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THE SECRET HISTORY OF OUR STREETS



LONDON

A SOCIAL HISTORY THROUGH THE HOUSES AND STREETS WE LIVE IN

HOXTON

Hill Street

SHOREDITCH

BRICKLAYERS' ENGINE SHED

WILSON STREET

ARNOLD CIRCUS

REVERDY ROAD

GREENWICH

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CHAPEL

BOARD SCHOOL

GAS WORKS

CONSUMPTION HOSPITAL

MONTAGU HOUSE

BRUNSWICK CHAPEL

GREEN ST

LABROCK GARDENS

BRYAN PLACE

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B.M. 84

S.P.

JOSEPH BULLMAN, NEIL HEGARTY AND BRIAN HILL

CONTENTS

Cover
About the Book
About the Authors
Title Page
Introduction: The Streets of London
‘The Belgravia of Bermondsey’ - Reverdy Road
Things Fall Apart - Deptford High Street
The Safe Area - Arnold Circus
The Thoroughfare - Caledonian Road
A Street of One’s Own - Portland Road
Paradise Regained - Camberwell Grove
Picture Section
Index
Acknowledgements and Credits
Copyright

About the Book

A History of London told through the stories of the houses and streets that we live in, *The Secret History of Our Streets* explores how property has become one of the defining forces of our lives – how in many ways where we live dictates how we live.

In a modern version of a classic survey from the 19th century, where Charles Booth spent 17 years exploring the social and economic conditions of every street in Victorian London, this remarkable book tells the story of six London streets and the people who lived there. The selection represents the widest possible picture of the city both socially and geographically: from Deptford High Street, Camberwell Grove and Reverdy Road in the south to Caledonian Road in the north, Portland Road in the west and Arnold Circus in the east. Each has a rich fascinating story of its own, from the rich being pushed out by the super-rich in Notting Hill to the first public housing scheme being launched at Arnold Circus. Together, however, their stories reveal the big underlying forces that have shaped London for the last 130 years: gentrification, migration, slum clearances, property speculation, and the rural being subsumed by a growing metropolis.

Accompanying a major BBC series, *The Secret History of Our Streets* is the untold history of the streets beneath our feet, and a fascinating social document of Britain's changing class and social system. It is a unique opportunity to discover the life of our capital, and will change the way you think about the streets you walk down every day.

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THE SECRET HISTORY OF OUR STREETS



LONDON

A SOCIAL HISTORY THROUGH THE HOUSES
AND STREETS WE LIVE IN

JOSEPH BULLMAN,
NEIL HEGARTY
& BRIAN HILL

BBC
BOOKS

Introduction
THE STREETS OF
LONDON

Nearly forty years of age, tall, abnormally thin, garments hanging as if on pegs, the complexion of a consumptive girl, and the slight stoop of the sedentary worker, a prominent aquiline nose, with moustache and pointed beard barely hiding a noticeable Adam's apple, the whole countenance dominated by a finely-moulded brow and large, observant grey eyes [...] an attractive but distinctly queer figure of a man.

So ran a description, penned in 1880, of a wealthy English industrialist named Charles Booth who would presently set out on an extraordinary 17-year quest. His singularly ambitious objectives were to chart, record and understand the true nature of London - at this point, the largest and most economically and culturally powerful city in the world - and to inquire into the nature of the lives and occupations of its inhabitants. The result of these labours would be Booth's extremely influential 17-volume *Life and Labour of the People in London*, published between 1889 and 1903.

The labours of Booth were characterized by a vast sense of scale and by an ambition to understand and map the world around him. They were of a piece with Victorian culture in general: as reflective of the *Zeitgeist* as Isambard Kingdom Brunel's spectacular railway and maritime works and Joseph Bazalgette's civil engineering projects. Britain in the 1880s was at the pinnacle of its global power and reach: its empire was approaching its zenith and the world's financial system turned on decisions made in London. Politicians and colonial administrators had created a global commodities market centred on Britain

too: the raw materials of the world flowed into British ports to be turned into manufactured goods and exported out to the world. The nation was rich - and London, as its commercial and political heartbeat, was richest of all. And yet not all was well - for, even at this time of wealth and power, a sense of foreboding was developing.

This was in part the result of the changing nature of this ostensibly munificent world. For one thing, the structures that had been established to service the country's economic and military supremacy were being threatened increasingly by the growing economic might of Germany and the United States. In addition, in the 1870s Britain had suffered a harsh recession: agricultural labourers left the fields and crowded into the cities, where there were fewer and fewer jobs available; immigration from Ireland and further afield had increased markedly - and again, the industrial cities were a favourite destination for these newcomers. The orthodoxy of *laissez-faire* economics, which had seemed to serve Britain so well for so long, began to be examined as never before.

