

2. Murder at the 'Love Hut': at home with Elvira Barney. By Alexa Neale

This chapter uses a micro-history approach to explore a single home that was the site of an alleged murder in 1932. Resisting attempts to generalise, the micro-historical method focuses on the specificities of a single case study (or in some instances, a small selection of studies) that is illustrative of wider themes in contemporary social and cultural life (Kilday and Nash, 2017). The present chapter uses a case of murder because the archives for these crimes are rich in detail for everyday lives in the past. Indeed, many other historians of crime and culture have taken advantage of the same collections used here (Bell, 2015; Bland, 2013; Frost, 2004; Grey, 2012; Houlbrook, 2012; Laite, 2012; Mort, 2010; Wood, 2012). However, few historians have used crime sources specifically to study homes (exceptions include Moss, 2011), and few studies of home benefit from sources that offer as much textual description from multiple angles and directly comparable visual materials as case files for domestic murders (Blunt and John, 2014).

This chapter will use the case of Elvira Barney (defendant) to argue that, despite the dichotomies of inside/outside and public/private usually used to refer to the home (Blunt and Dowling, 2004), homes in the past can more accurately be seen as microcosms of wider social and cultural life in which boundaries are constantly being tested and negotiated. Police investigation and judicial processes that explored the interior of a home, literally and figuratively, attempted to isolate the crime-scene home from the wider social, cultural and political world outside. To explain, justify and narrativise events, the internal workings of the home were prioritised and the immediate family and closest neighbours gave evidence in court. Further, the micro-scales of the home were prioritised in textual, visual (photographic) and geographical (scale floor-plans) representations of the crime scene that focused on a small area, most often bounded by the walls of the house. Though this reflects the reality of crime (most murders, for example, are perpetrated by members of the same household as the victim), it had the impact of making murders and/or other crime events appear to be isolated, one-off incidents, rather than an extreme outcome of everyday interactions and conflicts.

The fact that Elvira Barney was charged with murder means that the processes of investigation that led to the courts, and the trial itself, have left an archival record that can be explored. The seriousness of the alleged crime also generated many more newspaper column inches than less sudden or suspicious deaths at home at the time. Further, Elvira was a connected and high-profile figure in contemporary London (though little-known today), adding to public interest and debate, generating additional documents for the historical record. The specificities of the case also show that murder or violent death could happen anywhere, regardless of boundaries of class, geography and culture. Through this case I argue that the boundaries of home did not begin and end at the door and the walls, but were more flexible, in a constant state of negotiation.

Elvira Barney was the eldest daughter of Sir John Mullens, wealthy stockbroker to King George V, and his wife Lady Evelyn, née Adamson. Elvira was a debutante, a wealthy socialite and a party girl. She was probably the inspiration for Evelyn Waugh's character of Agatha Runcible in his novel *Vile Bodies* (1930). Like Agatha, Elvira was wealthy, influential, reckless, loved partying and driving cars and was

involved in a serious high-profile car crash. She may also have inspired Noel Coward's character Elvira in his play *Blithe Spirit* (1941). Elvira is also an important person to study because she was a bisexual woman, an identity frequently erased from historical writing, though she did not live as an openly queer woman in the sense that we might recognise it today. Many scholars writing about the history of sexuality have argued that queer identities, as we understand them now, do not accurately map onto the past. Harry Cocks, for example, has argued that the binaries of homo/heterosexual are recent, echoing Foucault's assertion that sexuality as selfhood is peculiar to the present (Cocks, 2006; Foucault, 1976). These arguments are supported by other recent histories of sexuality that have argued that mapping our present understanding of sexual identity based on same-sex desire and physical acts of sex onto sexual identities in the past is reductive (Cook, 2014; Hall, 2016; Harris, 2010).

On Monday 30 May 1932, 28 year-old Elvira held a cocktail party at her home at 21 William Mews. When the party was over, Elvira and a few of the guests went on to dinner and dancing at a night club or two. This was a regular scenario and, as usual, Elvira returned home after midnight with Michael (also known as William) Scott Stephen, a man of similar age and social background to her. Within a few hours Michael was dead and Elvira devastated. The resulting trial at the Old Bailey (or Central Criminal Court) came to be known as a cause célèbre due to the social status of the defendant and the incredible case constructed by the defence. This, and the sensational coverage by the press, led to Elvira's name being associated with other high-profile twenty-somethings from wealthy families who similarly enjoyed parties, music, clothes, alcohol, dancing and driving in the 1920s and 30s, known as Bright Young People. In his book of that name, D. J. Taylor argued that Elvira 'was not, and never had been, a Bright Young Person' in the sense that it was a group of specific people, but that 'the distinction was not one which the average newspaper reader would have been capable of making' (Taylor, 2008, p. 226). The press themselves were not able to make such a distinction either, and Taylor suggests that their coverage of Elvira's case was responsible for turning the tide of public feeling, which was already ripe for change, against the Bright Young People and anyone like them. As he quotes from contemporary magazine *The Bystander*, Elvira and her friends were unlikely to enjoy public sympathy or admiration 'when such ill-bred extravagance was flaunted, as hungry men were marching to London to get work' (citation not given, quoted in Taylor, p. 226).

