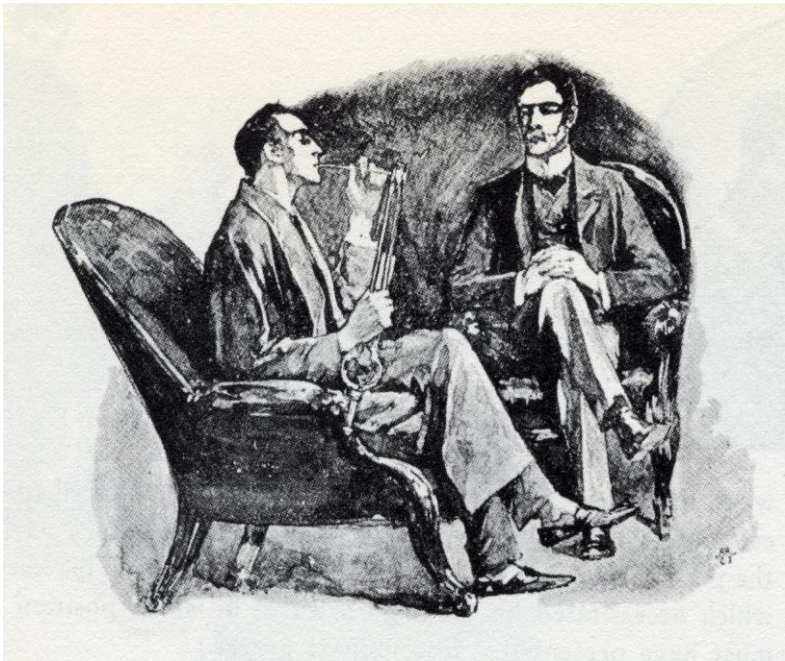
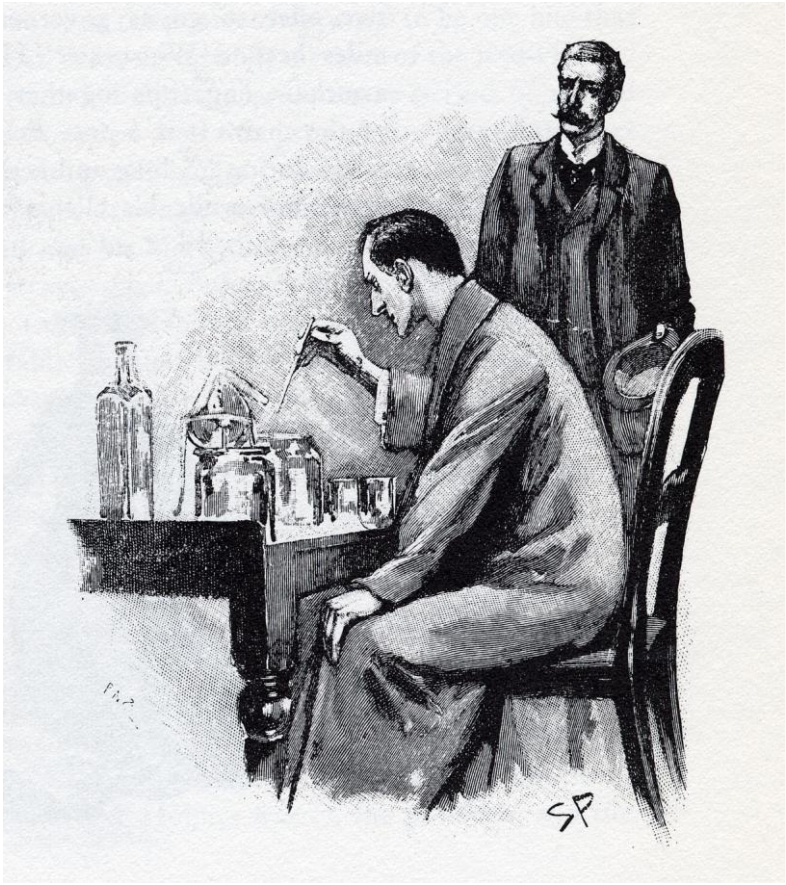


The Sitting Room
at 221B Baker Street

A Permanent Exhibit
from the
Sherlock Holmes Collections



Special Collections and Rare Books
University of Minnesota Libraries



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Curated by Tim Johnson
Special Collections & Rare Books

For disability accommodations, or to receive this information in alternative formats, contact Tim Johnson at johns976@umn.edu.

