



THE GISSING JOURNAL

Volume LVII, Number 1
January 2023

Gissing and Hastings

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Type 'Gissing and Hastings' into Google and the first references that appear are to George Everett Hastings, the University of Kansas author and critic who, in 1931, co-edited *Brownie*, a collection of short stories first published in *The Chicago Tribune* in 1877 by or attributed to Gissing. As Markus Neacey has recently demonstrated, many of these (and other) attributions are erroneous. Gissing wrote 'Brownie,' but certainly not three, and probably none of the other six stories packaged with it by Hastings and his co-editors.¹ 'Gissing and Hastings' also yields genealogical references to William, Thomas, and Hugh de Hastings, variously associated with the Norfolk village of Gissing, from which George's family name derives. However, regular readers of *The Gissing Journal* will not be surprised to learn that this article is about neither of these 'Gissing and Hastings' connections. Instead, pursuing my topographic fascination with *places* Gissing visited, lived in and/or wrote about, I focus here on the town of Hastings in East Sussex.

Hastings is probably still best known for the Battle of Hastings in 1066 which, in reality, took place several miles to the north-west, where Battle Abbey is situated. But a consequence of the Norman Conquest was the building of Hastings Castle on cliffs overlooking the English Channel and the development of a port and associated new town (now the Old Town) in the valley of the Boume, sheltered between East and West Hills (see Figure 1). Unfortunately, the town was not well protected from the sea: much of the castle collapsed into the sea, the port was battered into submission and the town was flooded regularly. For several hundred years, Hastings survived on a beach-launched fishing fleet and a reputation for smuggling until, in the 1790s, the new fashion for sea bathing prompted the beginnings of a tourist industry and the expansion of the town westwards. From barely 3,000 people in 1801, Hastings rocketed to nearly 50,000 by the 1880s, acquiring the accoutrements of a seaside resort including elegant crescents and squares, boarding houses and hotels, baths and bathing machines, public gardens and, in 1872, a 910-foot long pier.² Its principal attraction for many visitors, including successive versions of the Gissing family, was its reputation as a health resort:

The salubrity and mildness of Hastings, arising from its protection from the north and east winds, render it peculiarly eligible as a place of residence for invalids, and these advantages, with the openness of the coast, and smoothness of its beach, have long made it a fashionable and much frequented bathing place. At low water, the fine level beach affords a healthy and fashionable promenade, and from the high grounds the prospects are richly diversified with scenery of luxuriant cultivation, and of boldly romantic character.³

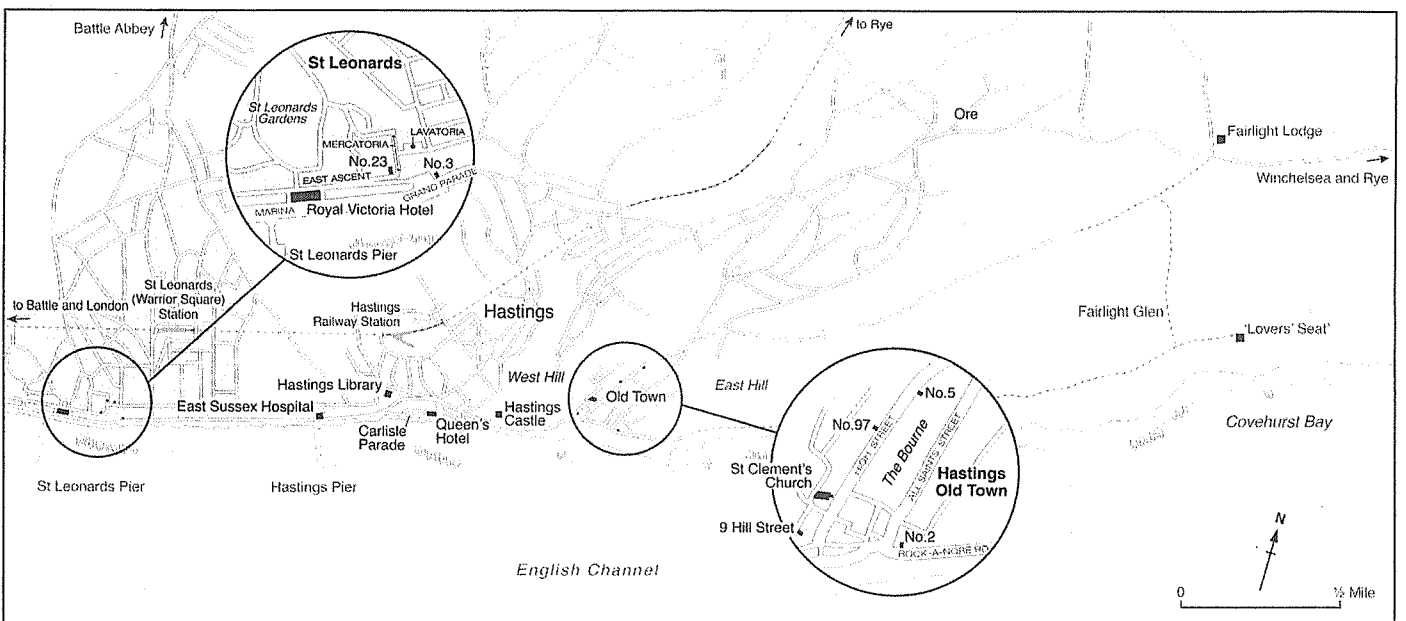


Figure 1: Map of Hastings and St Leonards, c. 1880-95.
Drawn by Miles Irving (UCL Geography Drawing Office).

First Encounters

In limbo between sitting the Oxford Junior Local Examination in May 1872 and learning that he had a scholarship to transfer to Owens College later that year, George composed poetry, including “After the Battle of Hastings,” dated 10 August 1872, a competent if conventional meditation on the fate of “the noblest minded warriors” lying dead on the battlefield.⁴ But it was nearly eight years later that George visited Battle Abbey, during a seaside holiday with his first wife, Nell, whom he had married eight months earlier, when they stayed for about a fortnight from 24th June to early July 1880 at 97, High Street, Hastings. On their visit to the abbey, George was both annoyed and amused by an illiterate guide who recited the history of the place parrot-fashion with little understanding of what he was declaiming.⁵

We can gain an impression of Hastings at the time of George and Nell’s first visit from paintings made at roughly the same time. William Henry Borrow’s ‘Hastings from the East Cliff,’ painted in 1881, depicts the soft sandstone cliffs, the Old Town in the centre of the painting, the castle ruins perched high above, and the nineteenth-century town winding its way around the West Cliff and into the middle distance, towards the new pier (Figure 2). Frederic Winkfield’s less ambitious view in the opposite direction, from the pier towards the castle, offers a metropolitan view of Hastings. Winkfield was active from the mid-1870s into the early twentieth century, specialising in marine landscapes and living throughout this period in Britannia Road, Fulham, less than half-an-hour’s walk from Gissing’s early 1880s Chelsea home in Oakley Crescent (now Gardens). Winkfield shows the Queen’s Hotel, opened in 1862, on the left of his painting, with a variety of yachts and small boats, either beached or just setting sail, and a pair of bathing machines (Figure 3).