On a philosophical level, the country's prosperity - or rather, the ways in which it had generated its wealth and the means by which it was being sustained - was also being questioned by elements within the very social class which had benefitted most from it. Liberal, middle-class Britain paused and took stock of its world. There had always been voices, of course, which dissented from this culture's image of itself: novelists such as Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell had had much to say, in decades past, of the social underbelly; artists such as Luke Fildes painted vivid scenes of deprivation and poverty for the education of the Victorian middle classes; and the existence of such journals as the *Graphic* and the *Pall Mall Gazette* demonstrated that there was a consistent appetite for tough, hard-hitting descriptions of contemporary society. The lives of London's poorest residents formed a particular focus of attention -

although these same lives tended to be observed from a discreet distance. And there were dangers implicit in such reportage, not least in the tendency of such journalists to describe the London working class as one homogeneous group, and in terms which stripped its members of any apparent control or ability to alter their dire living and economic situations.

Commentary, however, also began to assume a tone of sharp, overt protest. This took a variety of forms: socialist writers and artists such as William Morris took umbrage at what he perceived to be the desecration of the cities and countryside alike in the name of industrial gain, and at the fouling of workers' lives and dignity in the name of progress. Trade union membership swelled and labour strikes became more frequent, more prolonged and more violent. A sense of insurrection in the country - or in quarters of it - entered the political mainstream, as factions in both the Liberal and Conservative parties groped towards a more interventionist economic model, one that contained the seeds of a future welfare state. A measure of local government was encouraged, state money was spent on education and on welfare, the franchise was extended and extended again.

The framework of a future democracy was being installed, in other words - but a sense of social distress was in place too, and it could not be easily swept away. And there was no consensus on the road that must now be taken: for every radical Liberal activist or One Nation Tory who could envisage a cautious expansion of welfare and of government spending, any number of others saw the road to hell opening up in this idea of greater state intervention. And yet others saw the world in overtly moral terms: they considered that the face of the country itself had become grimed, besmirched by years of excessive profits coupled with inattention to the physical needs - and to the souls, indeed - of the people as a whole.

* * *

Charles Booth was born in Liverpool in 1840, into a Liberal, nonconformist family. His parents were representative of the independent-minded, canny, prosperous and commercial caste who dominated the economic life of the industrial cities of northern England - and Booth soon demonstrated the same acumen: in the 1860s, he established with his brother a shipping company, plying the trade routes between Britain and North America; soon, the Booth brothers became extremely rich. In 1872 - a year after his marriage to Mary Macauley, a niece of the eminent Liberal historian Thomas Babington Macauley - Booth suffered a breakdown from overwork: as well as running a business, he had thrown himself into a range of social causes. It was simply too much. Booth pulled back for some years, watching politics from the sidelines. Early in the 1880s, however, he removed to London - and here he witnessed the world in its entirety: wealth, careful respectability and terrifying poverty. For this was, as he saw it, a metropolis consisting of several cities meshed tightly together, yet for the most part ignorant of one another. The squares and boulevards of Mayfair and St James's had as little in common with the terraces of comfortable Victorian middle-class housing that had sprouted north and south of the city in the course of the nineteenth century as they did with the slums of Shoreditch in east London and Notting Dale on the city's western skirts. To an inquiring mind, this was a conundrum - and Booth set out to educate himself on the absorbing and horrifying matter of London, its worlds, its classes and its myriad lives.

'Fascinating', wrote Mary Booth's cousin (and Booth's own assistant) Beatrice Potter years later, 'was his unself-conscious manner and eager curiosity to know what you thought and why you thought it; what you know and how

you had learnt it.' Booth sought to listen to the ferment of London: to the socialist and radical thinkers who had taken as their cause the frightful poverty that existed in the East End and the city's docklands; and to more moderate figures who believed in a gradual education of the working classes into an alleviation of their situation. This exercise was in spite of his own firmly un-socialist views; and in spite too of his conviction that neither socialism nor social philanthropy held the key to social improvement. Most of all, Booth simply disbelieved the papers he read, the people with whom he spoke, the journals which painted such vividly bleak portraits of life in contemporary London. He could not accept the claims made about the degree of social deprivation that prevailed in London - and in particular, the startling statement made by M. H. Hyndman, chairman of the Marxist Socialist Democratic Federation, that 25% of all Londoners lived in poverty. There was nothing else for it but to begin his own investigation: to see for himself the nature of life in London; to measure the breadth and depth of the poverty that existed - and to suggest the ways in which it might be banished.

