



City of Westminster

# Cabinet Member Report

<b>Decision Maker:</b>	Cabinet Member for the Built Environment
<b>Date:</b>	8 June 2016
<b>Classification:</b>	For General Release
<b>Title:</b>	Commemorative Green Plaque for William Somerset Maugham at 2 Wyndham Place, W1
<b>Wards Affected:</b>	Bryanston and Dorset Square
<b>Key Decision:</b>	An entry has been included in the Forward Plan of Key Decisions
<b>Financial Summary:</b>	The Green Plaque Scheme depends on sponsorship. Sponsorship has been secured for this plaque
<b>Report of:</b>	Director of Policy, Performance & Communications

## 1. Executive Summary

William Somerset Maugham was a British playwright, novelist and short story writer. He was among the most popular writers of his era and reputedly the highest paid author during the 1930's.

## 2. Recommendations

That the nomination for a Westminster Commemorative Green Plaque for William Somerset Maugham at his London home at 2 Wyndham Place, be approved, subject to Listed Building Consent being granted for the Plaque and for sponsorship in full .

### **3. Reasons for decision**

William Somerset Maugham was a complex and interesting character and master of the short, concise novel. The last years of the British Empire offered him magnificent canvasses on which to write his stories and plays, evoking the feelings and emotions that allow the reader to understand and identify with the characters.

### **4. Policy Context**

The commemorative Green Plaques scheme complements a number of Council strategies: to improve the legibility and understanding of Westminster's heritage and social history; to provide information for Westminster's visitors; to provide imaginative and accessible educational tools to raise awareness and understanding of local areas, particularly for young people; to celebrate the richness and diversity of Westminster's former residents.

### **5. Background**

#### **William Somerset Maugham (born 1874 – died 1965)**

#### **5.1 Early Years**

5.1.1 William Somerset Maugham was born on 25 December 1874 at the British Embassy in Paris, the fourth son of seven children (only four survived infancy). His mother was socialite and writer Edith Mary *née* Snell (1840-1882) and his father Robert Ormond Maugham (1823-1884) was a lawyer for the British Embassy. Living in the suburbs of Paris, with William's older brothers Charles, Frederick, and Henry already at boarding school in England, he enjoyed the attentions of his affectionate mother and nurse. He spoke French and their home was often a vibrant salon with many literary and artistic people of the day including Guy de Maupassant and Gustave Doré.

5.1.2 By the age of ten Maugham was orphaned with an income of £150 p.a. after the death of his mother from tuberculosis and his father of cancer. He was sent to live with his Aunt Sophia, *née* von Scheidlin, and Uncle Henry MacDonald Maugham (1828-1897), the Vicar of All Saints, Whitstable, Kent.

5.1.3 Maugham attended The King's School, Canterbury which was difficult for him. He suffered from a stutter and his lack of proficiency in English and loss of his parents could not have helped matters when he was taunted and bullied by classmates. At sixteen he refused to continue at this school and his uncle allowed him to travel to Germany where he studied literature, philosophy and German at Heidelberg University. He came under the influence of John Ellingham Brooks who encouraged his ambitions to be a writer and Maugham completed his first work, a biography of opera composer, Giacomo Meyerbeer.

5.1.4 Back in England at the age of eighteen, and after a short stint as an accountant, Maugham studied medicine at St Thomas's Hospital in London. While in lodgings he filled notebooks with his literary ideas and continued to write nightly. Never having difficulty with his studies, he qualified as Member of the Royal College of Surgeons and licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians, London, in 1897, but never practiced. He was then on to his next profession; that same year his first novel *Liza of Lambeth* was published. As a medical student midwife, Maugham had seen first-hand the poor and suffering of the working classes in Lambeth's slums. The experience would serve him well in writing vivid physical descriptions of his fictional characters, and in realistic portrayals of the seedier aspects of life and its consequences on the human psyche. The book's first print run sold out in a matter of weeks. Maugham, dropped medicine and embarked on his 65-year career as a man of letters. He later said, "I took to it as a duck takes to water".