While in Hastings, George and Nell went for a sail several times on a yacht that took holiday-makers on trips twice daily. George was pleasantly surprised to discover that, despite “a fairly rough sea,” Nell was a good sailor, and had “not been sick at all.” He also indulged in sea bathing, and “had a glorious walk from Hastings to Winchester & Rye,” visiting the “four great gates” of medieval Winchelsea, “still in admirable preservation,” and enthusing about both towns’ parish churches.⁶ Evidently, he fared better than “A Visitor” from London who, two weeks earlier, had written to the *Hastings and St Leonards Observer*, complaining that he had found both churches closed to visitors. A cleaner in the church at Rye reported that the sexton feared that if the church was left unlocked “the place ’ud be full of all sorts of people!” At Winchelsea, neither the rector nor the churchwarden had a key to the church and the sexton, in the middle of his tea, “did not appear to relish being disturbed” and “seemed inclined to be rude.”⁷ Perhaps it was the deluge of rebuttals in the following week’s newspaper that prompted George to visit for himself. George and Nell had arrived in “glorious weather,” and when he

wrote to his brother, Algernon, on 30th June, he reported that it had rained “almost for the first time” since their arrival, but by 7th July the weather was so bad that he and Nell returned to their London lodgings in Hanover Street, Islington.⁸

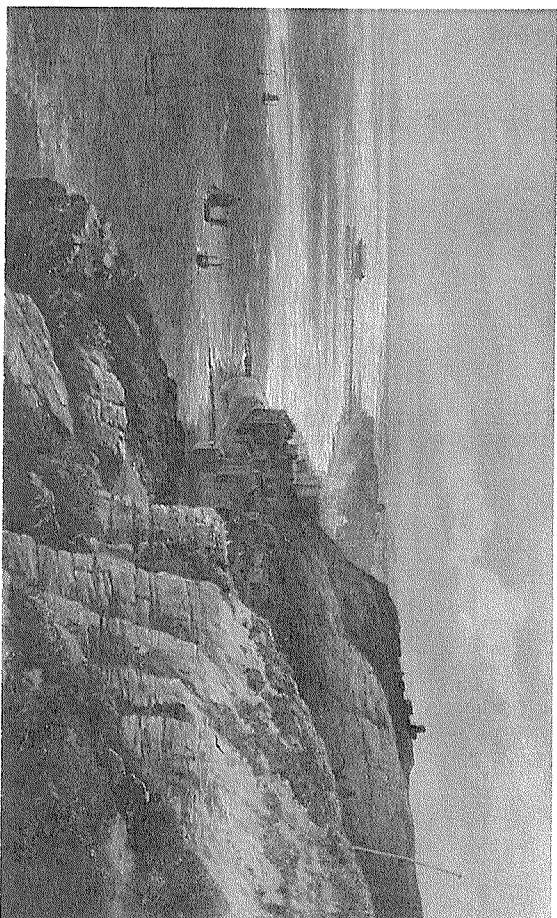


Figure 2: William Henry Borrow, ‘Hastings from the East Cliff’ (1881). Oil on canvas, 43.7 by 73.1 cm. Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.

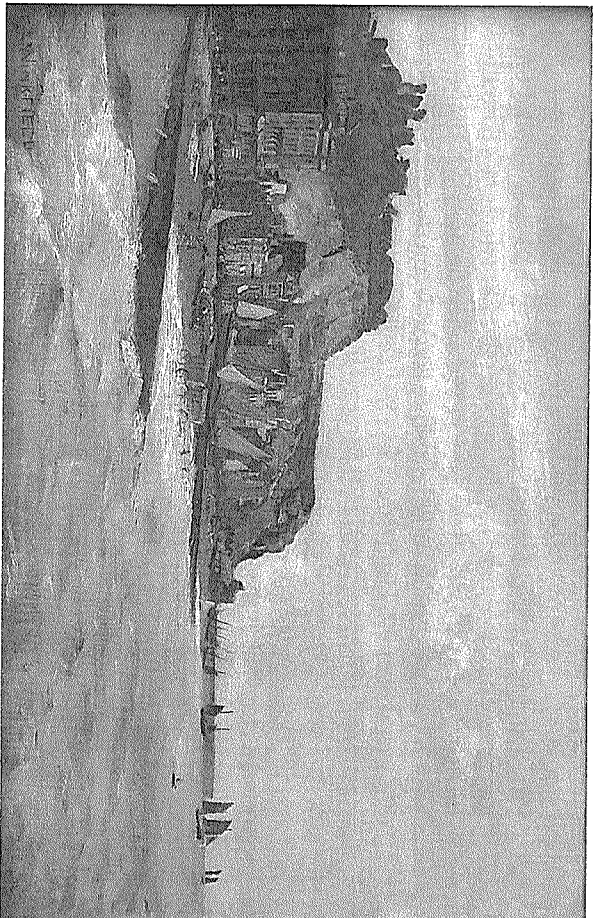


Figure 3: Frederic Winkfield, ‘The Seafront with Castle Hill, Hastings’ (no date, c. 1890s). Oil on canvas, 19.5 by 30 cm. Private Collection.



Figure 4: 97, High Street, Hastings.
Author's photograph (October 2021).

Frederick Poole, a master plumber, and his family, comprising his wife, four young children and a teenage domestic servant. Poole had been brought up in 9, Hill Street, a few hundred yards away, just south of St Clement's Church. He seems to have moved to 97, High Street in 1874 when he married. In the 1878 Sussex directory, he was listed as "plumber, glazier & painter, 97 High st & 9 Hill st."⁹ He was still at 97, High Street in 1891, but from 1901 to 1934 he was back at his parents' old house at 9, Hill Street. His conservatism with regard to moving house seems perfectly in tune with a disclaimer he sent to local newspapers in January 1884 explaining that he was *not* the F. Poole who had been reported as present at the annual meeting of the Hastings and St Leonards Radical Association!¹⁰

In December 1877 and again in early 1878, the *Hastings and St Leonards Times* carried advertisements of a "large Front SITTING ROOM and BED ROOM" to let at 97, High Street, but this was "for a permanency. Suitable for a lady or gentleman," not a holiday let for a young couple seeking a health cure (for Nell) and a delayed honeymoon.¹¹ How would George and Nell have found their lodgings? Certainly not in advance of their arrival in Hastings, as George's letter to Algermon on 23rd June testifies.¹² Nor was it a house that you

97, High Street is towards the top of the street, which forms the spine of today's Old Town, the part of the street farthest from the sea obviously geared to a tourist economy. According to the 1881 census, the only lodging-house keepers on High Street were at nos. 5, 10, 13, 100, and 116 High Street.

There was also a boarding house at 23, High Street (with 6 boarders at the time of the census). Street numbers run from 1 to 61, north to south, on the east side of the street, and from 62 to 118, south to north, on the west side, so all these lodgings were at the north end, away from the sea. However, we can infer that there were other houses where lodgers were accommodated, such as no. 97, which in 1881 was occupied by

would pass – and see a sign advertising rooms to let – as you walked from the railway station to the seafront. There must have been some other reason why George sought out lodgings in this area, far from the usual run of seaside boarding houses.

In 1854 Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal had stayed at 5, High Street, Hastings, just across the street from no. 97. Their tortuous relationship seems to have cooled during the following years, but when news reached Rossetti in April 1860 that Lizzie was staying in Hastings, seriously ill, he hastened to her side, and obtained a marriage license. Their wedding ceremony was briefly postponed because she was too ill to walk down the aisle, but on 23rd May the marriage was solemnised by the Rev. Thomas Nightingale, rector of St Clement's Church, in the absence of any friends or family, not dissimilar to – though for different reasons from – George's marriage to Nell Harrison at St James's, Hampstead Road in October 1879.¹³ Elizabeth Siddal's history of ill health and her struggle against laudanum addiction also prefigure Nell's own problems. St Clement's Church is just off the west side of Hastings High Street. Whether or not Gissing knew about 5, High Street, the wedding in St Clement's was public knowledge, so perhaps a site of 'pilgrimage,' and a reason for the Gissings to visit Hastings beyond its reputation as a "popular seaside resort [...] much frequented by invalids [like both Lizzie Siddal and Nell]."¹⁴