There was only one way to draw up such a report: coolly and scientifically, using the latest statistical methods - and undertaken by pounding the streets. Booth was convinced that such a survey would demonstrate that the poverty of London was in fact less vast than had been generally supposed. He could not know that his inquiries, beginning in the spring of 1886, would expose the fact that human need and deprivation were even greater and more firmly rooted than he could have imagined.

* * *

Booth at first had difficulty in designing and consolidating his method. It proved difficult, for one thing, to recruit and then to retain assistants - who tended to step back once the

daunting scale of the survey was revealed to them. Then, a chance examination of the School Board records provided the entry he needed into London's statistical underbelly. The school board's representatives, Booth discovered, visited the households of London to gather information on future pupils: most of them 'have been working in the same district for several years, and thus have an extensive knowledge of the people'. This was exactly what Booth needed too - and these records, together with extant Poor Law statistics and police files, came to provide the foundation for his own survey. Of course, many individuals and families lay beyond the reach of school inspectors; here, the survey would be obliged to extrapolate. Booth himself devised the famous system that sorted London households into groups or Classes, each signalled by an individual colour. Black (A) signified the worst slum properties, inhabited by the 'vicious and semi-criminal' lowest class; dark blue (B) signified the very poor - and so on through light blue, purple, pink and red to yellow (H), signifying the wealthy servant-keeping upper classes. A second system classified the occupations of the individuals encountered by Booth and his assistants: it now became theoretically possible to plot each of these individuals on a graph according to their wage, job and apparent standard of living. A definition of what exactly constituted 'poverty' was his next job - and he decided that it lay within his bands C and D, the members of which could make shift to live, if they spent wisely, husbanded their resources well and had the added benefit of 'a good wife and a thrifty one' to help keep up appearances. Bands A and B were, therefore, below the poverty line: the members of these social groups could not hope ever to make ends meet. With his facts and methodology now clear, the process of information-gathering could begin.

Over the next three years, Booth and his team pored over the various records of the East End, and visited in

person over 3,000 streets – and in 1889 the first volume of *Life and Labour* appeared. Booth's habitual discretion and delicacy – his assistants were forbidden from prying too closely into the lives they were investigating, forbidden from asking searching questions – was reflected in its pages: pseudonyms were given to individuals and streets alike. The research was written and phrased – or so Booth asserted – in such a way that it could not be accused of flights of fancy: he would not ascend the rhetorical heights of passion scaled by the journalists and socialists who had opened up the misery of the East End to the world. Rather, the simple facts could tell the story a good deal better – not to mention more honestly, as he told the Royal Statistical Society in 1888:

I am indeed embarrassed by the mass of my material, and by my determination to make use of no fact to which I cannot give a quantitative value. The material for sensational stories lies plentifully in every book of our notes; but even if I had the skill to use my material in this way – that gift of my imagination which is called 'realistic' – I should not wish to use it here.

Yet it could not be said that Booth wrote his reports in a dusty, disinterested statistical style. Far from it: time and time again, his own opinions, conditioning and views of the world inform and direct his style. His moralizing anxieties about the poor, their deportment, their habits and failings are all clearly evident – and they undercut any sense of these 17 volumes as an exemplar of statistical analysis. His survey is therefore by no means authoritative – yet it is at the same time beguiling and highly attractive: a portrait of a city and a society at a particular phase in its development – and a reflection of that society's anxieties and issues, as filtered through a highly organized, highly intelligent and

highly opinionated consciousness. Little wonder, then, that Booth's words have stood the test of time: for they consist of one man's compendium of a world, with its mores and its habits, that has vanished utterly.

The limitations of Booth's survey and methods, however, are readily apparent – not least in the form of his famous poverty maps, which have become instantly recognizable icons of *fin de siècle* British history. The maps encapsulate the extraordinary ambition of Booth's survey, setting out to impose a colour-coded visual order on a vast, seething city. But they stand too as emblems of a yawning gap between vision and reality – for Booth's statistical order could not be applied coolly to all of the neighbourhoods surveyed. The colour red inked onto a map of Deptford High Street meant, as we will see, something rather different from the colour red inked onto a map of Camberwell Grove: that is, his categories shifted confusingly in meaning according to context – a fact that in itself undercut the authority of his findings.

And there were other limitations and contradictions. For example, Booth may have cherished the ideal of statistical rigour – yet the behaviour of the people he and his assistants surveyed, including their look, their dress, their manner and the way in which they presented their homes, were deployed to ideological effect: again and again, the poor of London were portrayed in pathological terms, the reasons for their want and misery presented using the biological ideology fashionable – indeed, orthodox – at the time. The poor were poor because poverty literally ran with the blood in their veins: they made their environment dirty; and there was little or nothing to be done about such a situation than to clear such folk away, shift them from one part of London to another so that the cleared quarter of the city had a chance to cleanse and recover itself.