5.1.5 The writer's life allowed Maugham to travel and to live in places such as Paris, Seville and Capri for the next decade, but his next ten works never came close to rivalling the success of *Liza*. Works published around this time include *The Hero* (1901), *Mrs Craddock* (1902), *The Merry-Go Round* (1904), *The Land of the Blessed Virgin; Sketches and Impressions in Andalusia* (1905), and *The Explorer* (1907). His first drama *Man of Honour* (1903) brought him to the attention of London's intelligentsia but with little rewards. This changed in 1907 with the success of his play *Lady Frederick* and by the next year, he had four plays running simultaneously in London. His success was repeated in New York and he celebrated by moving into a luxurious house in Mayfair (6 Chesterfield Street) with his old friend and financial advisor, Walter Payne.

5.1.6 In 1913, shortly before he left for New York, Maugham met Gwendolyn Maude Syrie Barnardo (1879-1955), daughter of the founder of the Dr. Barnardo's Homes and the wife of Sir Henry Wellcome, American pharmaceutical manufacturer. They began an affair with Syrie giving birth to their daughter Elizabeth Mary Maugham "Liza" (1915-1981). The couple married in 1917 despite Maugham's relationship by then with Gerald Haxton, and often spent time apart in various pursuits, Syrie being a noted interior decorator and Maugham travelling and writing. The marriage was unhappy and they were divorced in 1929.

## 5.2 The Great War

5.2.1 By 1914 Maugham was famous, with ten plays and ten novels published. When war broke out he was too old to enlist (aged 40) and he served in France as a member of the British Red Cross's so-called "Literary Ambulance Drivers", a group of 24 well-known writers, including Ernest Hemingway. During this time Maugham fell in love with Gerald Haxton, who was later to become Maugham's devoted companion and secretary until his death in 1944.

5.2.2 When Haxton left to join the American Army in 1915, Maugham went to live in New York City and published his most famous novel, *Of Human Bondage*. After turning down a desk job offered by his golfing friend, Winston Churchill (then First Lord of the Admiralty), earlier in the War, Maugham was invited by Britain's Secret Service Bureau to become a secret agent. Maugham began work as a writer in Switzerland but also as one of a network of spies who operated against the Berlin Committee formed in Germany to promote the cause of Indian Independence.

5.2.3 In 1916, Maugham travelled to the Pacific to research his novel *The Moon and Sixpence*, based on the life of Paul Gauguin. This was the first of his journeys through the late-Imperial world of the 1920s and 1930s which inspired his novels. He became known as a writer who portrayed the last days of colonialism in India, Southeast Asia, China and the Pacific, his experiences forming the basis of many short stories, plays and novels: *East of Suez* (1922) *Our Betters* (1923) and *The Letter* (1927), are amongst the better known of these.

5.2.4 Maugham could speak Russian and in 1917, despite the early stages of tuberculosis, he moved to Petrograd in Russia where he was given the mammoth task of attempting to keep the Provisional Government in power, and Russia in the War, by countering German pacifist propaganda. His novel *Ashenden* published in 1928 would draw on these eclectic experiences. This collection of short stories about a gentlemanly, sophisticated, spy is said to have influenced Ian Fleming's later James Bond novels.

### 5.3 The Villa Mauresque

5.3.1 Having spent so much time on the French Riviera, in 1926 Maugham decided to move there permanently and purchased Villa Mauresque on 9 acres at Cape Ferrat where he hosted one of the greatest literary salons of the 20's and 30's. While entertaining he continued to be highly productive: writing plays, short stories, novels, essays and travel books, including *Cakes and Ale* (1930), *The Narrow Corner* (1932), *Don Fernando* (1935), *The Summing Up* (1938), *Up At The Villa* (1941), *The Razor's Edge* (1944), *Then And Now* (1946), *Creatures of Circumstance* (1947), *Catalina* (1948), and *The Art of Fiction: An Introduction to Ten Novels and Their Authors* (1955). After the death of Haxton, Alan Searle (1905-1985) became Maugham's lover and secretary, assisting him in writing *Looking Back* (1962).

