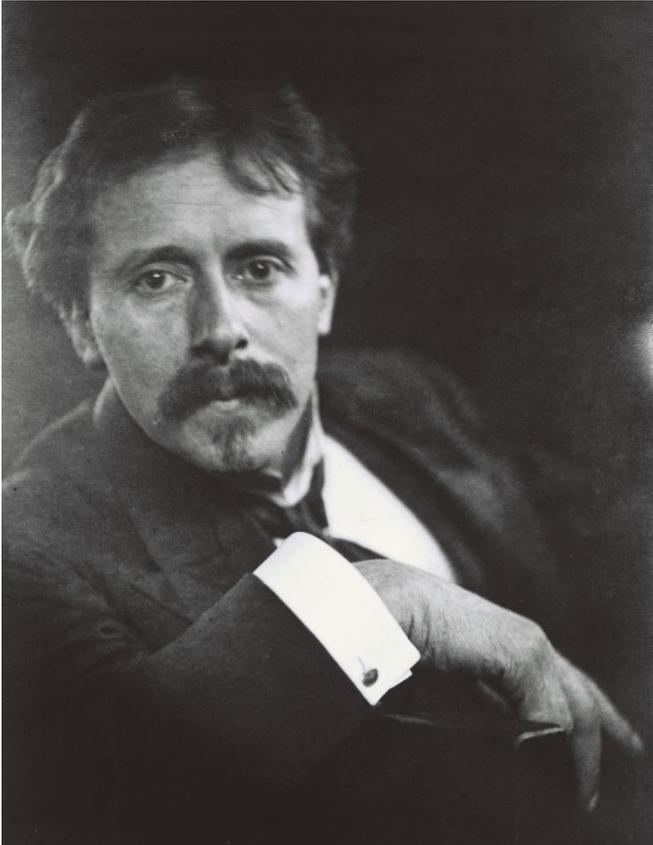


Charles Robert Ashbee 1863-1942



C. R. Ashbee in Chicago, 1899. © Guild of Handicraft Trust.
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The young idealist with a lasting contribution to Toynbee Hall

Charles Robert Ashbee's father was a merchant, bibliophile, and erotica aficionado. His mother a Jewish-Hamburgian suffragette. Their son, born in 1863, was a bright young man who rose above 'the routine, stupidity, and brutality' of his preparatory school to excel academically and read History at King's College Cambridge. Upon graduating in 1886, his parents had relocated to Bloomsbury. Ashbee returned to London to work as an architect, but chose to live at the newly established university settlement; Toynbee Hall. An idealist taken with T. H. Green's depiction of the virtuous social reformer,

Toynbee Hall was the obvious place to engage in social work. Furthermore, whilst Ashbee studied, his father 'grew conservative and alienated from his progressive family'. This culminated in a violent spat between his parents. Escaping this turmoil was an extra motive for the young Ashbee to move. On both counts, 'idealism' drew him to Toynbee Hall.¹

Ashbee was an unusual resident. He arrived 'as a sop to my own conscience, having now for three years talked philanthropy, I'm desirous of doing something. Yet I mistrust myself and this place also; myself for insincerity, Toynbee Hall for what seems a top-hatty philanthropy'.² He was equally apprehensive about his own work, an idealistic evening course for East End workers titled 'Language, Literature, and Morals'.³ He initially described his students as 'grimed with dirt and utterly depraved... very primitive'.⁴ However, all his fears proved unfounded: Instead of 'top hatty philanthropy', Ashbee found 'splendid men' and 'silent unostentatious heroism'. Instead of being 'weary' and 'primitive', the workers exhibited 'keenness, strength, and enthusiasm'.⁵

'How splendid it is to fly up to our other world at Toynbee Hall from the quagmires of society, to meet real men; not men plus top hats'⁶

With his apprehensions set aside, Ashbee set about establishing his labour of love in 1888; the Guild and School of Handicraft. He was inspired by the philosopher John Ruskin, who believed workers could be reinvigorated through finding 'satisfying work in industrial conditions'. To manifest this, Ashbee founded his guild to teach industrial workmen artisan skills at Toynbee Hall.