Yet Booth was more than capable of sensitive and penetrating engagement with the lives of these people – of

descending from the rarified heights of physiognomic theory to explore the substance and material of human lives. This was especially the case in his earliest surveys, when he left his comfortable west London home at intervals to occupy lodgings in the East End - at first, the focus of his inquiries. This exchange was by no means disagreeable: he took pleasure in conversation and observation; in noting the street life and private lives to which he now had access; in admiring the household management skills of the average working-class married wife and mother; and in setting aside the fine dining of his home for the 'oatmeal porridge and thick bread and butter of his east London landladies'.

He was a *flâneur*, then, in the classic bourgeois style. Indeed, he was but one of a host of such *flâneurs* exploring late-Victorian London: George Gissing, for example, on his Grub Street; Robert Louis Stevenson, portraying a 'labyrinthine' city in thrall to Irish terrorists in his potboiler novel *The Dynamiter* (1885); and Henry James, who set *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) against a backdrop of anarchist violence in this 'huge, luxurious, wanton, wasteful city': each of these gentlemen took it upon themselves to pace the streets of what James called 'dreadfully delightful' London; and to absorb its manifold thrills and delicious horrors. And it is this force of observation - running alongside the wealth of empirical evidence presented in volume after volume and the visually arresting style of map after map - that help to account for the survey's lasting power. By setting out a version of London that might stimulate the eye and the imagination, Charles Booth sought to make sense of a city that at all times seemed to slip away from adequate comprehension.

As for his legacy: the significance of his survey could be measured within a matter of years of its conclusion in 1902-1903. Booth had not uncovered the *fact* of poverty in British society - but he had helped to define it, his notion of

the 'poverty line' encapsulating in the public mind the shape and form of want and deprivation. While Booth was no social radical, then, his findings - the sheer volume and form of which could not possibly be ignored - provided a signal for change. The first of these reforms came in 1906, when the incoming Liberal administration of Henry Campbell-Bannerman began setting in place the changes - in the form of, among other measures, an expanded free education system, old-age pensions and national insurance - that laid the framework for the British welfare state. And so, while poverty and social distress did not vanish as a result of Booth's labours - not then and certainly not later - they became increasingly intolerable concepts to an increasing number of people. They became accepted as social evils and as collective issues - and Booth's survey can take some of the credit for this shift in public perception.

* * *

More than a century later, London is no longer the world's largest city - but it has retained its sense of enormity, with a further hundred years of narratives now compressed into its pounded streets and pavements. Much of the fabric of the city that Booth explored remains intact: or ostensibly intact, though changed by the accretions of war, prosperity, poverty, terrorism - by the endless accumulations of history. This book takes Booth's survey as its base note - but removes its vastness by settling on six streets, the histories of which in many ways represent the experience of London in the course of this intervening century.

Our streets are spread across inner London - from Camberwell, Holland Park and Islington to Shoreditch, Deptford and Bermondsey - and their dramatic histories have diverged widely. In west London, for example, the expensive pastel facades of Portland Road disguise a

history of chronic poverty, disease and violence. Beneath the green, serene mound of Arnold Circus in east London lie the crushed remnants of one of the city's worst slums - while the elegant red-brick buildings surrounding the Circus represent a Victorian experiment in creating social perfection in the heart of the capital. The quiet, pretty nineteenth-century terraces of Reverdy Road in Bermondsey survived the wrecker's ball as a result of muscular local government intervention; while the character of working-class Deptford High Street was changed permanently - again as a result of local government policies. Airy Camberwell Grove has fought (not always successfully) to retain its almost rural tranquillity; but Caledonian Road - cut though it originally was through the green fields of nineteenth-century Islington - epitomises an inner-city thoroughfare, with its strengths and social and economic challenges. Taken together, they represent something of the diversity of London as well as a century of extraordinarily diverse social, economic and human history.

History has in the past too frequently been applied from the top down: a desiccated parade of political leaders, monarchs and administrators that, taken together, do little to expose the complex weave of real histories, real stories, real experiences. This book, by contrast, takes for granted that on a fundamental level Booth's method was correct: that history rises from street level, that it is composed of the experiences of a multitude of voices; and that it can only truly be experienced by listening to these voices and absorbing the stories they have to tell. The Deptford trader, for example, who remembers the devastating impact of the planning policies devised by 1960s' local government agencies: 'As I'm growing up, I can see what other kids feel when they want to fight. I wanted to fight the council, but you couldn't fight 'em.' The owner of a gracious Georgian property in Camberwell, who acknowledges that his house

and its surroundings in fact own *him*: 'it has to take precedence over individualism'. And the resident of a slum house in the decrepit Notting Hill of the 1940s - 'half the floorboards were missing, because if my mum was short of a bit of firewood to start the fire, up a floorboard would go' - that is now worth over two million pounds.