The glamorous micro-world of the Bright Young Things in otherwise austere times has been of interest to other researchers, but few have capitalised on Elvira's dramatic story specifically. An exception is the blog by independent researcher Maurice Bottomley, who has described Elvira's case and related topics by exploring literature surrounding her and the case (Bottomley, 2012). Summaries of the case have featured in books exploring the legal and judicial aspects of this and other cases, placing its significance within the bounds of English legal history (Browne and Tullett, 1951; Hastings, 1963; Cotes, 1976). No analysis of the case has been made by any academic, and nothing has been published about Elvira's home, or the spaces she inhabited.

William Mews was a cobbled backstreet cul-de-sac of terraced buildings off Lowndes Square in Knightsbridge '...which mostly consist[s] of rooms over garages they being occupied by chauffeurs and their families' (MEPO 3/1673: Police report, 1932). Like many other mews in fashionable Knightsbridge, in other areas of London and in other UK cities and towns, this was a narrow, quiet street hidden behind much larger, grander buildings, inhabited by wealthy families or individuals of status and their retinue of servants and staff. The mews houses in Knightsbridge consisted of two or three small rooms above a large garage at the rear of the main house, with living quarters for the men who looked after and drove the car when their employer needed it. The buildings on the west side of William Mews, for example, backed directly onto the rears of the properties in Lowndes Square, and in nearby Belgrave Square a similar mews also allowed back-door access to the main houses. In the interwar peri-

od, mews were enclaves of respectable working-class lives of people living 'in service' and their families. Though chauffeurs and mechanics and their families were above 'live-in' servants in the service hierarchy, it being considered a skilled role and allowing workers to live with their families in a relatively private dwelling, mews were still very much in the shadow of the big houses of the employers.

The larger houses, by contrast, such as that inhabited by Elvira's parents, where she herself had lived previously, were much larger and more luxurious. Sir John and Lady Mullens lived at the centre of one of the four sides of Belgrave Square in a four-storey building with no less than 36 rooms. The 1911 census of twenty years earlier gives clues to the scale of the dwelling; it had at that time housed a family of five and their 16 live-in servants, including a butler, French chef and three footmen (1911 Census: RG14/388/102). Youngest daughter Avril Mullens was married to Russian Prince George Imeritinsky, and elder daughter Elvira had been a debutante (Daily Mirror, 29 October 1925; 21 April 1923). The Mullens' neighbours included King George V's fourth son, Prince George, and his wife (the Duke and Duchess of Kent) on the end of the terrace in a building that was slightly smaller than the Mullens' but still enjoyed seven bathrooms, 'central and electric heating', a passenger lift, morning room, dining room, front and back drawing rooms and at least twelve bedrooms. The lease on that property included 'a roomy garage and chauffeur's flat adjoining the back of the house' and it is likely that neighbouring houses did also (Daily Mirror, 19 November 1934, p. 2).

Newspapers described Lady Mullens herself as demonstrating 'her good taste in decoration, which is shown in a lapis lazuli drawing-room with amber coloured curtains and leaf green carpet at her Belgrave Square house' (Daily Mirror, 29 April 1926, p. 9). These descriptions show the kind of homes and surroundings members of the Mullens family and their neighbours and friends in Belgravia and Knightsbridge were accustomed to. Yet in contrast, in 1932, Elvira (now married and separated from her American nightclub musician husband John Barney) was living in the cobbled backstreet a few hundred yards away at 21 William Mews, the sort of dwelling usually reserved for Mullens' employees and cars. However, this was not an ordinary mews house. Police described it thus: 'The address, 21 Williams Mews, is a different class of house to the majority of premises in the Mews... [It] is a converted stable consisting of two floors. On the ground floor, on the left upon entering, is a small scullery, and opposite the entry door is a door leading to a room fixed up as a lounge, and fitted with a bijou cocktail bar in the left corner... the place is prodigally furnished' (MEPO 3/1673, Police Report, 1932).