Unfortunately, 1880 predates any evidence we have of Gissing's enthusiasm for Rossetti, which only emerged a couple of years later in his letters, visits to galleries, reading and writing. No. 5, High Street had not been a lodging house in 1851 (the census closest to Rossetti's first visit), when it was occupied by Thomas Elliott, a master plumber and painter and his upwardly mobile family (his sons' occupations were returned as a "professor of music" and a lawyer's clerk), although there was also a young annuitant from Lancashire lodging with the family. The Elliotts were briefly succeeded by Sarah Elphick and her husband, who seem to have moved to no. 5 to run it as a lodging house, Mr Elphick being an invalid and unable to pursue his occupation as a shipwright.¹⁵ In 1855, after the departure of Rossetti and Siddal, the Elphicks moved again, intriguingly to live next door to the Elliotts in Carlisle Parade, a much more stylish 4-storey seafront terrace newly built in 1854, a mixture of middle-class family homes and boarding houses: the new, more visible form of seaside holiday accommodation. By 1858, when *Melville's Directory & Gazetteer of Sussex* was published, no. 5, High Street was a lodging house run by Mrs S. Breach. Sarah Breach was still there in 1861 and 1871, an elderly widowed "lodging-house keeper," living with her three unmarried daughters, and one lodger in residence in 1861, three in 1871. By 1881 a younger, but also widowed lodging-house keeper had taken over, with one "boarder" and two "lodgers" staying with her.

Hastings in *The Unclasped*

Gissing was sufficiently attracted by Hastings to send Osmond Waymark and Ida Starr there in his next published novel, *The Unclasped*, although it was nearly three years after his and Nell's holiday before he embarked on writing what he provisionally entitled 'The Burden of Life.'¹⁶ As Delany and Colligan note in their Introduction to *The Unclasped: The 1884 Text*, Gissing wrote the novel "under the spell of Dante Gabriel Rossetti."¹⁷ Indeed, he was by then living in Chelsea and enthusing about his new home's proximity to Rossetti's own home on Cheyne Walk. Ida Starr "resembles the Pre-Raphaelite temptresses who figure obsessively in Rossetti's paintings and poems."¹⁸ Ida had visited Hastings as a child with her mother and when, later, she "caught the cry of the captive sea-gulls [captive in the aviary at London Zoo, close to her London home, and a particular source of pleasure to her], it brought back marvellous memories of the ocean flashing in the sun, of the music of breakers, of the fresh smell of the brine."¹⁹ Unsurprisingly, when the young adult Ida comes to reassess her life as a prostitute and decides to go "out of London for a few days, perhaps to the seaside," she opts not for Weymouth, where her flatmate's parents live, but for Hastings: "I went there once, when I was a child, with my mother [...] I had rather go there than anywhere else."²⁰ Waymark asks to accompany her, though they stay chastely in separate lodgings.

Waymark and Ida sit on the beach together as Ida recounts her life story, explaining how circumstances had effectively forced her into her current way of life. Ida is in need of peace and quiet and time to reflect on her own future, and although they meet again on Hastings Pier at sunset, she keeps Waymark at a distance, informs him that she must return the next morning to London, and then, in the closing pages of Book III, the mid-point of the originally three-volume, six-book, novel, she ventures alone onto the beach at midnight. Having ascertained that she is unobserved, she swims naked in the sea. In the 1884 edition, but not in that of 1895, from which he removed much of the more reflective and philosophical observations, Gissing refers to her as "Venus Anadyomene."²¹ Like Venus, she restores her virginity by bathing in the sea. Delany and Colligan note that in May 1884, Gissing saw a "splendid picture" by Philip Calderon, entitled 'Fresh as Foam.'²² Presumably this is the same picture, exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery, that the critic in *The Portfolio* referred to as 'The Birth of Venus,' noting that "the buoyant figure of Venus seems to rise and fall in the waves as one looks."²³ The critic in *The Academy* labelled the picture 'Aphrodite.' He criticised the title, observing that "[h]is [Calderon's] divinity may be 'fresh as the foam,' but she is not 'Idalian Aphrodite beautiful,' the goddess, in her lightest mood, should not be so entirely human – nay, modern and Parisian – in aspect."²⁴ Idaliun, in Cyprus, was a centre for the worship of Aphrodite, so naming his heroine Ida was

another way in which Gissing identified her with Venus, washing away her life as a prostitute to be reborn, virginally fit for a Victorian romantic novel.

Although this confirms Gissing's enthusiasm for the imagery, this particular 'Venus' was too late to influence the text of *The Unclasped*, which was published only a month after Gissing saw the painting (although it appears from the dating of *The Portfolio* review that the picture was on display by the time Gissing was putting the finishing touches to the novel in February 1884). But there were numerous other paintings of 'Venus Anadyomene' for Gissing to draw on, and the author hardly needed a literal image to fuel his imagination in writing Chapter 4 of Book Three of *The Unclasped*.

Another critical detail, retained in the 1895 edition of *The Unclasped*, is that the place where Waymark and Ida sit together on the beach, and she narrates her troubled past, was not near the centre of the town, or close to the pier, but "some two miles up the shore eastward from Hastings."²⁵ Likewise, Ida's midnight bath occurs after she has walked along the deserted beach "towards the place where she had spent the afternoon with Waymark, then onwards still further to the east till there was but a narrow space between the water and the cliffs."²⁶ This stretch of the coast, between two and three miles east of the town, was (and is) not only quieter – so no fear of being overheard while Ida tells her story or observed while she strips naked in the moonlight – but was especially associated with the Pre-Raphaelites. Holman Hunt painted 'Our English Coasts' (1852), also known as 'The Lost Sheep' or 'Strayed Sheep,' a picture as redolent with religious symbolism as his equally famous 'The Scapgoat' and 'The Light of the World,' on the cliffs above Covehurst Bay, two miles east of Hastings.²⁷ Coincidentally, from 1978 to 1999 Covehurst Bay was officially a 'naturist beach.' In practice, it still is.²⁸ This stretch of the coast was also the location of the 'Lovers' Seat,' a natural ledge part way down the cliff face, supposedly named for forbidden meetings in the 1780s between the daughter of a wealthy country gentleman and a local customs officer considered by her father as an unworthy suitor, but subsequently employed by countless other couples as a private meeting place.²⁹

Fairlight Glen meets the sea at Covehurst Bay and, at the head of the glen, only a quarter-mile inland, is 'The Dripping Well,' a veil-like waterfall, popular with Victorian artists and reputedly (though with no obvious evidence) a source of inspiration for Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market.' Hunt and Millais both stayed at Fairlight Lodge, a substantial house at the head of the glen.³⁰

Almost certainly Gissing visited Covehurst and Fairlight in 1880. In a letter to his brother he commented the "fine cliffs, broken here & there by wonderfully wooded glens" and "the country inland" as "beautiful in the extreme, undulating incessantly & gloriously green."³¹ In the town, he also visited a house with the inscription "R. Barry, Collector of British Ferns."³² Gissing's father had authored *The Ferns and Fern Allies of Wakefield and Its Neighbourhood* (1862) and

George retained an interest in ferns, as reflected, for example, in his references to ferns in *Born in Exile*.³³ Richard Barry, occupation “fern collector,” of indeterminate age (44 in 1861, 50 in 1871, and still 50 in 1881), hailed from County Cork in southern Ireland, but had lived in Hastings for at least 20 years. In 1881, with his wife, whom he had married in Dover in 1856, and two teenage sons, both listed as “sellers of pipe clay,” he lived at 2, Rock-a-Nore Road, on the east side of the Old Town facing fishermen’s huts and on the way to the beach and glens east of the town. It hardly needs adding that the moist, wooded glens were ideal environments for ferns.³⁴