It follows Booth in other ways too. He was fascinated by the domestic intricacies of life: of how people lived and where and by what means their businesses, their properties and their communities functioned - or failed to do so. This book asks these same questions by exploring these six contemporary streets, first surveyed by Booth a century ago; by colouring the context of the neighbourhoods within which they are positioned - and by bringing their stories up to the present day. The themes of life in London - gentrification, economic decline or revival, the influence of social class, the (in)ability of citizens and communities to control their destinies in the face of forces ranged against them, migration, whether voluntary or involuntary - all appear in certain guises in Booth's survey; they reappear throughout the history of twentieth-century London, and they dominate, in various and frequently startling forms, the histories of these six streets. It is a good deal easier to grasp the story of a street than of a city - of any city, much less a city like London. In exploring the history of six streets, this book seeks also to interpret the always evolving nature of London itself, and to frame it against its new, twenty-first-century world.

‘The Belgravia of Bermondsey’
REVERDY ROAD

*A feature of the district is the variety of its smells – jam,
glue, leather, confectionery and poverty.*

Charles Booth

IN THE HEART of south Bermondsey, a small network of streets lies between Southwark Park Road and the Old Kent Road. These streets are Victorian in origin, and the presence of a fine Anglican church set on Thorburn Square at the heart of the grid seems to underscore the area's orderly beginnings. The houses are predominantly two-storey and neither large nor grand: their scale, like the streets themselves, is emphatically domestic. The Victorians, however, were fond of striking contradictory notes: in this corner of Bermondsey, the air of prim tidiness is leavened and lifted by arched windows that add graceful touches to many of the house fronts.

Naturally, time has altered this quiet corner of south London. Today, for example, the streets are tree-lined - this an addition of the early twentieth century. Some of the houses have been ambitiously extended; others have swapped their wooden window frames for plastic. On Reverdy Road, a row of six houses has vanished completely - to be replaced not by modern homes nor even by a small park, but by brambles, wild honeysuckle and sloes, by rough undergrowth, by an accidental refuge for wildlife. Other features remain: the church of St Anne on Thorburn Square, for example, is as stately as it ever was, though surrounded today not by the original elegant Victorian terraces (once the most aspirational houses in the neighbourhood) but by an eccentric box of 1960s-era flats. Today, the church deals with issues familiar to many London parishes: its congregations are in decline; and it must compete for attention with smaller churches based locally - many reaching out to the black population of south

London, who travel to worship in Bermondsey from further afield. And at the corner of Reverdy Road and Southwark Park Road stands Church Cottage, a sign of potent continuity: since 1881, this has been the doctor's house, although today's doctor no longer works from the former dispensing rooms at the back. The area is changing. Venezuelan, New Zealand and American citizens now live on Reverdy Road and the surrounding streets; the Jubilee line extension has hooked Bermondsey more firmly into the commercial life of central London; and housing prices have risen. Estate agents can point to the desirable Victorian pedigree of this small corner of the borough of Southwark, to its relative lack of tower blocks, to the leafy quietness of its streets, to its status as a conservation area. At heart, however, Reverdy Road and its neighbouring streets have remained predominantly white working class. There are many reasons why this is the case: as we will see, changes in policy and in land ownership, together with a vibrant local political culture have all been instrumental in forming the landscape of this corner of Bermondsey.

* * *

Bermondsey has seldom been glamorous. Wedged between the Thames and the Old Kent Road, it is a district surrounded by some of the capital's most recognisable sights and destinations: Tower Bridge provides a dramatic entry into (and a smooth exit from) Bermondsey; London Bridge station, with its mass of platforms and arches, its serpentine roads and its new, glittering Shard piercing the sky, lies just to the north-west; the bells of Southwark Cathedral chime the hours; the tourists flock to Borough Market and to the string of cultural landmarks - Tate Modern, the Globe theatre and the South Bank - just a short walk away; and the boats and expensive apartments of St Katharine's Dock lie just on the other side of the

Thames. But none of these places belongs to Bermondsey itself: instead, like so many other districts of London, this is a place apart, with a sharply defined sense of itself.