This statement betrays Elvira Barney's lifestyle in her mews house. She held frequent cocktail parties and had noisy arguments with friends in the street late at night and early in the morning, much to the chagrin of her neighbours. 'It became known to police that many disturbances had occurred at No. 21, and that numerous complaints had been made with reference to the conduct of the person living there, and of the people who visited' (MEPO 3/1673, Police Report, 1932).

Some of the complaints were received from Elvira herself, who seemed to the police to be drunk and melodramatic, unable to control her guests and their behaviour at her house. Police notes going back months were collated after she was arrested:

'3 March 1932 2am went to 21 Williams [sic] Mews - Mrs Barney alleged a man had assaulted her and her window had been smashed in the struggle.'

'15 April 1932 about midnight went to 21 Williams Mews... [a male guest refused to leave Mrs Barney's house. Police asked him to leave but before he would do so he made her promise not to carry out the

threats she had been making to commit suicide. Police evidently thought there was no cause for concern and left as soon as the man did.}]'

'17 February 1932 10.30am Mr Everton of 11 Williams Mews approached PC Richard Hastings Francis on duty and complained "bitterly" of visitors to number 21 being drunk, shouting and quarrelling, "it was impossible for anyone living near, to sleep", he said.'

'17 February 1932 4am a taxi driver fetched [a police officer] to 21 Williams Mews where Mrs Barney could not make her drunk guests leave her house. She had called them a taxi but they refused to leave' (MEPO 3/1673: Police statements).

Elvira's cocktail parties usually consisted of 'cocktails, drinks and dancing to the gramophone' (MEPO 3/1673: Statement of Sylvia Coke). Witness Hugh Wade described what would be Elvira's last party at William Mews: 'there were cocktails, caviare sandwiches, and the guests were standing about talking. They all seemed happy and voted the party a success' (MEPO 3/1673: Hugh Armigel Wade). The next morning police found the evidence of the previous night's party:

'On the counter of the cocktail bar was a bottle containing a small quantity of whiskey, two empty tumblers, one empty soda syphon, whilst underneath the counter was an empty whiskey bottle, a bottle part full of port wine, a bottle of red wine and four bottles of beer. On a table in the scullery there were thirty used glasses of various sizes, four empty soda syphons and a cocktail shaker. Underneath the sink in the scullery were two empty vermouth bottles and three empty gin bottles' (MEPO 3/1673: Police Report).

Other than the evidence of the party, the scullery apparently contained very little. No photographs of the ground floor rooms are extant in any of the several files for the case, but plans and descriptions show a conspicuous absence of furniture and detail in the scullery, compared to other rooms in the house. This, and the absence of a dining table in the other rooms, supports the view of Elvira as a rich, carefree party girl who dined out every night. On the other hand, this depiction of Elvira's party lifestyle suited the aims of those constructing the evidence that supported it. Later on the night of her last party at William Mews, prosecutors for the crown alleged, Elvira shot her lover Michael Scott Stephen at close range and he died in the doorway of her bedroom. From that night, William Mews would never be home to Elvira again. Any privacy she had previously enjoyed was destroyed, her name and that of her parents thrust into newspapers, and local, national, even international interest endured, in part because of their connections with British and Russian royalty. Worse still, if the Crown's narrative were accepted and she were found guilty of the charge against her, Elvira could be hanged for murder.

Elvira would not receive the empathy of the jury at the Central Criminal Court as an apparently morally dubious, wealthy and noisy socialite who spent her time partying, spending her father's money and disturbing her hardworking neighbours. It also helped the Crown case for her home to be seen to be 'prodigally furnished', as police described, or as 'extravagant', a word which bore added significance in what were, for many, austere times and featured in the opening speech by Sir Percival Clarke for the Crown (Daily Mirror, 5 July 1932). The sitting-room, and especially the cocktail bar, was repeatedly highlighted as a symbol of Elvira's extravagance and lifestyle, by police, prosecution counsel and in the press, although there was debate at the time about whether the house could be considered 'extravagantly furnished', given that 'at least one room was not furnished at all' (Browne and Tullett, 1951). The biographers of Bernard Spilsbury, the pathologist in the case whose evidence was largely ignored, argued twenty years later that given her social status, Elvira 'would inevitably have been described as beautiful had she been the reverse, just as everything about her little two-floored dwelling was called

luxurious'(Browne and Tullett, 1951). However, the few contemporary arguments against Elvira's home as luxurious come from people in a similar social and economic position to her own, who lived in houses like her parents' at Belgrave Square. To them, 21 William Mews was a small and modestly furnished house by comparison to their own. To the neighbours, press, police and public, on the other hand, this was the type of home they knew externally – a small, terraced, two-storey building rather than a grand thirty-something-roomed architectural spectacle – but one which on the inside was furnished extravagantly, wastefully.