¹ A. Crawford, *C.R. Ashbee: Architect, Designer & Romantic Socialist* [London: Yale University Press, 1985], 19

² *C. R. Ashbee's Papers*, 6th June 1886 [King's College Library, Cambridge, CRA/1/2]

³ *Annual Report 1887* [Toynbee Hall archives, London Metropolitan Archives, City of London], 15

⁴ *Ashbee's Papers*, January 1887 [CRA/1/3]

⁵ *Ibid.*, 22nd – 30th November 1886 [CRA/1/2]

Crawford, *C. R. Ashbee*, 27-31

⁶ *Ibid.*



It was a success; they produced high-quality products for paying customers, the workers acquired new skills, and Ashbee saw his ideals come to fruition. Whilst Ashbee found his Guild a fulfilling antithesis to professional life, he became critical of Toynbee Hall's founder Samuel Barnett. Whilst his peers adored Barnett, the idealistic Ashbee lambasted him for 'refusing to stand for anything... a eunuch – in spirit & heart – that is the reason for his cold-blooded saintliness'. Due to Barnett's moralising and *les-affaires* leadership, Ashbee became concerned Toynbee Hall was 'isolated from the poor' and just helped the residents further their future careers.⁷ Simultaneously, Toynbee Hall was embroiled in the drama surrounding Jack the Ripper, which Ashbee felt was a distraction from social work. Ever the idealist, these concerns compelled Ashbee to leave Toynbee Hall in 1888.



Dining Room decorated by Ashbee's Guild, 1895. © Toynbee Hall archives, London Metropolitan Archives, City of London. LMA/4683/SPE/01/01/007.

Ashbee permanently changed the Settlement. His Guild decorated the dining room between 1888-9. Despite Blitz damage to the site, the Oxbridge college crests they painted and Ashbee's 'tree of life' medallion survived. It is now Toynbee Hall's logo. Whilst at Toynbee Hall, Ashbee also created a committee to protect East End buildings of architectural and historical significance, thereby leaving a legacy in the East End.

After leaving Toynbee Hall, Ashbee explicitly pursued 'cooperative socialism' in a way he felt was inhibited by Barnett's leadership. His Guild moved to Mile End so members could 'grow their socialism' by mingling with

⁷ S. Meecham, *A Life Apart: The English Working Class 1890-1914* [Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1977] 82
Ashbee's Papers, late 1887 [CRA/1/3]

'people of East London' and 'union leaders'.⁸ The Guild prospered throughout the 1890s, employing a range of craftsmen and opening an affluent shop in Mayfair in 1899. A printing press was also opened to support the Guild's activities. Despite this, the Guild's school and press proved unprofitable. Lacking funds, the school moved to the Cotswolds in 1902 and the press closed. The Guild itself liquidated in 1907, leaving a forlorn Ashbee to return to lecturing, architecture, and town planning.

Amid this turmoil, Ashbee married Janet Forbes, whose father was a Guild benefactor. Their marriage concealed Ashbee's illegal homosexuality. They had rocky but 'passionately platonic' marriage. Janet Forbes remained fond of Ashbee, describing a complex character 'loved' by friends, but accused of 'conceit and arrogance' by others.⁹ Despite Janet suffering a nervous breakdown and having a long affair, they eventually had four daughters.

Too old to serve in the First World War, Ashbee worked in Chicago and Cairo, before travelling to Jerusalem to oversee post-war repairs. It was not until retirement that Ashbee reconnected with Toynbee Hall by donating a piano decorated in the Guild style. He also attended its Jubilee Event to celebrate the work to which he made a lasting, if unusual, contribution.

Further Reading

- 'Ashbee, Charles Robert', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.ucd.idm.oclc.org/view/article/30465>
- A. Crawford, *C.R. Ashbee: Architect, Designer & Romantic Socialist*, [London: Yale University Press, 1985]
- F. Ashbee, *Janet Ashbee: Love, Marriage, and the Arts and Crafts Movement*, [Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002]

Thanks to Court Barn Museum and the Guild of Handicraft Trust

⁸ Crawford, *C.R. Ashbee*, 39

⁹ F. Ashbee, *Janet Ashbee: Love, Marriage, and the Arts and Crafts Movement* [Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002], 17



Ashbee's sketch of his bedroom view at Toynbee Hall. © King's College Library, Cambridge. CRA/1/2/359