While George’s first visit to Hastings had been in 1880, it was not until late in 1883 that he completed *The Unclasssed*. In the interim, he had made several other brief visits to the town. In 1881 he reported that, for the sake of her “incessant illnesses,” Nell would go to Hastings on 2nd July, where she would live “for some little time, not improbably right away through the coming winter.” He planned to travel to Hastings with her to “see her comfortably housed,” relying on “[p]eople whom she knows,” who expected to be in the town for several weeks, to help her get accustomed to her new situation. He stayed one night and returned to London on the Sunday evening.³⁵ However, his hopes of a trouble-free few months soon evaporated. Nell, claiming “not to know what to do with herself alone” in Hastings and that she felt “vastly better in health,” returned to London after only a month at the coast.³⁶

Hastings next appears in Gissing’s correspondence on Monday 2nd April 1883 when he wrote to Algernon that he was going to Hastings the next day, planning to stay there until the following Saturday. On this occasion it was his own health – a “general seediness” and an “inability to do a stroke of any work whatever” – that was leading him to the seaside: “The weather is all at once very glorious, & a breath of the sea will prob’ set me up for the rest of the year.”³⁷ His next letter, dated 10th April, indicates that he had certainly been away from London, but more likely visiting his brother in Wakefield than staying in Hastings: he thanks Algernon “for what Mr Mlcawber would have called the temporary accommodation” and he refers to setting foot “on King’s X platform on Sunday night,” not a station he would have used if travelling from Hastings to Chelsea.³⁸ However, it seems he was in Hastings on 25th July, the place and date inscribed at the foot of a poem, ‘Hope in Vain,’ which was first published in Edward Clodd’s *Memories* (1916).³⁹ The poem recounts a brief love affair, or perhaps just the fantasy of an affair. Did he go to Hastings in order to write it, to recapture a memory from the past, or was he inspired to write it once he had arrived in the town on some other business, or even as a result of a ‘brief encounter’ that day? There are no clues in his correspondence, although a letter to Algernon on 21st July indicated that if the weather was fine, he was planning on joining “the Cowards [his Chelsea landlady and her husband] in a party to Kingston” on the 24th.⁴⁰ Was the following day’s

trip to Hastings in any way related? Or perhaps the visit was prompted by the need to visit Hastings to check some detail for inclusion in the Hastings episode in *The Unclasssed*. However, if George’s progress report to his brother on 23rd May is accurate, he must have reached that point in the story around April or early May, just at the time he was most obsessed with Rossetti.⁴¹

At the Grosvenor (library and art gallery in New Bond Street), the home of the Aesthetic Movement, Gissing “obtained the Rossetti” for his brother in January 1883,⁴² he visited Rossetti collections at the Royal Academy and Burlington Arts Club early in February,⁴³ later the same month he alluded to Rossetti’s house at 16, Cheyne Walk, very close to his own lodgings in Oakley Crescent, in a letter to his sister, Margaret;⁴⁴ in May he obtained through his friend John George Black’s relatives in Germany a prized edition of Rossetti’s poems published in Leipzig by Tauchnitz; and he invested in the May 1883 edition of *The Portfolio* which contained high-quality reproductions of three of Rossetti’s paintings, all images of the type of womanhood that Ida represented in *The Unclasssed*.⁴⁵ He continued to refer to Rossetti in his correspondence throughout the 1880s, finally, in 1890, rebutting Bertz’ apparent criticism of Rossetti’s art by noting that “both his pictures & his poems have had a very great influence on my life & thought.” He regarded his first encounters with Rossetti’s work as “a dawn of beautiful imaginings.”⁴⁶ He also, though we cannot really estimate when, copied a stanza of ‘Soothsaying,’ a Rossetti poem that postdates the Tauchnitz collection, into his notebook, ‘Extracts from My Readings’⁴⁷ and in Book V of *The Unclasssed* he has Maud read Rossetti’s poems on Waymark’s recommendation.⁴⁸ ‘Soothsaying,’ the poems that Maud reads with their “perfect beauty” and “rapturous purity of ideal passion,” and Gissing’s own passionate ‘Hope in Vain’ are all cut from the same cloth.

Even if Gissing knew little about Rossetti when he took Nell to Hastings in 1880, he cannot have been unaware of Rossetti’s associations with the place by the time in 1883 when he composed key scenes in *The Unclasssed* and revisited the town.

Ida tells Waymark that she is returning to London urgently “by the express at five minutes past nine” next morning. Waymark says he will take the same train, but when he gets to the station she is not there and he discovers that she had left her lodgings “very early that morning” and travelled “by an earlier train.”⁴⁹ Knowing Gissing’s care over the details of travelling by train, we should not be surprised to discover that in July 1880 there really was an express at 9.05 a.m. from Hastings, arriving at London Bridge at 10.42 a.m., and earlier, but much slower trains at 7.25 and 8.25.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, the times in 1880 had been adjusted slightly from 1878, when the express left at 9.00, and 1879, when it left at 9.10.⁵¹ Evidently, the South Eastern Railway had been tinkering with its schedules to determine just how quickly it was possible to cover the 60 miles

between Hastings and London Bridge. We don't know precisely when the novel is set: the only date specified in *The Unclasssed* is "March 187—" for the advertisement that Waymark places in a morning paper seeking "human companionship."⁵² The scene in Hastings is set in July the same year, so no later than 1879. The 1879 express timing of 1 hr 30 minutes compares to a fastest journey today of 1 hr 22 minutes (and 1 hr 33 minutes for the departure closest to Gissing's timing) – such is progress!

Gissing in St Leonards

Gissing did not return to Hastings until 1894. By now he was married to Edith, living in Brixton (close to the setting of the "academy" in North Brixton where Waymark was a teacher in the early chapters of Book II of *The Unclasssed*), and with a sickly two-year old son, Walter. When Walter contracted bronchitis in January 1894, their doctor suggested taking him away from London for the winter. Gissing decided they should go to Hastings, "to get him into mild, pure air as soon as possible," probably for three months.⁵³ Writing to his brother, he proposed taking "two sitting rooms, so as to work at my ease." He aimed to finish 'Miss Lord of Camberwell' (as *In the Year of Jubilee* was still entitled) and begin work on his "'I.L.N.' novel" (i.e., *Eve's Ransom*).⁵⁴ To this end, he advertised (in his wife's name) for rooms in a Hastings paper:

Wanted, by Married Couple, with one child, for a month, or more, BEDROOM and TWO SITTING ROOMS, in sheltered part of Hastings. – Mrs Gissing, 76, Burton-road, Brixton, London.⁵⁵

His new friend, Clara Collet, suggested he also contact Mrs Gardner, the proprietor of a lodging house in St Leonards, immediately west of Hastings.⁵⁶ Gissing travelled to Hastings on 5th February to check out the thirty or so replies they had received: "Of course a day of ceaseless rain, miserable; got wet through. No one of my replies any use." Instead, he took rooms at the house recommended by Miss Collet: 23, East Ascent, St Leonards, where "happily" there was a sea-view, and he could use a back bedroom as a study (Figure 5).⁵⁷ Two days later, the Gissing family caught the 11.15 from Charing Cross, due at St Leonards (Warrior Square) at 1.18 p.m. They had sent Walter's cot ahead of them, though Mrs Gardner had as much trouble with Gissing's handwriting as many subsequent readers, and anticipated the arrival of a cat.⁵⁸

St Leonards was laid out by James Burton, beginning in 1828, following his completion of Chester Terrace on the east side of Regent's Park, and extended by his son, Decimus Burton, in the 1850s. James's plan was for a kind of seaside Regent's Park. Much like Regent's Park, there was a central area of landscaped parkland with gardens and a lake, mansions set in a continuation of this parkland, substantial Regency-style terraces facing the seafront, semi-detached and terraced villas and, in one corner of the development, rows of smaller cottages, mews, shops, and laundry on streets classically named 'Mercatoria' and 'Lavatoria.'