The name, derived from Old English, first appears in the Domesday survey of 1086: *Beormund's Island* implies watery origins; and the tell-tale 'ey' ending connects Bermondsey with any number of other water-bound places - Guernsey, Lundy, Bardsey, Jersey - on the margins of Britain. Not that Bermondsey was itself ever an island. Instead, it was something more mundane - an unpromising stretch of marshy ground, low-lying and prone to flooding from the tidal Thames. As a result, the Romans skirted the district: Watling Street - now the Old Kent Road - avoided the wetness and mud of what became Bermondsey, so that travellers and legions could remain dry-shod on their way from Dover and Canterbury up to London and on to Chester. The terrain of the district, together with its location on the wrong side of the Thames from Roman and Saxon London, meant that Bermondsey would remain obscure and undeveloped until comparatively late.

It took the Church - one of the very few institutions with the necessary clout, power and money in medieval England - to begin the long, expensive process of shoring up the banks of the river against the floods, building dikes and drainage channels, and eventually making the land profitable. Soon, the usual patchwork of fields and hedges appeared; the area gained a name for its orchards and fruit trees; and the Thames was pressed increasingly into service as a conduit of trade and influence. By the seventeenth century, Samuel Pepys could write of a languorous riverine Bermondsey as the home of delightful pleasure gardens - the so-called Cherry Gardens - by the river:

June 13, 1664. - Thence [from the Tower] having a galley down to Greenwich, and there saw the King's

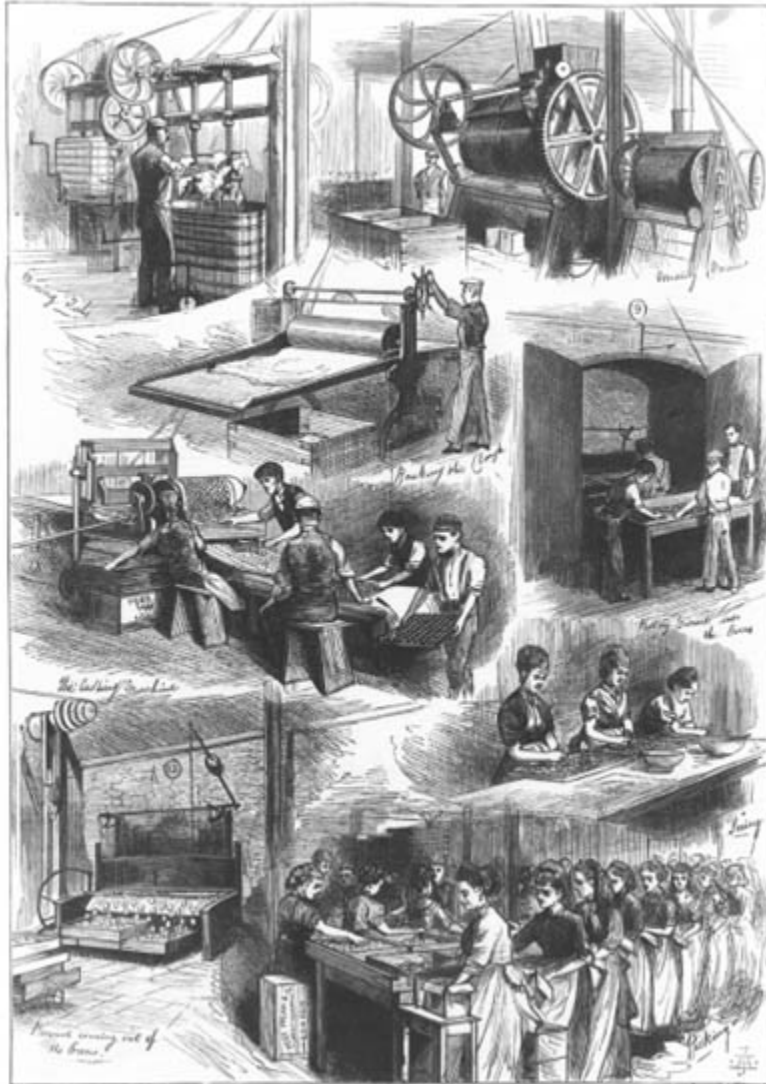
work, which are great, a-doing there, and so to the Cherry Garden, and so carried some cherries home.

June 15, 1664: - And so to the Cherry Garden, and then by water singing finely to the Bridge and there landed.