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Life in London and the Origins of 221B

A man's first residence in London is a revolution in his life and feelings. He loses at once no small part of his individuality. He was a man before, now he is a "party." No longer known as Mr. Brown, but as (say) No. XXI, he feels as one of many cogs in one of the many wheels of an incessantly wearing, tearing, grinding, system of machinery. His country notions must be modified, and all his life-long ways and takings-for-granted prove crude and questionable. He is hourly reminded "This is not the way in London; that this won't work here," or, "people always expect," and "you'll soon find the difference." Custom rules everything, and custom never before seemed to him half as strange, strong, or inexorable.

So begins an anonymous account on London life in the 1870s, published the year before James Hamish Watson matriculated at the University of London and began work in St. Bartholomew's Hospital. Nine years later Watson was back in London, his "health



St. Bartholomew's Hospital, early 19th century

irretrievably ruined" by wound and fever—the result of his military sojourn on the sub-continent—facing his own revolution of life and feelings. He relates that

I had neither kith nor kin in England, and was therefore as free as air—or as free as an income of eleven shillings and sixpence a day will permit a man to be. Under such circumstances I naturally gravitated to London, that great cesspool into which all the loungers and idlers of the Empire are irresistibly drained. There I stayed for some time at a private hotel in the Strand, leading a comfortless, meaningless existence, and spending such money as I had, considerably more freely than I ought.

This twenty-eight-year-old doctor's "comfortless, meaningless existence" threatened to crush him beneath "the many wheels of an incessantly wearing, tearing, grinding, system of machinery." "In London," our anonymous chronicler wrote, "man rubs out, elsewhere he rusts out. No doubt the mental stimulus of London staves off much disease, for idle men eat themselves to death and worry themselves to death." Watson, aware of the threat, "soon realized that I must either leave the metropolis and rusticate somewhere in the country, or that I must make a complete alteration in my style of living. Choosing the latter alternative, I began by making up my mind to leave the hotel, and take up my quarters in some less pretentious and less expensive domicile."

Where was Watson to look? In the "Housekeeping in Belgravia" section of *London Characters and the Humourous Side of London Life*—again by an anonymous writer—we find some assistance with Watson's question of domicile.

The question arises, In what does the superiority of one district over another consist? Without entering into the reasons that induce people to prefer one to the other, we may briefly describe them as follows:—Grosvenor Square and its immediate environs as the most aristocratic, Belgravia the most fashionable, Tyburnia the most healthy, Regent's Park the quietest, Marylebone and Mayfair the most central, and Bayswater and Eccleston Square quarters as the most moderate. People's views and means may be guided, in a general manner, by these leading features. The man of small income finds he must locate himself in a region verging upon what in former years one would have called Shepherd's Bush, or in a quarter uncomfortably near Vauxhall and the river; if a family man, solicitous for the health of his children, he

decides in favour of the former, where he finds a choice of houses, from £60 a year and upwards to £200, and the rates moderate.

It is unknown whether or not Watson had access to this volume and the benefit of its counsel, but fortune smiled on him in another way, in the person of "young Stamford, who had been a dresser under me at Bart's. The sight of a friendly face in the great wilderness of London is a pleasant thing indeed to a lonely man." This sense of loneliness echoed the sentiment penned by the writer of "Life in London."

Men soon discover they have no longer the friend, the relative or the neighbour of their own small town to fall back on. To sink or swim is their own affair, and they had better make up their minds to depend wholly upon themselves; for London is like a wilderness, not as elsewhere because there are no people at all, but because there are so many people, that one is equally far from helping another save on rare occasions.