Journalist MacDonald Hastings described in the 1950s:

'Even the police, when they saw the place, were as shocked as it's possible for policemen to be. Over the cocktail bar in the corner of the sitting-room was a wall painting which would have been a sensation in a brothel in Pompeii. The library was furnished with publications that could never have passed through His Majesty's Customs. The place was equipped with the impediments of fetishism and perversion' (Hastings, 1963).

Hastings does not cite his sources. No reference to the wall painting has been found, in the case files or elsewhere and, unfortunately, no photographs of the ground floor interior were taken as evidence in the case. Plans and a description show that the sitting room ran the full length of the ground floor of the property, covering more than 180 square feet. Whether this much floor space would justify a description of the party of 26-30 party-goers as 'crammed into the little house' is as subjective as views of its furnishings. Other than the cocktail bar, the room was comfortably furnished with a large corner settee, armchair and two further chairs, two end-tables, a radiogram and bureau. The furniture was placed around the walls, facing into the open space in the middle of the room, which allowed the maximum space for dancing (CRIM 1/610, 1932).

Photographs, plans and much richer descriptions were recorded for the upstairs of the property, where the bedroom was furnished in a contemporary style. Compared to similar-sized homes of the same time, this was indeed luxuriously furnished. Furniture and soft furnishings were brand new, fashionable and coordinated. Police gave rich descriptions but failed to comment on the fact that the patterned silk curtains covering the entire west wall of the room matched exactly the wallpaper on the opposite wall:

The bedroom furniture consisted of a double full sized divan bed, over the head of which was an extension from the telephone downstairs in the lounge... Looking towards the window from the head of the bed and to the left of the bed was a chair on which was the cushion the revolver is alleged to have been hidden under. At the foot of the bed was a dressing table on which was some spilled face powder and an empty wine glass. Under the dressing table, on the carpet, there was a large quantity of face powder. Opposite the dressing table there was a chair and in the seat of the chair there was also face powder. A fixed wardrobe extended from the dressing table to the window and on the opposite side of the bedroom by the door was another fixed wardrobe with a kind of shelf outside it, on which rested a number of papers and periodicals. Over this shelf there was a mark on the wall where a bullet had struck and at the side of the wardrobe itself there was a hole caused by the ricochet of the bullet. Plaster from the wall had fallen and a very small quantity was resting on the top newspaper, which was a copy of the *Daily Sketch* of the 30th May, 1932. Some of the plaster had fallen on to a copy of *Britannia and Eve* of January 1931 and some pieces of plaster and paper was on a copy of the

Daily Sketch dated 16th May, 1932, still lower down the pile. In front of the window was a chair in which there were two rag dolls... (Police Report, 1932)

Apart from the periodicals described, the room was full of reading material, including more than fifty magazines and newspapers, such as *The Daily Express*, *The Stage*, *National Graphic*, *Cosmopolitan*, *London Life*, *Tatler*, *The Picture Budget*, *Vanity Fair*, theatre programmes, and a book called *This Delicate Creature*, published in 1928. The covers of some of the editions make suggestions about Elvira's possible self-identity, or certainly her aspirations. The magazines were colourful and modern and content commented on culture, leisure and style. (Bottomley, 2012) There were no house or home magazines; Elvira's understanding of herself does not seem to have been related to the home, to domesticity or family life. It is impossible to know to what extent Elvira's lifestyle resembled the magazines she consumed and, as Houlbrook has argued in the case of Edith Thompson in the 1920s, it is dangerous to claim strong links between reading and a sense of self identification, although Edith's extensive written commentaries on what she read help Houlbrook make conclusions about the way her reading influenced her and allowed her to escape from everyday life (Houlbrook, 2010). What we can say about Elvira is that she read magazines that featured young, mobile, glamorous, active, affluent and cultured party-goers enjoying driving, sports, dancing, films and theatre, and the case files and contemporary newspaper reports, including comments from her friends, describe these as among Elvira's interests. Her hobbies and her lifestyle were facilitated by her money and the privacy it purchased her in her mews home.