Such descriptions, however, are rare. Rather more common are the portraits of a district that is increasingly dense with houses, with labour, with industry. The Huguenot migration from France in the seventeenth century left its mark on Bermondsey, in the growth of weaving and other crafts. The development of the Thames docklands had a profound impact on the area: in J. M. W. Turner's *The Fighting Temeraire* (1839), the great ship is being tugged past the Bermondsey docks to be broken up. Later still, the district became associated with the trade in tanning and its noxious by-products; riverside districts in Bermondsey stank of urine and animal faeces. And as workers crowded in, living standards declined: in *Oliver Twist*, Charles Dickens could describe the mid-nineteenth-century horror of the notorious Jacob's Island slum on the Thames:

... crazy wooden galleries common to the backs of half a dozen houses, with holes from which to look upon the slime beneath, windows, broken and patched, with poles thrust out, on which to dry the linen that is never there; rooms so small, so filthy, so confined, that the air would seem to be too tainted even for the dirt and squalor which they shelter, wooden chambers thrusting themselves out above the mud and threatening to fall into it - as some have done; dirt-besmeared walls and decaying foundations, every repulsive lineament of poverty, every loathsome indication of filth, rot and garbage: all these ornament the banks of Jacob's Island.

Yet even in the early part of the nineteenth century, the southern part of Bermondsey remained relatively pastoral: the maps of the day still trace the old landscapes of fields, footpaths and hedgerows, the old Roman road replaced now by the Old Kent Road as the main thoroughfare striking south-east from London Bridge. By the end of the 1830s, however, the world began rapidly to change: railways were slicing through the flat fields on their way to Greenwich and further afield; and by 1836, a passenger terminus - the forerunner to London Bridge station - had been established in central Bermondsey. Indeed, the railway helped to mould the social order of the district: north of the line, the land stretched up to the river and its associated industries; south of the line, the residents could afford to cultivate a tentative gentility.



Bermondsey was famous for its biscuit and other food-processing factories, the chimneys of which sent sweet, malty aromas wafting across the area. This engraving, from the *Illustrated London News* of December 1874, introduces the reader to the world of Peek Frean biscuit manufacturing.

Since the 1700s, much of the land in south Bermondsey had been owned by the Steavens family. By the mid-nineteenth century, it had passed (by marriage and in the absence of any male Steavenses) to James West – and it was West’s business ambitions that led to the development of this part of Bermondsey. Another wave of new industries started up, mainly to do with food processing: most famous of these was the Peek Frean biscuit factory, the chimneys of which sent wafting over Bermondsey sweet, malty aromas to add to the medley of other scents and fumes already in the air. Later, Peek Frean would be joined by the Pink’s and Hartley jam plants, Pearce Duff custard manufacturers and by Crosse and Blackwell, purveyors of savoury relishes to the nation. This rapidly expanding sector needed labour – and ideally, this labour should reside close by: after all, if workers lived practically on the next street, they would have no excuse to be late for their shifts. West had a certain financial acumen, having served as Secretary to the Treasury: he soon realized the earning opportunities implicit in his banks of land in Bermondsey – and he set about transforming the fields and marshes into streets of orderly terraced rows of workers’ accommodation.

The process of systematic planning and development began as early as the 1850s, when local Anglican congregations started fundraising to establish a new parish and church in the area. Then, in 1868, the West estate began to grant long leaseholds to patches of land: the new leaseholder might build a house (as long as it was the one specified by James West), agree a rent rate (within a certain limit) and retain the land for 70 years. In return, the West family would receive the ground rents; then, once the leases expired, the property would revert to West ownership. And so the streets of the West estate sprang up: Reverdy Road, Alma Road, Balaclava Road – named, patriotically, for the famous Crimean battle – and others; the socially ambitious villas of Thorburn Square lay in their

midst; and the area rapidly became home to a working class of skilled and semi-skilled workers. There was an abundance of employment, and their families prospered - at least in comparison to many in other parts of London.

This financial stability was relative. The censuses of 1891 and 1901 contain page after page of figures on Reverdy Road and its adjoining streets and reveal that these homes were seldom lived in by a single family. Instead, there was a density of humanity packed into the modest terraces. Typically, one family would be housed on the ground floor, another on the first floor; for the sake of convenience, the oven stood on the landing between the two households. Lavatories of any description were far from being the rule in Victorian London - but the houses of Reverdy Road could boast both an outside convenience, and an outside tap, placed by the builders just at the back door. Even in their crowded state, then, the houses on Reverdy Road were - in subtle but important ways - a cut above the accommodation available elsewhere in Bermondsey.