Watson had been "trying to solve the problem as to whether it [was] possible to get comfortable rooms at a reasonable price." The auspicious meeting of Stamford in the Criterion Bar brought the young doctor a step closer to the solution of his problem and a step away from the wilderness.

The unknown factor in this domestic equation was a person also known to Stamford, "[a] fellow who is working at the chemical laboratory up at the hospital. He was bemoaning himself this morning because he could not get someone to go halves with him in some nice rooms which he had found, and which were too much for his purse." The fellow was Sherlock Holmes. Stamford accompanied Watson to the hospital and introduced him to Holmes—probably one of the more momentous encounters in history—real or imagined. Watson continues the story:

We met next day as he had arranged, and inspected the rooms at No. 221B, Baker Street, of which he had spoken at our meeting. They consisted of a couple of comfortable bedrooms and a single large airy sitting-room, cheerfully furnished, and illuminated by two broad windows. So desirable in every way were the apartments, and so

moderate did the terms seem when divided between us, that the bargain was concluded upon the spot, and we at once entered into possession. That very evening I moved my things round from the hotel, and on the following morning Sherlock Holmes followed me with several boxes and portmanteaus. For a day or two we were busily employed in unpacking and laying out our property to the best advantage. That done, we gradually began to settle down and to accommodate ourselves to our new surroundings.

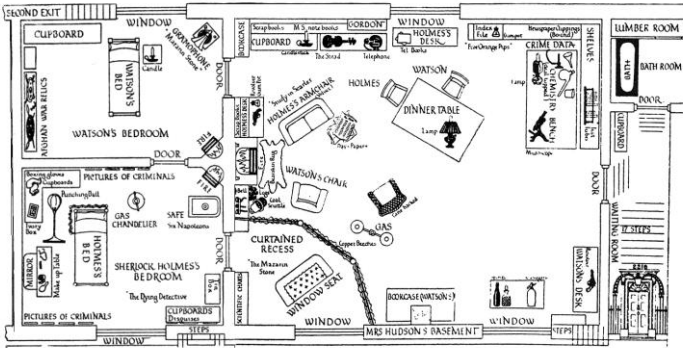


221B and the Sherlockians

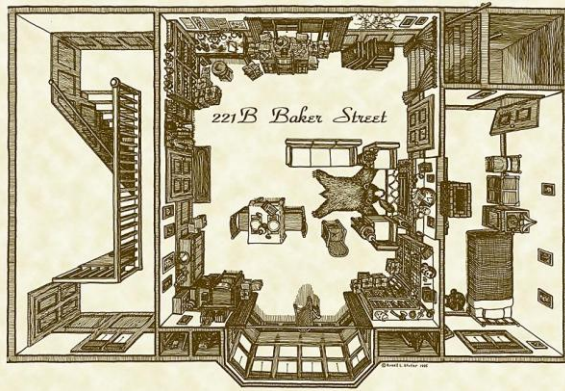
On August 20, 1940—in the midst of the Battle of Britain—Winston Churchill delivered a speech in the House of Commons that included this phrase: "Never has so much been owed by so many to so few." It is a phrase, often taken out of context, which lends itself to imitation or caricature. Christopher Morley, the godfather of American Sherlockians, cleverly used the phrase to sketch a word picture of what he saw in the early writings (or pseudo-scholarship) of Holmes devotees: "Never has so much been written by so many for so few."

This observation might well be applied to the riddle of the rooms. The arrangement and description of the rooms at No. 221B (not to mention the exact location of the building itself) has become something of an industry for Sherlockians (or Holmesians, as they are named across the Atlantic). It is a pleasant pastime as evidenced by the many floor plans and articles produced by authors from around the globe. Chris Redmond, on his Sherlockian.Net web site, offers us links to a number of sites with additional information, commentary, speculation, and artistic renderings of the rooms. He notes that "[p]robably the most elegant re-creation of the sitting-room and adjacent rooms in Holmes and Watson's lodgings is the floor plan drawn by Ernest

H. Short, circa 1948, and published in the *Strand* magazine in 1950." A link from that notation gives us this delightful drawing:



Short's conceptualization of the rooms at 221B is one of many. Redmond's web page also directs us to Peter Liddell's analysis on the location of the rooms, David Richardson's re-visitation to Baker Street, and a bird's-eye view from Stutler Comics. Not only are we (for I consider myself one of these enthusiasts) fond of writing and drawing about the room, we delight in our own recreations.



