



History - compiled by Brita Haycraft

IH in Covent Garden: Then and Now

By Brita Haycraft

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In March 2007 International House London moved back to Covent Garden, the area where our first school in London started in 1959, after Cordoba.



The very name Covent Garden was already famous, synonymous with the legendary Opera House and its wartime ballet performances, seen in films like *Waterloo Bridge* and *The Red Shoes*. It was built in 1858, next to the old Covent Garden flower and vegetable market, probably the medieval Convent Garden

on old maps. The new opera house was to become known by the same name.

But the old Market itself had also gained fame in the 1920s with Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* opening with the cockney flower girl Eliza Doolittle offering bunches of violets to the opera goers, a scene that later toured the world in the musical and film *My Fair Lady*. Thus our first London school seemed well placed.

The busy, bustling market was almost like an opera stage, its whistling barrow boys and shouting lorry drivers loading up for London's greengrocers and florists behind the stately Opera House surrounded by fans camping out overnight in the hope of a ticket. Opposite stood the austere Bow Street Magistrates' Court amid theatres, music halls and pubs teeming with scholars, actors, street vendors, clerks and students from the nearby British Museum and the Bloomsbury university precincts.

In such historical quarters it felt exciting walking to our school from Charing Cross, diving down prongs and passages, squeezing up narrow alleyways, past the Lamb and Flag pub, crossing the market littered

with cabbage leaves and flower stems, the market traders calling out 'Hello dearie!'. From Long Acre, I'd turn down Endell Street, where our school flat was. Oddly this short, plain street was untouched by all the neighbouring enthusiasm.

At number 35, three floors up a stern and steep stone stairway with an iron railing, was the door to our hopeful little school with its three rooms and a hallway. The only sign of life was a film studio above, lined with egg-boxes painted black. Out of curiosity, I recently went back there and rang the doorbell. Same door, now in modern blue, same grim staircase and same unimpressive street as in 1959. It was astonishing to think of the vibrant IH state-of-the-art premises now just a few streets away in 2007.

Our Endell Street school took ages getting students, as if no one could find us. After a few weeks a class of Portuguese young men materialised. A German girl, Gisela, enrolled, and a Spanish priest. We nevertheless started a club, as in Cordoba, with a social programme, to bring foreign students together with English people and we gave talks. Our model was the Cordoba school with all its different activities and we did our best to recreate its reception and waiting area. Furniture was bought for next to nothing from a Salvation Army depot in Bermondsey filled with interesting tables and chairs amassed there since the war.

But it was a very lean winter. John took an evening job teaching at an ILEA school, the West London College of Commerce beyond Notting Hill. He obviously taught well and when it closed for the summer, his class of fifteen students, mainly Latin girls, followed him to Endell Street and never returned to their ILEA school. They all passed Proficiency and Silvana became John's excellent secretary later on, while Gisela took down the school accounts. And John persuaded Liliana who taught Italian at the ILEA school to teach for us as well.

Recently, out of the blue, a letter sent by John in 1960 was passed to me by the recipient. It exudes optimism about our new Casa Internacional in Endell Street.

I'm sure this Academia (in Endell Street, London) here will flourish and grow fat. I feel it in my bones. In two years we shall be a big establecimiento with a big house, and a bar with Cobos (famous Montilla vinyards) wines and more lectures and dances and a reputation. We won't earn money, as we never do, but we shall have enough to spend in la calle (the street). And the strange thing will be that we shall just be a S. Fernando 13 en Londres, different only en proporción.

The flat we are in reminds me strangely of Gutierrez de los Rios with the Covent Garden vendors below our windows, with people on their way to the market in the same way, with a lot of tavernas in the neighbourhood. Instead of Sausage Factory we have "Poetic films" below who run the same track of the most horribly tinny music during classes till we go down and ask them to close their door. The entrada worries us in the same way as the patio of the pigs did, with its drab staircase and the dustbins by the door. And there is the same feeling of exuberant crecimiento of a chrysalis becoming a butterfly.

The same old characters even come dropping in: Gerald and Shaun and Shirley, Valerie Thomas (teachers at the Academia) and old course members (who had been on our Spanish courses for foreigners in Cordoba). The only sad thing is that there is no Anastasio or Julio or you. It is strange how the throng of pupils at the peak horas de trabajo (working hours) with their smiles and quips and problems brings one back.

And there is the same sense of improvisation: the chairs borrowed from downstairs, the newly made doors which don't shut, the ficha de la biblioteca which is always out of order, the grinding and creaking which the front door makes when it is opened, the enormous, badly placed mirror which sticks everyone in the ribs when they go into one of the classrooms. And again the sense that these things will be put right little by little, replaced by fresh better improvisations when there is time – which there never is¹.

It had actually been touch and go if we would continue teaching back in London. John's real hope was to write full time. His *Babel In Spain* book had done well in Britain. He had sent articles on Spain to the Observer and he now tried to freelance for the new BBC programme Panorama, but he was not taken on.

I'd had a job lined up with the BBC Scandinavian department but it had closed down the year before. With our two little children, and a mortgage, we had to have a regular income.

So when a friend Pepe Brew rang to say he knew of a

flat in Covent Garden that might do for a school, we decided to have a go. We had loved teaching and getting to know our students and London was full of promises and eccentricity.