Not all of the residents made biscuits, custard, chutney and jam for a living. The 1891 census notes the presence of lift attendants, port watchmen, telegraphists and railway clerks, machinists, dyers, dressmakers and the occasional 'scholar'. In the 1901 equivalent, the Victorian mania for documentation and exploration seems a little on the wane - for now the denizens of Bermondsey are categorised rather more sweepingly: page after tart page of 'worker' is itemised. People from all over London - from Camberwell, Bethnal Green, Islington and Kennington, as well as neighbouring Walworth and Rotherhithe - had come to live in Bermondsey; and an occasional terse 'Scotland', 'Liverpool' and 'Ireland' indicates that others too gravitated here. Many of the listed individuals, however, were born and lived their entire lives in Bermondsey - and saw no reason to move elsewhere.

By the turn of the century the district had become established. St Anne's on Thorburn Square had been consecrated in 1879: a local vicar, Thornton Wilkinson, had taken to preaching in the streets and holding outdoor prayer services to raise both awareness of the need for a church and funds to pay for it; and by the 1890s, the church was obliged to add side aisles to cope with its swelling congregations. The area was decent and respectable: its houses were nicely maintained, its gardens spick, its doorsteps scrubbed; and the large houses on the square added a welcome gloss to the smaller surrounding properties.

'The people are no longer ists.'

In 1900, Charles Booth arrived on Reverdy Road. His report and colour-coded maps indicate the desirability of this street and its surroundings to a certain class of Londoner - he designated it pink, in sharp contrast to the blacks and dark blues that dominate his maps of Bermondsey, and his comments were, as usual, clear and concise:

These are all 2 storied and comfortable streets. Yellow brick, built at the time of the Crimea [sic]. Some tenanted by one family as by salesmen and traveller but the majority by two: good gardens at the back: railwaymen, engine drivers, guard, police, live here: houses seldom empty and hard to get: small fronts with iron railings: fairly broad and clean streets.

Booth went on to sum up the nature of Bermondsey's social geography, its range of the very poor and the rather less

poor, and the activities that kept some of the people of the district fed and warm:

This round falls into the natural divisions i.e. the fairly comfortable who are found south of Southwark Park Road, and the poor who are north of it. The comfortable are railway men and commercial salesmen and travellers who come into their work from the South Bermondsey Station. The poor are leather workers, glue makers, and jam and sweet makers who inhabit round the spa road.

The very poorest streets, Booth noted, lay to the north and west, as the streets narrowed in the direction of Southwark and London Bridge. Yet - for all the delineations of class and rank charted by Booth and held to tenuously in the minds of most people - the range displayed by Bermondsey's society, its housing stock and its roads was not in the end so very great. 'There is great sameness throughout Bermondsey,' he wrote. 'In this division there is street after street built exactly alike.' It was a vital point, underscoring the fact - doubtless an unwelcome one to some of the residents - that the hard-won respectability of Reverdy Road was at best fragile: its families were seldom more than a few weeks' wages away from destitution.

And while the jobs were abundant and welcome, they were harsh and potentially dangerous. Booth himself was well aware of the fact: he discussed at length the conditions faced by female workers in particular, who laboured under circumstances consistently inferior to those of their male counterparts: their hours more intermittent, their pay considerably less, their work skills less honed. The women who worked in the confectionery factories, for example, tended to be thrown out of their jobs as soon as the weather warmed: hot sun meant melting chocolate and factories mothballed until the onset of autumn. In the

weeks after Christmas, sales of sweets dropped sharply; and female workers were once more, at a moment's notice, out of a job. The women employed to bottle quantities of boiling preserves in Bermondsey's jam plants endured burns and scalds as an occupational hazard; and those who worked in mineral water plants lived with the threat of glass bottles exploding in their faces.

And the world was changing. Capital was highly mobile, migrating rapidly to where wages and overheads were cheaper. Newly formed trade unions could help a little, but they provided no panacea: the employers continued to hold the cards. Bermondsey's lucrative leather trades, for example, had begun to leave the area by the end of the nineteenth century, moving to the north of England in search of more favourable conditions: '[T]he trade was going from Bermondsey', complained a former official with the Amalgamated Leather Trade Union. 'Leeds was the chief competitor taking heavy + light work; Warrington took the light work only.'

Not that these circumstances always led to political radicalism. London's population was of course alive to the political ideas of the day, and the city's militant edge had been sharpened in the course of the nineteenth century by Chartism and other forms of political agitation. The dockers' strikes of 1892 on the Thames opposite Bermondsey had electrified that sector of the city's proletariat, and set the stage for more waves of industrial action in the years to come. But the poor of London often had more pressing material problems with which to contend; and Booth - though conscious of the sometimes ferocious conditions prevalent at the time in the East End and in districts of Bermondsey - acknowledged this fact. His opinion - and it was aired frequently - was that London's working poor were rather more prone to a sort of lamentable social, political and moral lassitude. 'The general attitude is indifference,' he noted, 'and the people