Again, there is a small industry in recreating the sitting room at 221B. Doyle's son, Adrian, had one such space, possibly the first of many. It is unknown to me who created the very first sitting

room. They exist, both in full-sized reproductions and in miniature.

The Mackler Room

The Sherlock Holmes Collections of the University of Minnesota Libraries hold two versions of that famous sitting room—a full-size reproduction and a miniature rendering. The miniature came into our possession first, in 1993. It was the creation of the late Dorothy Rowe Shaw, wife of the collector John Bennett Shaw, and has been a source of amazement and joy to many visitors of the Holmes Collections over the years. The second, a full-scale rendition, was acquired in 2006. It was a gift to the Collections from the estate of the late Allen Mackler, who died on December 29, 2005, at the age of 62.



Allen Mackler's estate is the largest bequest ever received by the Collections. Allen provided that his entire book collection, some five to six thousand volumes, will become part of the Collections. Allen, like the Collections, was interested in content as much (or more) than condition. His was a reading collection with strengths not only in Sherlockiana, but in other aspects of Victorian and Edwardian England. Noteworthy among his books are materials on Jack the Ripper, Victorian London, contemporary literary figures, and Gypsies. In addition to the books, Allen had a significant collection of video tapes and DVDs. These, too, are part of his gift to the Collections.

Beyond his books, Allen had some significant original pieces of Sherlockian art, including a rare drawing by Sidney Paget. Allen provided that these important items would also be added to the Collections. The Paget original shows Holmes seated in the stalls at St. James Hall, listening to music—a portrait of Allen as much as Holmes. "All the afternoon he sat in the stalls wrapped in the most perfect happiness, gently waving his long thin fingers in time to the music, while his



gently smiling face and his languid dreamy eyes were as unlike those of Holmes, the sleuth-hound, Holmes the relentless, keen-witted, ready-handed criminal agent, as it was possible to conceive." (*The Red-Headed League*) I don't know that Allen possessed long thin fingers, but he was most certainly relentless in his hunt for books through the many shops he frequented. And those who went up against Allen in any quiz knew, by his long string of victories, the keenness of his wit. And, of course, there was his love of music.

More noteworthy yet, and a sure memory to anyone who visited Allen in his home in Osseo, is the gift of the 221B room. This room was a special place and source of pride for Allen. He spent time, energy, and study in faithfully recreating the sitting room of the world's most famous consulting detective. There was a special moment during a visit to Allen's house, when one stood outside the door, awaiting the invitation to enter this special space. Each item was meticulously placed—there for a reason.

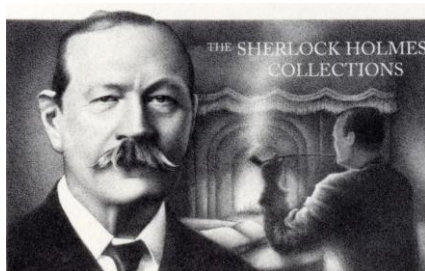


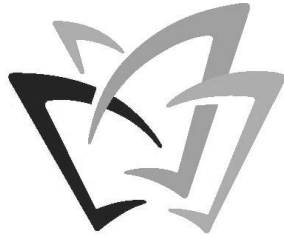
Beyond the gift of his collections and his room, Allen remembered the University and its Holmes Collections with a substantial supporting gift, a testament to Allen's championing of the Collections. His gift will help move the Collections to a new level of excellence.



This exhibit—featuring the room that was so special to Allen—is offered with thankfulness for his life and in his memory.

Tim Johnson
Curator, Special Collections & Rare Books
The Sherlock Holmes Collections





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