Whether or not Elvira did identify with the media she consumed, it certainly appeared that she spent a lot of time reading and, more specifically, reading in her bedroom. She also read letters in bed, including two from Michael found in her flat and read out in court. One letter indicates that he wanted her to find it in her bedroom and read it when he was not there. Handwritten on her pale blue headed notepaper, the pre-printed address ('21 Williams [sic] Mews // Lowndes Square, S.W.1. // Sloane 6869') is crossed out and 'Love Hut' handwritten in its place. He wrote the letter downstairs in the living room, perhaps at the small writing desk, when she was in the house. At one point he smudges the ink because she came downstairs and he had to hide it under his coat, according to the letter. 'Baby, little Fatable,' he writes, 'This little note is to be awaiting your arrival in the place in which I've been happiest of all my life' (CRIM 1/610: Exhibit 8). That he meant the bedroom is clear from her reply. It seems that she found the letter before he had intended, but she reassures him in her response: 'I will read your letter dozens [underlined] of times when I'm in bed tonight' (CRIM 1/610: Exhibit 8). Elvira's bedroom was the part of the house where she spent the most time and enjoyed the most privacy, and the letters and witness statements intimate that Elvira also enjoyed an active sex life there. Such evidence contributed to the case for the prosecution, who needed to draw the attention of the jury to what contemporary society deemed her indecent behaviour, particularly as a married woman and the daughter of a knight with links to royalty. If the jury could be convinced that Michael Stephen's death had been caused by sexual jealousy rather than being an accident, as her defence counsel argued, Elvira could be convicted of murder (Lustgarten, 1951).

Elvira and her sister Avril were both separated from their husbands, but Princess Imeretinsky, as Avril was styled, had gone back to live with her parents at Belgrave Square (*Daily Mirror*, 15 November 1932). With 36 rooms, there was plenty of space for Elvira too, and it was only a few hundred yards away - so why did she not do the same? One reason might be the sexual freedom that a quiet backstreet mews house away from her parents, their peers, and the newspaper gossip column writers, would permit. Certain standards of behaviour were expected of members of the 'Smart Set' although it has been argued that Elvira and her lover were on the fringes rather than at the centre of stylish London life (Taylor, 2008; Browne and Tullett), and so she could entertain her lovers and friends away

from the public gaze. The relative privacy of 21 William Mews was broken, however, when Michael's death brought Elvira's home, relationships and routines out into the open for scrutiny by police, court, newspapers and public. (For just some of the many press photographs taken of the building, see Getty Images: <http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/license/73332132> ; <http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/license/78970205>).

To be able to enjoy an active sex life was certainly one reason to live in a quiet backstreet, but neighbours still saw and heard what they interpreted as Elvira's morally loose behaviour. According to Dorothy Hall, a chauffeur's wife who lived at number ten, directly opposite Elvira's house, Mrs Barney 'had a man' prior to Michael 'who I should think lived with her there. He used to go in with her late at night and would be seen again there early the following morning. He was with her up to the latter part of last year, when he stopped coming. Shortly after, quite a few weeks, a man to whom she spoke as 'Michael' went and lived with her. Until a fortnight ago he was there every night' (MEPO 3/1673: Statement of Dorothy Hall).

Mrs Hall recalled several incidents in which she had been woken by the noise from across the mews. Dramatic exchanges frequently took place between Mrs Barney and Mr Stephen, she said, during which Elvira was usually screaming from the open upstairs window wearing very little or nothing at all, and Michael was stood in the mews below. Several other neighbours saw and heard similar goings-on and complained to police. One night after Elvira kicked him out, Michael slept in an open car in the mews, much to the disgust of the neighbours (MEPO 3/1673: Statements of Dorothy Hall, William Kiff, and Kate Stevens). However, we cannot know if their observances were usual or not. Did they see and hear everything that went on in the mews, or was it just that Elvira was particularly noisy? Were they shocked by her behaviour as a woman of the same social status as their employers? There are no testimonies from neighbours describing that they had ever visited Elvira or been inside the house. It seems none of them were ever invited to any of the cocktail parties. Her relative social position to Mr Stephen did not prevent Mrs Hall the chauffeur's wife from telling the former to 'clear off' as he was 'a perfect nuisance' (MEPO 3/1673: Statement of Dorothy Hall). Despite his apologies on this occasion, the picture that is revealed is of Mrs Barney as a noisy party girl and an inconsiderate neighbour, with drunken friends to match. Given that this was a quiet, cobbled backstreet mews where the small stable-houses were overshadowed by the backs of the big houses of the inhabitants' employers, Elvira and her noisy friends – the same sort of people they worked for - may very likely have seemed like intruders. Witness statements by neighbours do not speak of harmonious relationships with the resident of number 21; they seem to have observed her with irritation. Elvira did not say anything about her neighbours, but on the other hand her statement did not call upon her to do so. Elvira's home spilled out into the street and the sounds of her domestic life came in through the walls of her neighbours' dwellings. But this was a one-way relationship (CRIM 1/610; MEPO 3/1673).