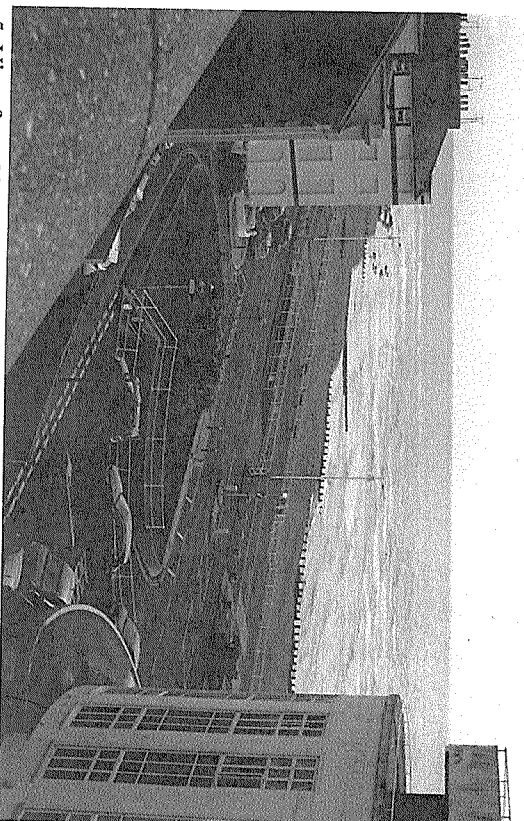


Figure 5: View from 23, East Ascent, St Leonards. The building on the right, Marine Court (1937), replaced a row of four-storey terraced houses. Author's photograph (October 2021).

There was also a church, grand hotel, several smaller hotels, assembly rooms, library and baths, estate lodges and archways denoting the eastern and northern entrances to the new town (Figure 6). All these features still existed in 1894, and most still exist today, though World War II bombing and insensitive redevelopment have taken their toll, and the eastern ornamental arch where Grand Parade became Marina was removed only a year after the Gissings' visit. St Leonards also acquired its own pier in 1891.⁵⁹

Several residents and tradesmen with homes in East Ascent are listed in *Pigot & Co's Directory* published in 1840 and the street appears complete on a map made in 1846. Nos. 13-24, East Ascent are a row of early nineteenth-century (probably 1830s) stuccoed houses, each with two storeys and a basement, sufficiently attractive to have been listed Grade II as long ago as 1976. Their designation noted their "ground floor round-headed windows," "semi-circular fanlights" over recessed front doors, and "slate roofs."⁶⁰ No. 20, just downhill from no. 23, where the Gissings stayed, was advertised for sale in October 2020, supposedly one of five houses still "complete" and "as intended by Decimus Burton."⁶¹ The facade of no. 23 is identical (Figure 7), so we might reasonably assume the interior layout of no. 20 – with three first-floor rooms – was also the same in no. 23, offering one large and one small bedroom at the front with sea views and a large back room overlooking the garden. In June 1893, the freeholds of no. 23, along with nos. 13-15 and 21-22, and industrial premises in the rear, were offered for sale, estimated to yield an annual value of £3335.⁶²

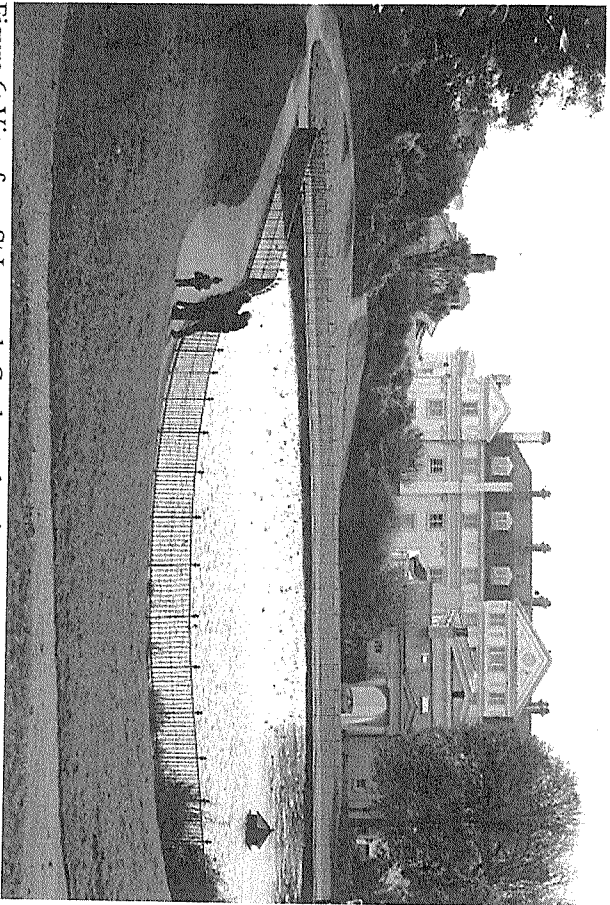


Figure 6: View from St Leonards Gardens, showing the South Lodge and, behind it, the St Leonards Hotel (later renamed Royal Victoria Hotel). East Ascent is off to the left of the hotel. Author's photograph (October 2021).

The implication of advertising them together is that the occupiers would not have been the owners of their dwellings, at best relatively short-term leaseholders, and that each dwelling must have been let at about £50 per annum, an indication of the social cachet of St Leonards, especially when we consider that just a few months later George was writing to Miss Collet, outlining his resolution to rent “a decent house of not more than £45 rental, as near as possible to Regent’s Park.”⁶³ Intriguingly, of the six houses offered for sale on East Ascent, only no. 23 was sold, for £710.⁶⁴ However, no information was reported on the new owners of no. 23.

What we do know is that the Gardners were long-standing residents at 23, East Ascent, recorded in the 1881, 1891 and 1901 censuses. On each occasion, Edwin Gardner, aged 66 in 1891, gave his occupation as “lodging house keeper.” His wife, Elizabeth, was returned as aged 49 in 1891, with no occupation listed, but by 1901 she had aged to 64, and was now listed as “lodging house keeper” like her husband. Several other houses on East Ascent also accommodated visitors and, in the early 1880s, when a “Fashionable Intelligence” column in the *Hastings and St Leonards Times* regularly announced new “arrivals” in the resorts, there were frequent listings of people staying on East Ascent, including at no. 23.⁶⁵ The Gardners hailed respectively from Kidderminster in Worcestershire and Cholsey in Berkshire. Edwin had been a house servant (1861) and then a butler (1871) before marrying Elizabeth in Hastings in 1880.

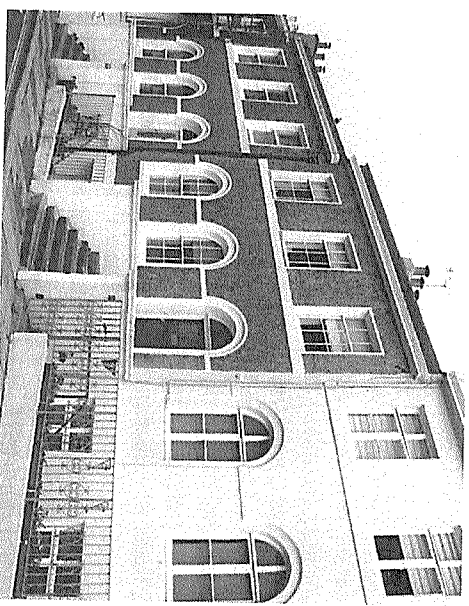


Figure 7: 23, East Ascent, St Leonards. Author's photograph (October 2021).

