful in halting many plans, there were small victories for Fletcher and his like-minded contemporaries. His favourite achievement was the preservation of a Patent Sewer Gas Ventilating Lamp, situated in an alley near the Strand's Savoy Hotel, which still survives in 2011.

By highlighting these issues to such a wide audience, conservationists considered him a huge asset to their cause.
“Whenever I am low in spirits... I head to Islington, one of the most intriguing of all London areas” Geoffrey Fletcher. Offbeat in London (1966)

**Inspirating Islington**

As a favoured location for Fletcher to draw and write about, he referred to Islington as having a “many-sided” character. He found the combination of affluence and poverty, and the resulting variety of buildings and people that made up the area, intriguing and inspiring.

A typical excursion to Islington would begin for Fletcher at Islington Green, by the statue of Hugh Myddelton, and from there he could decide what kind of experience he would like that day; Islington offered so much choice.

Fletcher often described his encounters with the area. He admired the “seedy though perfectly proportioned terraces” and “Bloomsbury-like” houses that line the many squares; he especially found Exmouth Market, off Farringdon Road, endlessly fascinating. Pie shops, second-hand clothes shops and amusement arcades all represented the character of Islington for Fletcher, and he captured them all in his drawings.

**Walter Sickert**

Walter Sickert (1860-1942), fellow artist and Islington resident, was a great inspiration to Fletcher. His influence is visible in the younger artist’s work and writings. He enjoyed stumbling upon ‘Sickert’s Islington’ by following in his footsteps; down Duncan Terrace to Sickert’s former studio on Noel Road or through atmospheric Barnsbury.

Islington seemed to bring Geoffrey Fletcher comfort and familiarity. His passion for the area allowed him to possess the ability to see through the encroaching aspects of modernity and imagine the past as it was, an impression in time.

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**Geoffrey Fletcher. Spring Morning, Islington Green.** Ink drawing. 1968. 30 x 22cm. The drawing’s focal point is the statue of Sir Hugh Myddelton, erected on the green in 1862.

**Left: Geoffrey Fletcher. The hanging gardens of Islington.** Ink drawing. 1968. 35 x 27cm.

**Right: Walter Sickert. The hanging gardens of Islington.** Original print. 1929. 16 x 10cm.


**Lloyd’s Dairy, Amwell Street [Clerkenwell].** Pen and wash. 1971. 37 x 27cm.