

THE HISTORY AND MYSTERY OF WILLIAM HOLMAN HUNT'S HOUSE IN JERUSALEM

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One day, in November 2019, a memorial stone-bench in Jerusalem, facing the Greek Orthodox monastery Mar Elias on the road to Bethlehem, disappeared without the city administrators knowing what had happened to it. The bench was commissioned in 1922 by Edith Hunt, the wife of William Holman Hunt, in honour and memory of her late husband's work and life in Jerusalem (fig. 1). The disappearance of the bench had left Hunt's house (fig. 2) – built in 1876 at what is now number 64 Ha-Nevi'im Street [Street of the Prophets] – as the only remaining relic of Hunt in Jerusalem. A year later, in May 2020, the owner of Hunt's house – the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem, which had been receiving "key-money" from the Israeli tenants living in the house since 1967 (after the Six-Day War) – had the tenants evacuated from the premises. The decision was made after a discussion between both sides regarding the legal question whether "key-money" tenants should be compensated. (*Key-money* is the fee paid to a landlord, or even a current tenant, to secure a lease on a residential rental property.) The matter was finally settled in court, as the tenants were compensated and consequently evacuated.

These contemporary legal events provide an opportunity to discuss the historical events concerning the house. We focus on two questions, which to date remain unsolved: who lived in the house after Hunt had left it in 1892, without selling it; and how did the Russians initially get hold of the house, and is their claim bound in any historical documents? To answer these questions, we present archival material, unseen in this context before, to discuss the unique history, mystery, anecdotes, and references of a house which in the past 150 years resided British, American, Ottoman, Jewish, Israeli, and Russian tenants.

One of the several reasons for the disbandment of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was Hunt's travel in 1854 to the Holy Land in pursuit of the footsteps of Jesus to convey a sense of authenticity in Hunt's depiction of religious scenes. Upon his arrival, Hunt's first impression of Jerusalem was