In 1891 their household also included a teenage domestic servant and two widowed women listed as “boarders,” one aged 86, from London, the other aged 34, an “invalid nurse” born in the West Indies, presumably nurse to the 86-year-old. Between them, the Gardners and their boarders occupied only three rooms. But there was a separate household of four female “lodgers” occupying another three rooms, presumably the same rooms available to the Gissings. This “household” comprised an 11-year-old “scholar,” two students aged 21 and 25, and – listed first – a 28-year-old “asst mistress public school,” none other than Edith S. Collet, Clara’s younger sister. Like her sister, Edith Sophia Collet had attended North London Collegiate School in Sandall Road, Camden (the site now occupied by Camden School for Girls). By 1881, aged 18, she was a “student of London University.” From 1889 to 1922 she was an assistant mistress back at North London Collegiate. She was also a co-contributor to a survey of “Family Budgets: being the income and expenses of twenty-eight British households, 1891-1894,” part of Charles Booth’s survey to which Clara more famously contributed. The Gissings had met Edith Collet when Clara invited them to join her and her sister at a performance of ‘Utopia, Limited,’ the Gilbert & Sullivan opera premiered at the Savoy Theatre in October 1893.⁶⁶

Whether or not Clara had herself stayed at the Gardners’ house in St Leonards, George was, at least at first, justified in accepting her advice. He reported that they were “remarkably comfortable in these lodgings” and that Mr Gardner, “a former butler,” waited upon them at mealtimes. In fact, “the people” [i.e., the Gardners] were “extremely decent.”⁶⁷ The weather on their first full day there was “sunny and warm.” It continued fine, if wild, with strong south-west winds whipping up a very high sea, and Walter “enjoying himself much by the seaside.”⁶⁸ But east wind and rain gave Walter a new cold and bronchitis, “a deep barking cough,” prompting the

late-night summons of a doctor, Dr Batterham, who lived close by at 3, Grand Parade, to prescribe “medicines and a linseed meal.” Walter was confined to the house with “badly swollen tonsils,” and Batterham proposed removing them, but not until the weather was warmer.⁶⁹ Batterham was not only a GP but assistant surgeon at East Sussex Hospital, later obituarised as a man of “sound judgement, a painstaking carefulness, an infinite patience, and an ever-present consideration for the feelings and well-being of his patients” combined with a “cheery manner and [...] somewhat dry humour.”⁷⁰ In Walter’s case, however, basic treatment with alum and cod liver oil meant that by the beginning of March (three weeks into their stay) he was well enough to venture outdoors again.⁷¹ Now it was George’s turn to suffer; a sore throat and then a cold, and very limited progress with ‘Miss Lord of Camberwell’ let alone even starting the still putative *Eve’s Ransom*. On the other hand, even if he struggled with his own writing, he could enjoy reading that of others: Thomas Hardy’s *Life’s Little Ironies* and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters*.⁷²

The latter had been left with him by Clara Collet who, in mid-February, had arrived to spend a week in St Leonards, not at the Gissing’s lodgings, but seeing them daily for walks, visits or staying to supper.⁷³ Edith went shopping in Hastings one day, but there is no reference to them enjoying any of the attractions of “the favourite winter resort” – the electric lights along the promenade, the “superb golf links,” the “bands daily on the Parade,” or the “entertainments daily” on both Hastings and St Leonards Piers.⁷⁴

Hastings in *In the Year of Jubilee*, *New Grub Street*, “Humble Felicity,” and *Thyrza*

Gissing did not incorporate his St Leonards experience into his novels, but Hastings receives the briefest of mentions in Part IV of *In the Year of Jubilee*, when Horace Lord needs to recuperate after the excesses of his life in London: “He went to Hastings for a few days, but wearied of the place, and came back to his London excitements.”⁷⁵ Following Gissing’s record in his diary of pages per day, we can estimate that this passage was written around 12th February, close to the time (11th February) he wrote to Clara Collet reporting that “After the inevitable day of blank despair, I [...] am getting my daily quantum of MS. despatched without much trouble.” Unlike Horace Lord, Gissing was not missing London, but he was looking forward to the end of a “long gale” and to Clara’s arrival a week later, lightening “a cheerless outlook.”⁷⁶

Hastings may not have been exciting enough for Horace, but – a few years earlier, in *New Grub Street* – it had hosted a fortuitous first meeting between two lost souls short of confidence and company: Reardon and Biffen, the former visiting the circulating library to shelter from the rain and overhearing the latter ask the librarian if he had any books by Edwin Reardon.⁷⁷ At the time, both were

visiting from London. Much later, in their final meeting before Reardon was summoned, fatefully, to Brighton, they recall their meeting in Hastings and regret the “will-o’-the-wisp attraction exercised by London” which had effectively destroyed both men.⁷⁸ Earlier still, when Reardon first suffered the anxiety of writer’s block and impending penury, Milvain had suggested that Reardon and Amy should go away from London for “a fortnight somewhere – Hastings, Eastbourne?” But Reardon declared himself “incapable of holiday.”⁷⁹

The only short story in which Hastings appears is ‘Humble Felicity,’ one of Gissing’s portraits of ‘Nobodies at Home,’ written a year after his abortive search for lodgings in the town and the family’s subsequent stay at East Ascent. ‘Humble Felicity’ draws on three of Gissing’s recent experiences: not only his survey of Hastings lodgings in February 1894, but also his stay in lodgings at 186, Kennington Road in Spring 1893 when he was checking out areas of South London prior to the family’s return from Exeter, and his dealings with “the furniture warehouse at Brixton” over the logistics of moving to Epsom in September 1894.⁸⁰ In ‘Humble Felicity,’ Mr Baty works for a firm of south London furniture removers, visiting clients to provide estimates of removal costs. He and his wife also run a lodging house in Kennington Road, careful to seek out bargains and save on expenditure wherever possible. They take an annual holiday in Hastings:

Year after year they had spent an autumnal week at Hastings, but never twice in the same lodgings. Naturally, seeing that, from the moment of arrival to that of departure, Mrs Baty was on belliose terms with the lady of the house. True to their principles, they made it a point to pay less for the lodgings than the landlady had ever before accepted; and having established themselves to their indifferent satisfaction – the first day was wholly devoted to this business – they spent the rest of the time in regretting their choice, in abusing the cookery, in guarding against imposition, and in talking very loudly, with the door open, of the comforts to which they were accustomed at home. They looked forward with growing impatience to the day of return. *Ennui* tormented them. The sun was too hot, the wind too high, the sea an intolerable bore.⁸¹

Gissing may not have been quite so explicit or public about his frustration with seaside holidays, but his letters and diary entries often suggest a suppressed version of the same – for example, his moving lodgings mid-stay in Eastbourne, his recording the shortcomings of lodgings, and his often being anxious to move home or somewhere new before the due date for departure had arrived. Yet neither of his hosts in Hastings and St Leonards, the Pooles and the Gardeners, provoked any criticism on his part.