Five photographs were presented in court as part of Exhibit 3, the majority focusing not on the landing where Michael died but on the extravagantly-furnished bedroom. The below image of the mews, with Elvira's house on the right of the picture, depicts a view of the quiet back street. The photograph allowed the court and jury to imagine the disruption caused by the dramatic events witnesses testified to; the late-night parties and guests drunkenly falling out of the door and into taxis, Elvira shouting at them to leave, the shouting matches between Elvira and Michael in the wee hours of the morning from the bedroom window to the street outside, and the gunshots echoing around the mews. In the far distance of the photograph the much taller, grander houses that surrounded each side of the small mews stables can be seen.



Fig. 1: CRIM 1/610: Exhibit 3: Book of photographs 'Taken on Tuesday 31st May and Wednesday 8th June, 1932 by Alfred Madden, New Scotland Yard' [1 of 5].

Mrs Hall lived opposite number 21, and, despite her observances, Elvira was keen to stress that she lived alone, that she and Michael were just 'great friends', and she downplayed their intimacy by stating 'he used to come and see me from time to time' and 'see me home' (CRIM 1/610: Exhibit 10: Statement of accused). During her trial at the CCC she replied in the affirmative to questions about Michael's reliance upon her financially, admitted that she was 'his mistress' (although she was, in fact, the married party), and said that yes, she had tried to keep details of her lifestyle and relationships out of her statement because she was 'anxious to keep her mode of life from her parents' (Daily Mirror, 6 July 1932). Potentially, they had more to lose than she did if her lifestyle were revealed in public, and so perhaps it suited them as well as her to have her living away from their home given her rather public behaviour in the mews. On the other hand, she may have lived at the 'Love Hut' to entirely keep her mode of life from her parents, and although she was separated and was clearly a 'party girl', they may have assumed that she did not have lovers in the mews. While she was keen to hide her mode of life from her parents, Elvira clearly did not care what the neighbours thought of her. Rather than being bounded by the walls of her mews home, Elvira's social space extended out into the street she lived in. While she was protected by the privacy of the mews, her domestic life was not private from her neighbours.

Elvira had no choice but to admit to her sexual relationship with Michael. His parents and brother, whose wealth and social status were similar to those of the Mullens family, although they lacked a title, believed Michael was letting a suite of rooms at Brompton Road, but they were not supporting him

financially since he argued with his mother (MEPO 3/1673: Statement of Francis Richard Stephen). This was considered suitable as a temporary address for a single young man when he was in town, away from his family who lived in the country. Brompton Road itself was a very suitable address, being less than half a mile from Elvira's house and only 500 feet from Harrods. Investigations at Michael's rooms were conspicuous to police because there were no night clothes or underwear there. They doubted whether he lived there at all:

'On 1st June 1932, I went to 178 Brompton Road, and searched a bedroom which had been occupied by the deceased man, Michael Scott Stephen. In that room I found a photograph of Mrs Elvira Dolores Barney, one dress suit, one white dress waistcoat, one blue cloth waistcoat, light grey waistcoat and pair of trousers, one blue lounge suit, one pair grey flannel trousers, one mackintosh, three pairs of shoes, one pair of slippers, one dressing gown, two tennis shirts, one dress shirt, one or two day shirts, some ties, socks and handkerchiefs. There were no hats, night attire or underclothing' (MEPO 3/1673: Statement of DS John Sourr).

'I can't say whether or not Stephen and Mrs Barney were living together,' answered Arthur Jeffress when questioned by police regarding his friend and her lover, 'but last night we all three had dinner together at the Café de Paris and Stephen told me he was residing at Brompton Road' (MEPO 3/1673: Statement of Arthur Filden Jeffress). Whether Michael was living at 21 William Mews or not did not seem to matter in the case, when all evidence seemed to highlight their sexual intimacy and the possibility of Elvira's jealousy and violent behaviour. Of the bedroom on the night of Michael Stephen's death, Detective Inspector William Winter said 'There was no sign of disorder or struggle there. The bed had the appearance of being slept in, and the bed linen was not unusually disarranged' (MEPO 3/1673: Statement of DI William Winter). Her doctor, the first on the scene, described how Elvira had been in her dressing gown when he arrived. 'She said that they were in bed together quarrelling,' he told police (MEPO 3/1673: Statement of Thomas Arnold Durrant). Elvira failed to mention that the couple had been to bed together but she did admit to 'a quarrel about a woman he was fond of', a 'Miss C' (MEPO 3/1673: Exhibit 10: Statement of accused).

