

## **My Own 221B Baker Street**     "To a great mind nothing is little" (STUD)

### PLANNING AND BUILDING

For forty years I had toyed with the idea of making myself a full-scale replica of the most famous room in the world literature, the legendary snug , unconventional sitting room at 221B Baker Street in London where most of the wonderful Sherlock Holmes adventures begin and where the reader, embedded in safe fellowship, listens to the detective revealing his remarkable clues to his dedicated friend Dr Watson while the eternal smoke from his pipe curls against the ceiling.

However, on my own retirement we moved to a rather small terrace house and I had to drop the idea. I then suddenly remembered a fine letter from my friend John Bennett Shaw <sup>1</sup> where he temptingly describes the 221B miniature that his wife Dorothy had made for him, and realized that I could build my own scale model. Now, twelve years later, I can hardly think of anything more pleasant than a hobby including cultural and literary research, miniature handicraft and collecting.

After having read the Holmes stories once again -- this time taking careful notes -- I started with a design draft. My proper scale would be the English 1:12, one inch to one foot. And my model should at least exhibit the ground floor and the second floor of the famous three-storied Baker Street house. When musing about the dimensions of the house I decided on two criteria: The stairs leading up to the second floor must consist of seventeen steps<sup>2</sup> and the sitting room had to be large enough to hold all the furniture that is mentioned in the stories<sup>3</sup>. I converted the height of a step in my own house by multiplying by 17 and dividing by 12 and thus received a reasonable room height of 9 inches.

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<sup>1</sup> John Bennett Shaw (1910-1994)

<sup>2</sup> SCAN [Holmes:] "*I know there are seventeen steps because I have both seen and observed*". This is a key line, not only to the reader's conception of the dwelling but also to a proper understanding of Mr Holmes's philosophy. Regarding the number of steps the Dane Svend Ranild in *Sherlockiana* No 2-3, 1987 points out a paragraph in STUD, chapter 6, which runs: "*There was a violent peal at the bell, and in a few seconds the fairhaired detective [Tobias Gregson] came up the stairs, three steps at a time, and burst into our sitting room*". We know, says Ranild, that Gregson was a tall man, so we must not doubt his capacity to take three steps at a time if he was in a hurry . But how can one possibly take three steps at a time on those stairs? The only solution, says Ranild, is the following: Gregson started his run in the street , jumped over the front door step and landed on the second step of the famous stairs, went on without problems and eventually reached the second floor landing after having six times jumped over three steps.

<sup>3</sup> STUD:[...] "*a single airy sitting room*". In his book *Immortal Sleuth* (1983) Michael Harrison claims that the full scale reconstructions which through the years have been shown at exhibitions and the screen are too small and narrow. He calls attention to the fact that the No 109 Baker Street building, typical of the street and never rebuilt, contains a very large sitting room on the second floor. Brian Jackson, a model builder, has acquired a blueprint of that building and measured the room to 20x28 feet (Tonga Times #24). Against that stands a statement by Dr Watson in RESI: "*I was weary of our little sitting room*". I have chosen a compromise and my model sitting-room measures 14x20 inches, roughly equivalent to 14x20 feet in full scale.



The framework of the house is built of 1/3-inch plywood. And following the advice of my English Holmesian friend Stanley MacKenzie, expert on Victorian interior decoration, I nailed the floors with 1/2-inch-wide wooden planks, varying in length and stained dark brown with varnish.

My miniature house shows the street rooms of the building. Besides the entrance hall, with a lumber room and the famous staircase up to the next floor, the ground floor also contains Mrs Hudson's two private "below stairs" rooms<sup>4</sup>. On the second floor one finds the wellknown sitting-room and Mr Holmes's bedroom, which is specially designed to fit the demand that Dr Watson must be able to hide behind the head of Mr Holmes's bed without being seen by the cunning Mr Culverton Smith<sup>5</sup>.

Another problem I met with is the fact that Dr Watson's texts four times confirm that Mr Holmes's bedroom is located on the second floor<sup>6</sup>, connected with the sitting-room, while a fifth story indicates that his room is located one flight of stairs further up<sup>7</sup>. An intense and long discussion on this topic started in Swedish Holmesian circles<sup>8</sup> and eventually led to a constructive compromise. By lifting Mr Holmes's bedroom floor level one inch I was able to connect it with the sitting-room by two steps!