### 5.4 World War II

5.4.1 In *Strictly Personal* (Maugham's wartime memoir of 1941) he describes walking around an almost deserted Cap Ferrat passing closed villas whose owners had fled. Now wishing to contribute in some way to the war effort he was given a project, by the Ministry of Information in Britain, to write a series of articles on the French war effort and the attitude of the French towards the British. He visited London for several months before returning to tour France and assess the general feeling among the people. The situation in Eastern and Central Europe grew ever more threatening and by June 1940 Maugham knew he must escape.

5.4.2 On 17 July 1940, two small British colliers, the *Saltergate* and the *Ashcrest*, were suddenly made available. The advice to leave now became an order to evacuate, everyone was to be at the Cannes Customs House early on the following day. What everyone did not know was that the poorly equipped ships were to take only 1,000 refugees in total. Leaving American Gerald Haxton in charge of Villa Mauresque and his possessions, Maugham left. A total of 1,300 were eventually crammed in pitiful conditions on board the two ships, crossing the Mediterranean at night in a sea full of Italian submarines, before eventually, after 20 days, reaching Gibraltar and then England.

5.4.3 Maugham, by then in his sixties, spent most of the war in the USA on a propaganda mission for the British Government to encourage neutral America to aid Britain. Ostensibly on a lecture tour, few other well-known British writers worked harder or had such an impact, or proved as invaluable as W Somerset Maugham. With the USA entering the War in 1941, Maugham moved from Hollywood to South Carolina to devote himself to his writing, but his services were constantly called upon and it was not until 1944 that he was able to publish his last great novel *The Razor's Edge*. With the death of Gerald Haxton to TB in November that year, Maugham faced the prospect of returning to Villa Mauresque alone.

## 5.5 Post-War Years

5.5.1 During the war years the Villa Mauresque had suffered from occupation by the French, Italians and Germans but mostly from the Royal Navy's shelling of the local lighthouse. Maugham returned in 1946 and, after the necessary repairs, guests came and went as before. Maugham began a relationship with Alan Searle, whom he had first met in 1928. A young man from the London slum area of Bermondsey, he proved a devoted companion and secretary and Maugham began to travel once more.

5.5.2 William Somerset Maugham died in Nice, France, on 16 December 1965, having twice been nursed back to health from pneumonia. Following cremation in Marseilles his ashes were brought to England and interred in Galpin's garden of his old school, King's College, Canterbury, close to the Maugham Library. Searle inherited £50,000, the villa's contents, Maugham's manuscripts and revenue from copyrights for 30 years (after which they passed to the Royal Literary Fund).

## 5.6 Recognition

5.6.1 Maugham received many honours during his lifetime including the Queen's Companion of Honour (1954); Fellow of the Library of Congress, Washington, DC, U.S.A.; an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Toulouse, France; and Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Maugham himself instituted the Somerset Maugham Award for the encouragement and support of British writers under the age of thirty-five

in 1947. Notable recipients include V.S. Naipaul, Kingsley Amis, Martin Amis and Thom Gunn.

## **5.7 No. 2 Wyndham Place**

5.7.1 The No. 6 Chesterfield Street property became too cramped for the needs of Maugham, his wife Syrie and their daughter Liza and in 1919 they moved to a handsome 4 storeyed mansion at 2 Wyndham Place. Here Syrie was able to indulge in her decorative talents, furnishing the house for high-level entertaining. Maugham continued to travel to avoid this unhappy marriage but when at home the couple tried to keep up appearances, riding in Hyde Park, inviting friends for breakfasts, lunches and lavish evening receptions. Here the glitterati from the world of art, literature and theatre from England and America would gather. In 1923, at the instigation of Maugham, the family moved to a larger house in Bryanston Square. Here Syrie could entertain on an even more lavish scale and showcase her furniture restoration business.