References to another woman did little for Elvira's defence case. She further incriminated herself and demonstrated her capacity for uncontrollable violent outbursts and 'paroxysms of rage' by slapping a policeman across the face when he suggested she put on her warmer fur coat, rather than the one she kept upstairs in her house, because she might find it cold at the police station. 'I'll teach you to say you will take me to a police station' she shouted 'now you know who my mother is you'll be a little more careful in what you say and do to me!' (MEPO 3/1673: Statement of DI W. Winter). The suggestion by the press that she might receive preferential treatment by the criminal justice system due to her family's position was a major concern. Even behind the scenes people in authority were concerned about the 'nasty comparisons [that] are made [in the press and in private] as to what would have happened had the prisoner been a man or woman without any influence' (DPP 2/92: Letter marked 'personal' from Wilfred Dell, Registrar of the Mayor's and City of London Court, to E.H. Tindal Atkinson, Director of Public Prosecutions, 8th July 1932).

An anonymous postcard sent to the Director of Public Prosecutions suggests that the special home comforts Elvira enjoyed at 21 William Mews were replicated in the temporary home of her 'private cell' at Holloway Prison, where she was given 'telephone, powder-puffs and grand tea-gown etc.' (DPP 2/92: Postcard sent by 'An Observer' Brixton, unaddressed, dated 10 June 1932). Newspapers reported that Elvira's homely 'ordinary comforts' there included 'an iron bedstead with a flock mattress instead of the usual boarded bed and also a small table and a chair' (Daily Mirror, 31 August 1932). There was also a suggestion that Elvira kept a photograph of Tallulah Bankhead in her cell (Bottomley,

2012). This choice of celebrity photograph is interesting. It is possible that Elvira was friends with the actress, the two having perhaps been at some of the same parties and sharing mutual friends. Bankhead had a reputation for being very sexually active, often with members of her own gender, and for having a cocaine habit. It is possible that Elvira kept the photograph in her cell because she identified with the actress, for these reasons or others.

Elvira's sexuality and cocaine habit are confirmed by a letter hidden in one of the files related to the case. 'Hidden' because generally, where they do exist, these types of files record only procedural details related to questioning and arrests of defendant and witnesses. The letter represents an attempt to blackmail Elvira, though for her attention, and repayment of expenses, rather than for any great sum of money. It threatens to send a letter to her mother describing her past sexual behaviour and drug-taking, a copy of which is also in the file. The author, Barbara Graham, was very distressed and writes as Elvira's former lover who felt she had been thrown over for a partner Elvira preferred (MEPO 3/1673: 14B: letter from Barbara Graham to Elvira Barney (undated) with commentary by Met Police dated 5th September 1932). While her motivations for making such accusations might make the content more extreme, perhaps tending toward exaggeration, they also add weight to the argument that a major reason for Elvira inhabiting a mews house rather than her parents' home was to allow her greater sexual freedom. The privacy of a backstreet mews away from her parents would be particularly useful if that sexual freedom involved same-sex relationships as the letter describes, which could have generated even greater scandal than the sexual relationship she was already having with a man who was not her husband. More than that, though, if Elvira regularly used cocaine as the letter accuses, it may be necessary to reconsider the meaning of the 'face powder' police found all over the floor, dressing table and chair of her bedroom, and in her bathroom cabinet. While this may not have been cocaine, Elvira was more widely suspected of abusing the substance after Barbara Graham committed suicide and the note she left was printed in newspapers: 'Tom Chadbourne and Elvira Barney are responsible for this... please make [Sir John] Mullens pay the [hotel] account' (Daily Mirror, 31 August 1932). The Daily Mirror intimated at their interpretation that Elvira had been responsible for the dead woman's long-term drug problem which was the cause of her suicide. Equally possible is that it was Barbara's rejection in favour of Tom Chadbourne by Elvira that led her to name the pair in her suicide note. The additional context given by these documents shows the rich and varied details crime sources are able to offer. With only a basic reading of the trial transcript published in the Great Trials series (Cotes, 1976), it would be impossible to appreciate the extensive layering of evidence for Elvira's behaviour and her home life that contributed to her eventual acquittal. Furthermore, the approach to these sources used here demonstrates the complex provenance, meanings and interpretations of the evidence and the ways they could be manipulated to favour an outcome that benefitted such an influential family.