Knowing that they could not stay with the Gardeners after 21st March, but not wanting to risk a return to London until he was confident of Walter’s future health, George delayed completing ‘Miss Lord,’ first by going house-hunting to Reigate for the day – “No good, either for lodgings or a house?” – and then spending most of another day travelling to Eastbourne to take rooms there.⁸² Eastbourne proved much more to George’s liking and much better for Walter’s constitution. In retrospect, it was “obvious that St Leonards, with its muggy air, was entirely

the wrong place for him.” In Eastbourne, the bracing east winds meant “the boy skips like a lamb” and had “ceased to snore & gasp in his sleep.”⁸³ Why the east wind in St Leonards was bad for Walker’s health, but the east wind in Eastbourne was just what he needed, we can only speculate! Thank goodness Dr Batterham had not operated; although he had charged £4 for his seven visits: “if he had visited a millionaire’s house the rate could not have been higher.”⁸⁴

Hastings viewed through the lens of Eastbourne had been a recurrent motif in Gissing’s earlier novel, *Thyryza*. Thyryza Trent has her first experience of the sea when she accompanies the sickly Bessie Bunce to convalesce in ‘The Chestnuts,’ Mrs Ormonde’s home in Eastbourne. Mrs Ormonde takes Thyryza to the top of Beachy Head, from which they can see eastwards all the way “to the cliffs of Hastings.”⁸⁵ Thyryza has heard of Hastings because Gilbert Grail has taught her about the Battle of Hastings and the Norman Conquest. Much later, Thyryza herself is rescued by Mrs Ormonde and placed in the care of a “decent woman who did sewing for the ‘Home.’”⁸⁶ It is when her landlady-cum-carer goes to Hastings to stay the night and leaves Thyryza to her own devices that, feeling very alone, she wanders off in the direction of ‘The Chestnuts’ and overhears Egremont confirming his continuing love and Mrs Ormonde’s determination to dissuade or at least delay him in his pursuit of Thyryza.⁸⁷ And the final scene of the novel, played out between Egremont and his first love, Annabel Newthorpe, takes us back to the slopes, *not* the summit of Beachy Head. The day/light fades but the sky lightens as storm clouds disperse – “a pale dawn, the restored twilight” – and, in the distance, “the lights of Hastings began to twinkle.”⁸⁸

Whether centre-stage, as in *The Unclassed*, or part of the supporting cast, as in *New Grub Street* and *Thyryza*, Hastings twinkled intermittently throughout both Gissing’s life and his fiction.

¹ George Everett Hastings, Vincent Starrett, and Thomas Olive Mabbutt (eds), *Brownie* (New York: Columbia UP, 1931); Markus Neacey, *George Gissing’s American Stories – How Many of Them Are Actually His? A Literary Investigation* (Forfar and Berlin: Markus Neacey, 2022).

² Steve Peak, *Hastings Chronicle*, online at <https://www.hastingschronicle.net/>. Accessed 15 April 2022.

³ *Deacon’s Court Guide, Gazetteer & County Blue Book of Sussex* (London: C. W. Deacon & Co, 1881), pp. 392-393.

⁴ Bouwe Postmus (ed.), *An Exile’s Cunning: Some Private Papers of George Gissing* (Wormerveer: Stichting Uilgeverij Noord-Holland, 1999), p. 198.

⁵ Paul F. Matthiesen, Arthur C. Young, and Pierre Coustillas (eds), *The Collected Letters of George Gissing, Volume One, 1863-1880* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio UP, 1990), pp. 287-288.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 287, 290.

⁷ Anon, “Closed Churches at Rye and Winchelsea,” *Hastings and St Leonards Observer*, 19 June 1880, p. 7.

⁸ *Collected Letters, Volume One*, pp. 287-288.

⁹ *The Post Office Directory of Sussex* (London: Kelly, 1878), p. 3023. Census and vital registration records all researched online through *Findmypast*.

¹⁰ “An Explanation,” *Hastings and St Leonards Observer*, 26 January 1884, p. 3.

¹¹ *Hastings and St Leonards Times*, 22 December 1877, 12 January and 2 February 1878, all p. 8.

¹² *Collected Letters, Volume One, 1863-1880*, p. 284.

¹³ Jenny Ridd, *A Destiny Defined: Dame Gabriel Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal in Hastings* (Pett, East Sussex: Edgerton Publishing Services, 2008). On George and Nell’s marriage, see Pierre Coustillas, *The Heroic Life of George Gissing, Part I: 1857-1888* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), p. 157.

¹⁴ “A Week at Hastings,” *Hastings and St Leonards Times*, 3 July 1880, p. 7 (reprinted from the *British Workwoman*).

¹⁵ Ridd, *A Destiny Defined*, pp. 47-54.

¹⁶ Paul F. Matthiesen, Arthur C. Young, and Pierre Coustillas (eds), *The Collected Letters of George Gissing, Volume Two, 1881-1885* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio UP, 1991), p. 119.

¹⁷ Paul Delany and Colette Colligan, “Introduction,” in George Gissing, *The Unclassed: The 1884 Text* (Victoria, BC: ELS Editions, 2010), p. vii. ¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *The Unclassed: The 1884 Text*, p. 26 (Book I, Chapter III).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 153 (Book III, Chapter III).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 168 (Book III, Chapter IV).

²² Delany and Colligan, “Introduction,” p. xviii (note 5); *Collected Letters, Volume Two, 1881-1885*, pp. 220-221.

²³ Anon, “Art Chronicle,” *Porfolia*, 15 (January 1884), pp. 101-102.

²⁴ Claude Phillips, “The Grosvenor Gallery II,” *Academy*, 17 May 1884, p. 356.

²⁵ *The Unclassed: The 1884 Text*, p. 155 (Book III, Chapter IV). ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 167 (Book III, Chapter IV).

²⁷ Tim Barringer, Jason Rosenfield, and Alison Smith, *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde* (London: Tate Publishing, 2012), p. 99.

²⁸ “A Guide to British Naturalism and Beaches across the UK,” p. 26, <https://issuu.com/leantradrubytuesdaymevooy/docs/a-zofundistbeachesinbritain/26>. Accessed 16 April 2022.

²⁹ Gill Metcalfe, “The Lovers Seat in Fairlight Glen,” *Hastings Independent*, <https://www.hastingsindependentpress.co.uk/features/the-lovers-seat-in-fairlight-glen/>. Accessed 16 April 2022.

³⁰ On Fairlight, see *A Guide to St Leonards-on-Sea and Hastings* (St Leonards-on-Sea: James Dorman, 1865), pp. 81-84; on Hunt and Millais, see the discussion of Hunt’s ‘Fairlight Downs, Sunlight on the Sea’ at <https://www.leicestergalleries.com/browse-artwork-detail/MTYIMDg=>. Accessed 16 April 2022.

³¹ *Collected Letters, Volume One, 1863-1880*, p. 287. ³² *Ibid.*, p. 288.

³³ George Gissing (1892), *Born in Exile* (London: Dent, 1993), pp. 134 (Part the Second, IV), 215-216 (Part the Third V), 246 (Part the Fourth, III).

³⁴ *A Guide to St Leonards-on-Sea and Hastings*, pp. 16-17.

³⁵ *Collected Letters, Volume Two, 1881-1885*, pp. 48-49. ³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 54-56. ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 129. ³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Edward Clodd, *Memories* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1916), pp. 193-194; the poem is reprinted in Postmus, *An Exile’s Cunning*, pp. 320-321.

⁴⁰ *Collected Letters, Volume Two, 1881-1885*, p. 148. *Times*, 24 July 1883, p. 10, forecast “fine to dull and showery, cold” weather for the 24th, while the following day (*Times*, 25 July 1883, p. 5) was expected to be “unsettled, some showers locally, with bright intervals” – a real mixed bag which doesn’t help us determine whether Gissing did go to Kingson or what it was like in Hastings the next day!

⁴¹ *Collected Letters, Volume Two, 1881-1885*, p. 137. ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 112. ⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 113, 115-116. ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 136, 137. Re John George Black, it is worth noting here that Black’s future wife, Ellen Elizabeth Marion Smith (they were married in Chelsea in January 1884 but living at the same addresses in Fulham and Chelsea as early as 1881) was returned in the 1891, 1901 and 1911 censuses as born in Hastings. Further research reveals that she was actually born in Battle, daughter of John Smith, shoemaker, Mount Street, Battle. Gissing was close to both Black and his fiancée in Chelsea in 1882-1883, so perhaps his planned or actual visits to Hastings in mid-1883 were connected to them in some way.