What name could we give it? Academia Britanica no longer sounded right, but Casa Internacional did, except that our third floor effort was hardly a 'casa'. I thought we called it the Travellers School of English. But only a few weeks ago, now in 2008, an old student in Cordoba proudly showed me the very first leaflet about our new school in London, and it is headed Casa Internacional! This same student, Rafael Molina, had turned up in London in 1959, and before he knew where he was, John had asked him to help paint the walls of our new school in Endell Street. It was not the only time John had roped in students or teachers to give a hand with a new school – see Colin McMillan in Shaftesbury Avenue and Alan Wakeman and Jane Glover in Via Marghera in Rome.



Brita's class in Cordoba with Rafael Molina, the student near right, who came to London and helped paint the walls in 35 Endell Street. He also saved a copy of the first Casa Internacional leaflet.

¹ Extract from a letter from John sent in summer 1960 to Marete, the German teacher in Cordoba. She gave it to Brita in December 2007, who notes "I hadn't read it and am now amazed by John's optimism about Endell Street but glad my memory hadn't failed me regarding the staircase, the neighbours, the improvisations". Explanations in brackets are Brita's.



The leaflet offering English to foreign students at Casa Internacional, Endell Street with a note in John's hand to Rafael Molina from Cordoba. It states the school's idealistic aims and interest in the students' feeling at home but there was no canteen till Shaftesbury Avenue.

Also the leaflet advertising Foreign Languages taught to British students at Endell Street which omits that the teachers were native French, Spanish, Italian and German speakers. Mingling with the foreign students to practise your target language was a free extra. The following year's leaflet mentioned the talks and the excursions organised for the students, British and from abroad.

Already some of the fundamental aims are in place: the reason for founding Casa Internacional, small classes, language exchanges between nationalities, company teaching, the chance to follow up with a course in Spain, versatility and flexibility. The main difference is the fees!

To lure students to our London Casa Internacional, we spread the word to embassies, foreign institutes and churches in London and our second autumn in Endell Street did bring a few more students. In Blackheath we had bought a second-hand 1930s Austin for £20 and this small T-Ford-like vehicle would chug up the bomb damaged Old Kent Road and stay parked all day below the school. We got two extra teachers, both reading Spanish at university, Sam Benady from Gibraltar, and Colin McMillan from Streatham. They were paid ten shillings per hour. Not a bad pay, Colin remembers. It felt good being able to chat about Andalusia and Colin had already spent a year in Seville and told wonderful stories.

Then two things of interest happened. John was asked to write an intermediate course of English for the BBC English By Radio, and the same winter he had an offer to go and teach English to President Kekkonen of Finland. Both assignments eased our financial position and brought new hopes. John was away in Helsinki living for four months in the presidential palace tutoring the President six hours a day, at meals, out walking in the snow and even in the

sauna. In his autobiography he describes how he had the President rehearse speeches for his coming state visit to Britain. He spent his off hours writing his *Getting On In English* BBC course.



1961: President Kekkonen and John Haycraft during English lessons

Meanwhile our Endell Street school ticked over, much helped by the loyal teachers and the ever welcoming receptionist Maruja Brew. I acquired an au pair girl to help me at home. Luckily for me, classes were still every other day, so there was room for manoeuvring and searching

for better premises. One agent's list showed a six-room flat for £25 a week in Shaftesbury Avenue near Piccadilly Circus. It sounded too good to be true and I rushed to ask to view it. But they said dismissively that no one had ever managed to rent that flat for the twelve years it had been on the market.

Then John had a mid-term break from Helsinki and came back to London. By chance the Daily Express had a piece on this in their William Hickey column. John armed himself with references from the BBC, the Observer, the publishers, and the cutting from the Daily Express and off we went to see the agents again. This time, they smiled as soon as the press cutting caught their eyes.



Glass entrance to IH London, Stukeley Street

It turned out, however, that the lease was short, only six months in fact, but renewable. But even half a year in a famous street near Piccadilly Circus, and at that rent, seemed better than struggling away in a drab flat in an anonymous street. We moved in June 1961 and Endell Street soon faded from our memory. It was a great summer and suddenly students poured into our new Shaftesbury Avenue school.

Now in 2008, the IH London school is an entire six-storey building with a splendid glass entrance down a cul-de-sac in Stukeley Street, a smartly pedestrianised secluded turn-off from the top end of Drury Lane.

Its many large windows look out on tall office blocks rising like Manhattan constructs overshadowing the old Victorian buildings below. The sky looks in sideways here and there. But the upper floors have a splendid view over many London landmarks, the Opera house roof, the London Eye in the distance, Big Ben. It is exhilarating, as if a new era has begun for International House.

From eminence and embassies, clubs and hotels, privilege and parks, IH has moved to a busy London of bookshops, theatres, churches, pubs and coffee shops, and of course the famous Covent Garden opera and its modern Covent Garden piazza with stalls, shops,



The rooftop café at IH London

pavement cafes and street performances watched by wandering visitors from all over the world. Once more IH finds itself in a legendary setting.

Further reading: John Haycraft vividly writes about life at Endell Street and Shaftesbury Avenue in *Babel in London* (Hamish Hamilton, 1956)