There is one window in Mr Holmes's bedroom<sup>9</sup>. The sitting-room has two<sup>10</sup> windows, one of which is a *bow window*<sup>11</sup>. A bow window was a curved bay window after modern Victorian fashion. It was brittle and expensive and when, in the Spring of 1894, the window glass was smashed by violence for the third time<sup>12</sup>, the sorely tried Mrs Hudson evidently changed the expensive curved glass against a more conventional type. Anyway, you will not find a building with a bow window in photographs of Baker Street from after 1895. The entrance of the building is placed front left and provided with a *fanlight*<sup>13</sup> which you will also find in Sidney Pagets illustrations<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> A view I share with the learned Holmesian Vincent Starrett (1886-1974): "So they lived in Baker Street, and so always shall they live; the detective and the doctor and, below stairs, the humble and loyal housekeeper" [...] Starrett: *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, 1933.

<sup>5</sup> DYIN

<sup>6</sup> STUD, SCAN, MUSG and CHAS

<sup>7</sup> BERY: "[Holmes] hurried to his chamber and was down again in a few minutes [...]"

<sup>8</sup> Known here as the "Bedroom debate" and carried in the Swedish Holmesian magazine *The Moor* during the years 1993-94, with contributions from Eric Bylander, Ted Bergman, Mattias Boström and Nisse Andersson.

<sup>9</sup> DYIN. Mr Holmers says: "You need not draw the blind" which indicates one window only. It faces Baker Street because the bedroom gas lamp is turned up as a signal to Inspector Morton in the street.

<sup>10</sup> STUD: "[...] a sitting-room, cheerfully furnished, and illuminated by two broad windows".

<sup>11</sup> BERY and HOUN chap 1

<sup>12</sup> March 1881 (STUD), April 1891 (FINA) and April 1894 (EMPT)

<sup>13</sup> BLUE, DYIN and ILLU: "[...] in the glare of our fanlight".

<sup>14</sup> SCAN and GOLD



## THE FURNISHING

Dr Watson's literary accounts of Mr Holmes's adventures must of course be the obvious guidance to what is to be found in the famous Baker Street rooms. However, when working with this reconstructing project one soon realizes that Dr Watson's stories never were intended to serve as a complete documentary inventory. The author's skilled literary technique was instead aimed at letting certain suggestive details be *spotlighted by events* as the English Holmesian James Edward Holroyd once put it<sup>15</sup>. Add to that esteemed axiom of Professor Christian Elling, the Danish Holmesian: *What is not mentioned in an official document does not exist*<sup>16</sup>.

Anyway, it goes without saying that the designer of a 221B sitting room must at first sight supply the viewer with the impression of a large number of objects, spread all over the room in apparent disarray. And even if we know that each single object has its meaning and evident presence there obviously also has to be space left for such everyday things which the narrator never considers worth mentioning. To manage that puzzle I guess that Mrs Hudson, the loyal 221B housekeeper, facing new adventures, was constantly busy dragging odd items, described by Dr Watson, in and out of the sitting room like a stage manager.

If you want to supplement your sources, you are advised to study the English artist Sidney Paget's contemporary illustrations of the stories, all published<sup>17</sup> in the Strand Magazine. They are drawn with a reliable sense of everyday details. Interesting as well are the photographs and descriptions of the full scale Baker Street sitting-room reconstructed for the Festival of Britain in London in 1951 by theatre manager Michael Weight. He was fortunate to get hold of some of Paget's own original furniture that the artist had used as models in the 1890s. Nor can anyone avoid being inspired by the faithful suite of Holmes films produced by the English TV company Granada between 1984 and 1993.

<sup>15</sup> Holroyd: *Baker Street By-Ways*, London 1959

<sup>16</sup> "Hvad der ikke findes nævnt i Aktstykker, har aldrig eksisteret". *Politiken*, København 7 April 1946

<sup>17</sup> Between 1891-1904

My 221B model is not meant as an exhibition of *other people's* view of the unique bachelor setting. Even if a lot of items are mentioned belonging to the apartment, the text amazingly often lacks information of how these items were arranged. So in the same way as the author once, step by step, builds his setting through the stories, I had to fit the pieces together using my own intuition and common sense. When Dr Watson says: ***Our chambers were always full [...] of criminal relics which had a way of wandering into unlikely positions***<sup>18</sup>, he as well inspires me to put into my reconstruction some suggestive criminal souvenirs that Mr Holmes may have liked to keep, such as Black Peter's harpoon and the cardboard box with the two cut-off ears.

Even if my chief purpose has been to transform the famous interior into the viewer's understanding of the harmonious, snug rooms as a whole, there is a special dimension connected with it. Someone has indicated that collectors often tend to load things with their own feelings and that the objects, therefore, independent of the collector's interest in a departed historical epoch, run the risk of achieving their most important significance in their relation to the collector himself. Well, there is no use complaining. The reconstruction is my own and I have chosen to place in it all relevant objects which I myself like to find there. The wise Mr Holmes once said: ***"Each may form his own hypothesis upon the present evidence, and yours is as likely to be correct as mine"***.

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<sup>18</sup> MUSG