- ⁴⁶ Paul F. Matthiesen, Arthur C. Young, and Pierre Coustillas (eds), *The Collected Letters of George Gissing, Volume Four, 1889-1891* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio UP, 1993), p. 181.
- ⁴⁷ Pierre Coustillas and Patrick Bridgewater (eds), *George Gissing at Work: A Study of His Notebook, Extracts from My Reading* (Greensboro, NC: ELT Press, 1988), Extract 81, pp. 88-89.
- ⁴⁸ *The Unclassed: The 1884 Text*, pp. 268 (Book V, Chapter II), 275 (Book V, Chapter III).
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 167-168 (Book III, Chapter IV).
- ⁵⁰ "Time Tables for July, 1880," *Hastings and St Leonards Times*, 3 July 1880, p. 7.
- ⁵¹ "Time Table for July, 1878," *Hastings and St Leonards Times*, 13 July 1878, p. 9; "Time Table for July, 1879," *Hastings and St Leonards Times*, 5 July 1879, p. 7.
- ⁵² *The Unclassed: The 1884 Text*, p. 43 (Book II, Chapter I).
- ⁵³ Paul F. Matthiesen, Arthur C. Young, and Pierre Coustillas (eds), *The Collected Letters of George Gissing, Volume Five, 1892-1895* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio UP, 1994), pp. 178-179; Pierre Coustillas (ed.), *London and the Life of Literature in Late-Victorian England: The Diary of George Gissing, Novelist* (Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978), p. 328.
- ⁵⁴ *Collected Letters, Volume Five, 1892-1895*, p. 180.
- ⁵⁵ "Apartments Wanted," *Hastings and St Leonards Observer*, 3 February 1894, p. 8.
- ⁵⁶ *Collected Letters, Volume Five, 1892-1895*, p. 181.
- ⁵⁷ *Diary*, p. 329. ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁹ J. Manwaring Baines, *Barton's St Leonards* (Hastings: Hastings Museum and Art Gallery, 2012); Peak, *Hastings Chronicle* at <http://hastingschronicle.net/features/st-leonards-pier/>. Accessed 18 April 2022.
- ⁶⁰ Historic England, *1/3-24, East Acent*, <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1293565?section=official-list-entry>. Accessed 18 April 2022.
- ⁶¹ The advertisement, with its claims about authenticity, has now been removed, but details, including the floor plan, can still be seen at <https://www.righlmove.co.uk/house-prices/detail/Matching.html?prop=50757423&sale=56244776&country=england>. Accessed 18 April 2022.
- ⁶² *Hastings and St Leonards Observer*, 24 June 1893, p. 4.
- ⁶³ *Collected Letters, Volume Five, 1892-1895*, p. 172.
- ⁶⁴ "Property Sale," *Hastings and St Leonards Observer*, 15 July 1893, p. 7. If the property was bought by somebody intending to rent it out, this would imply an annual rent of £60-80, according to the 'years purchase' formula applied by private landlords in late Victorian England. See Avner Offer, *Property and Politics, 1870-1914* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1981).
- ⁶⁵ For example, in "Fashionable Intelligence," *Hastings and St Leonards Times*, 3 July 1880, p. 7; 31 July 1880, p. 7; 28 August 1880, p. 7; 11 September 1880, p. 2.
- ⁶⁶ On Edith Collet, see Deborah McDonald, *Clara Collet 1860-1948: An Educated Working Woman* (London: Woburn Press, 2004), pp. 42, 127, 200; Rosemary O'Day and David Englander, *Mr Charles Booth's Inquiry: Life and Labour of the People in London Reconsidered* (London: Hambledon Press, 1993), p. 55, note 8; *The Diary of George Gissing*, p. 317; Teachers Registration Council, Register Entry concerning: Collet, Edith Sophia, 1st June, 1915. Accessed via *Findmypast*.
- ⁶⁷ *Diary*, p. 329; *Collected Letters, Volume Five, 1892-1895*, p. 184.
- ⁶⁸ *Diary*, pp. 329-330.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 330; *Collected Letters, Volume Five, 1892-1895*, pp. 186-189.
- ⁷⁰ "Obituary," *British Medical Journal*, 1 April 1933, p. 593.
- ⁷¹ *Diary*, p. 331. ⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 331-332; *Collected Letters, Volume Five, 1892-1895*, p. 190.
- ⁷³ *Diary*, pp. 330-331; *Collected Letters, Volume Five, 1892-1895*, pp. 186, 188.
- ⁷⁴ *Diary*, p. 330; *Graphic*, 27 October 1894, p. 501.
- ⁷⁵ George Gissing (1894), *In the Year of Jubilee* (London: Dent, 1994), p. 199 (Part IV, 3).
- ⁷⁶ *Collected Letters, Volume Five, 1892-1895*, pp. 184, 186; *Diary*, pp. 328-330.
- ⁷⁷ George Gissing (1891), *New Grub Street* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), p. 143 (Chapter X).
- ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 436-438 (Chapter XXXI). ⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 71, 76 (Chapter VI).
- ⁸⁰ *Diary*, pp. 300, 346-347.

- ⁸¹ George Gissing, "Humble Felicity," *To-Day*, 1 June 1895; reprinted in Pierre Coustillas (ed.), *Collected Short Stories, Volume Two* (Grayswood, Surrey: Grayswood Press, 2012), pp. 252-253.
- ⁸² *Diary*, pp. 331-332.
- ⁸³ *Collected Letters, Volume Five, 1892-1895*, p. 193. ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 194.
- ⁸⁵ George Gissing (1887), *Thyrza* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1984), p. 184 (Chapter XVI).
- ⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 338 (Chapter XXVIII). ⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 338-346 (Chapter XXVIII). ⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 489 (Chapter XLII).

Chit-Chat or Trivial Pursuits: From G. G. to Gigi

In 1910 E. M. Forster ended his novel *Howards End* with the epigraph "Only connect!" I will now apply this to Gissing and make a random connection. To start, then, G. G., i.e., George Gissing, wrote *Demos* in 1886, 35 years later there was a film version starring Evelyn Brent as Emma Vine, Richard Mutimer's forsaken love interest. In the 1930 variety film, *Paramount on Parade*, Miss Brent did a comic dance routine with the famous French crooner, Maurice Chevalier. This debonair Frenchman appeared decades later, in 1958, as a gallant, if aged, playboy in *Gigi*, the popular film version of Colette's renowned novella from 1944. Now, working our way back, Colette was formerly married to that terrible libertine, Henry Gauthier-Villars (1859-1931), who had, as it happens, a similar dominating relationship with her to that of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch with his wife Wanda. And, as we know, she personally knew Gissing around 1900.

To start over following a different pathway: in 1907, Edvard Bertz, Gissing's German friend, wrote a controversial book about Walt Whitman entitled *Whitman-Mysterien: eine Abrechnung mit Johannes Schlaf*, which the well-known Austrian writer, Stefan Zweig, read and discussed in his correspondence with other Whitmanites. Some years later, in 1922, Zweig wrote one of his most poignant novellas, "Brief einer Unbekannten," which, in 1948, was made into an equally moving film called *Letter from an Unknown Woman* starring Louis Jourdan as the Don-Juan-like recipient of the letter in which a woman he does not remember describes how they met and she fell, not only under his spell, but in love with him. Eleven years later, to come full circle, Louis Jourdan appeared in *Gigi* as the womanising and wealthy socialite who courts the eponymous heroine played by the faun-like French-American beauty, Leslie Caron.

Finally, let us connect Gissing to *Gigi* via E. M. Forster. When Gissing stayed at the Nayland Sanatorium during the summer of 1901, a fellow patient was Rachel Evelyn White, the Greek scholar, whom he befriended. In 1906 Miss White married the classicist, Nathaniel Wedd, who was at that time a major influence on Forster. Fifty years later, in 1956, Forster was photographed in his Cambridge study by the famous photographer, Cecil Beaton. Now Beaton was a set designer on Broadway and not averse to appearing on screen. Thus, he was both the costume designer behind the camera and, in front of it, a gentleman strolling in the park in a cameo appearance in the 1958 film musical of the year, namely, "Gigi."