When the case was at an end, Elvira Barney never went back to her home at 21 William Mews, instead returning to her family home at Belgrave Square. She did not stay for more than a couple of weeks, and it seems she never set up a permanent home again. Within a month she was accused of being responsible for a car accident in Cannes where she was touring France with 'a male companion' (Tom Chadbourne) and had returned to her previous 'fast' lifestyle, as described in Barbara Graham's letter (Daily Mirror, 18 January 1935). On Christmas Day 1936 Elvira was found dead in her hotel room in Paris. It was speculated that drugs had a role in her early and sudden death, but whatever the cause, her wealthy family managed to limit exposure in the press. Their reputation was safe. Mullens continued his career as high-profile banker until his own early death the following year, and sister Avril went on to marry divorcé Ernest Aldrich Simpson (ex-husband of Wallis Simpson before she married Edward VIII). It is not known what happened to 21 William Mews after Elvira left, but today the original building has been demolished and replaced.

Of the murder case files I have examined, Elvira Barney's is typical in that it describes conflict (and not just on this occasion) in the bedroom as being related to arguments about sex and relationships. Elvira's bedroom was frequently a site of outpourings of emotion. They argued here about the other woman Elvira thought Michael was seeing, or about sex, and they usually did so in the early hours of the morning, after they had come home together from a party or nightclub. Their arguments poured out of the small mews house and on to the small street below, for all the neighbours to see and hear. In the living room and the street, Elvira's social life was laid bare. Her noisy parties were a source of conflict with neighbours, though they do not seem to have confronted her personally. She also argued with her friends on the ground floor and the street when they refused to leave after some of the parties. This is not typical of most working-class streets or domestic murders. Case files for the majority of twentieth century murders explored by this author show that low income and limited social capital resulted in small living spaces, multi-function rooms and overcrowding. These and other poor housing conditions meant specific challenges in everyday life, complicated by additional factors and inequalities such as gender, race, age, sexuality, disability and household structure.

Elvira's home was also unusual because it was so luxurious and was not used for cooking or preparing meals. In every case of murder in domestic space I have analysed, it is possible to argue that the home was evidentially extremely important, and not only because it was the place in which the crime occurred. Police, newspapers and counsel all looked for evidence in the home to discredit either the defendant or the victim, as well as to look for the cause of death, for the basis of a murder conviction over manslaughter, and evidence of the identity of the murderer. Elvira's home was no exception. Descriptions of it were used to paint her as wild and extravagant, and neighbours' observations of her behaviour at home used to highlight her indecent behaviour. However, her failure to meet the standards expected of her were not framed in terms of her housewifery or domestic skill. Women of her class were not expected to perform this type of domestic labour. In this way she is unusual amongst the cases I have analysed. Much more typical is the case of John Anderson (defendant) who was charged with the murder of his wife, Lilian, at their home in Prebend Street, Camden, two years after Michael Stephen's death at Elvira's home in Knightsbridge. Even as the victim, rather than the defendant, the extent to which Lilian Anderson's domestic roles and routines met expected standards were scrutinised. The home and behaviour in the home were significant in the case, in the same way, but to a lesser extent and for different reasons, than in Elvira Barney's case (CRIM 1/742).

The case of Elvira Barney shows that when it came to housing in London, higher capital could buy not only greater space but more sexual freedom and increased privacy, even if private and sexual life spilled out into the street. While Elvira's comings and goings and partners were observed by her neighbours, the respectable status of those 'in service' nearby ensured their discretion. They were not about to tell the newspaper gossip columnists about Elvira's late-night visitors and loud drug-fuelled parties. Even if they did, the rules of social hierarchy and newspaper censorship would prevent such tales from reaching print (Bingham, 2009).

Elvira Barney's case shows that, even in a home that was modest in size compared to what she could afford to live in, improved amenities, more modern design, newer furnishings, and more fashionable decorations could be purchased, but these were not the most influential factors on everyday life and experience at home. By pushing the boundaries of her home outside the walls of her house Elvira could take advantage of the additional space, attempt to wrestle control over who was allowed inside and when, and enjoy freedoms not normally associated with her class. It was her economic and social capital that allowed her to do this. The case of Michael Stephen's death illustrates that the boundaries between public and private and between the social worlds inside and outside the home space (in itself

not restricted to the walls and doors of the building) are not distinct, or fixed: rather, they are constantly being negotiated.

Postscript

'...he got up and dressed and was going to leave her. She said to him "You know what will happen if you leave me" and he went to the chair and took the revolver from under the cushion and said "Anyhow you will not do it with this"' (MEPO 3/1673: Statement of Thomas Arnold Durrant).

Elvira chased after Michael to get the gun back and they ended up on the landing at the top of the stairs. The gun went off during the struggle, delivering the fatal bullet wound to Michael's lung. This was the narrative settled on by judge and jury and Elvira was acquitted and released (CRIM 1/610, 1932).

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