## **5.8 Blue Plaque**

5.8.1 There is a GLC Blue Plaque to Somerset Maugham at 6 Chesterfield Street, Mayfair, where he lived from 1911 to 1919.

## **6. Financial Implications**

The cost of the plaque, its installation and Green Plaque Scheme administration costs will be borne by the sponsors, (clients of managing agents Concierge London). There is no cost to Westminster City Council.

## **7. Legal Implications**

The property, 2 Wyndham Place where Maugham lived is listed Grade II. A Listed Building Consent application has been submitted in tandem with this report.

## **8. Consultation**

The owners of 2 Wyndham Place support the nomination and Ward Members have been consulted and no objections have been raised.

**If you have any queries about this Report or wish to inspect any of the Background Papers please contact: Kim Patterson**

**Telephone: 020 7641 3297**

**E mail: [kpatterson@westminster.gov.uk](mailto:kpatterson@westminster.gov.uk)**

**Report Author: Chris Stanton**

**Telephone: 020 8763 2044**

**Email: [seebee.stanton@virgin.net](mailto:seebee.stanton@virgin.net)**

## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix 1**

Location plan of 2 Wyndham Place, W1 at 1:1250 scale

### **Appendix 2**

Photo Montage showing proposed location of William Somerset Maugham plaque at 2 Wyndham Place.

### **Appendix 3**

Wording and layout of proposed William Somerset Maugham Plaque

For completion by the **Cabinet Member** for the Built Environment

**Declaration of Interest**

I have <no interest to declare / to declare an interest> in respect of this report

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

NAME: **Councillor Robert Davis MBE DL**

State nature of interest if any .....

.....  
*(N.B: If you have an interest you should seek advice as to whether it is appropriate to make a decision in relation to this matter)*

For the reasons set out above, I agree the recommendation(s) in the report entitled

**Commemorative Green Plaque for William Somerset Maugham at 2 Wyndham Place, W1**

Signed .....

Cabinet Member for the Built Environment

Date .....

If you have any additional comment which you would want actioned in connection with your decision you should discuss this with the report author and then set out your comment below before the report and this pro-forma is returned to the Secretariat for processing.

Additional comment: .....  
.....  
.....

If you do not wish to approve the recommendations, or wish to make an alternative decision, it is important that you consult the report author, the Director of Law, City Treasurer and, if there are resources implications, the Director of Human Resources (or their representatives) so that (1) you can be made aware of any further relevant considerations that you should take into account before making the decision and (2) your reasons for the decision can be properly identified and recorded, as required by law.



Note to Cabinet Member: Your decision will now be published and copied to the Members of the relevant Policy & Scrutiny Committee. If the decision falls within the criteria for call-in, it will not be implemented until five working days have elapsed from publication to allow the Policy and Scrutiny Committee to decide whether it wishes to call the matter in.

## Appendix A

### Other Implications

#### 1. Resources Implications

1.1 There are no resources implications arising from this report

#### 2. Business Plan Implications

2.1 There are no Business Plan implications arising from this report

#### 3. Risk Management Implications

3.1 There are no risk management implications arising from this report

#### 4. Health and Wellbeing Impact Assessment including Health and Safety Implications

4.1 There are no health and safety and wellbeing issues arising from this report

#### 5. Crime and Disorder Implications

5.1 There are no crime and disorder issues arising from this report

#### 6. Impact on the Environment

6.1 There are no environmental issues arising from this report

#### 7. Equalities Implications

7.1 There are no equality issues arising from this report

#### 8. Staffing Implications

8.1 There are no staffing issues arising from this report

#### 9. Human Rights Implications

9.1 There are no issues relating to responsibilities under the Human Rights Act 1998 arising from this report

## **10. Energy Measure Implications**

10.1 There are no energy measure issues arising from this report

## **11. Communications Implications**

11.1 Should this report be approved and an unveiling ceremony arranged the Council's press section will be informed

Note to report authors: If there are particularly significant implications in any of the above categories these should be moved to the main body of the report.