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# The 'Happiest Corner' of London: Bethnal Green, 1881-1951

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THE 'HAPPIEST CORNER' OF LONDON: BETHNAL GREEN,  
1881-1951

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
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in

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## **A BRIEF NOTE ON MONEY:**

Prior to decimalization (in 1971), British money was divided into pounds (£) shillings (s.) and pennies (d.). Twenty shillings per pound, twelve pennies per shilling, and 240 pennies per pound. The pound note was a 'quid,' the shilling a 'bob,' and a sixpence was a 'tanner.' Increments lower than a penny existed, and were quite frequently used in Bethnal Green. They were a farthing, worth a quarter of a penny; a 'ha'penny,' half a penny; and a three farthing, or three-quarters of a penny. A half groat was worth two pennies, a thrupenny three, and a groat equalled four pennies. A florin was two shillings, a half crown equalled two shillings, six pennies. A crown was five shillings, a half-sovereign ten, a half-guinea ten shillings, six pennies. A guinea was worth one pound, one shilling. The smallest increments would have been used daily in Bethnal Green. A crown was a treat from a toff, for watching horses or returning lost items. Children rarely saw money, and women could make even a farthing stretch through to the end of the week.

## **ABSTRACT**

The social question of the Victorian age centered on poverty: the who; the what; and most importantly, the why of poverty. By the end of the nineteenth century, the why had been obscured by a search for the causes of overcrowding, epidemics, starvation, sanitation, and unemployment, all seen as symptoms of poverty but often confused as causes of poverty. Bethnal Green was emblematic of all of these conditions, and many social experiments were conducted to alleviate these symptoms. With the evacuation of London during World War II, as well as the mass destruction of buildings in Bethnal Green, overcrowding was finally alleviated. Bethnal Green fell into worse conditions, however, as war-torn buildings were left to rot, and movement into the area was tightly controlled. The massive social movements which had been enacted in Bethnal Green prior to the war lost steam as national attention was directed elsewhere. The model dwellings, tenements, and philanthropic institutions carried on, but at a considerably reduced volume. This work explores the social, cultural, institutional, and civic efforts made to alleviate overcrowding and sanitation issues in Bethnal Green from 1881 to 1950. Local and national perspectives of these efforts are offered, with the idea of putting a human face to the epidemic of poverty. Many of the civic and philanthropic efforts were misguided, as they destroyed kinship networks, limited movement of the people, and involuntarily displaced residents to locations far from their employment. Local identity, at times a boon and a curse, was destroyed as well. Bethnal Green held a place in history as the epitome of the slums, slum clearance, and the efforts to alleviate poverty. Many aspects of poverty and the efforts to alleviate it have been explored, but in broad terms. This is a study of local effects of these efforts on a designated area of London, with a specific and definable people, with cultural and social aspects which were unique to the area.

## INTRODUCTION

Sandwiched between popular histories on the World Wars and London are thin and fat volumes on highly detailed aspects of each society. These volumes expound on the intersections between politics, society, and Victorian ideals. Predominant among those ideals were philanthropy, social causes, science, and pseudo-science. These studies were spurred by the total failure in the early part of the nineteenth century to deal with the problem of poverty. Laws enacted during the time to deal with poverty utterly failed, leaving devastating reports in newspapers and popular fiction. These reports detailed overcrowding, depicted horrific images of the workhouses, and attempted to put a face to poverty. They spurred to action men of academic repute, who descended on the rookeries of London and other industrial cities with notebooks in hand to record everyday details of poverty. Thousands of civic and philanthropic institutions sprung up, also detailing meticulous records of the poor people. Various attempts were made to deal with the conditions of poverty, and from these sprung even more reports.

Debates raged on the floor of Parliament about solutions to the social question of the age: how to alleviate poverty and all of its symptoms? Overcrowding, sanitation, workhouses, drinking, and unemployment were chief among their concerns, as these were the most evident forms that poverty took. More important, they were seemingly the most approachable problems to solve. The world was taking notice, and something had to be done. From these debates, laws were introduced, rewritten, or amended. Seemingly nothing was left undocumented in the quest to eradicate poverty.

Harold J. Dyos was among the first urban historians to delve into these materials, which he characterized as “the obsession with numbers [which] was almost congenitally determined

and the inevitable prefix to so many of [Victorian peoples'] judgements.”<sup>1</sup> His was among the first historical characterizations of the urban poor. His first essay on the poor was delivered in 1967, entitled “The Slums of Victorian London.” He was the first to dismiss the inadequacy of speaking about the masses without considering the individual. He argued that the individual was affected by social policy more than could be shown by the numbers which Victorian society coveted. The slums of London became a wholesale topic for historians.

Slum dwellings, slum living, and slum clearance were popular topics, generating any number of essays and tomes. The adaptation of the poor to urban environments was a popular topic beginning in the 1970s, and the research materials provided a wealth of information on the subject. Historians followed Dyos’s example of treating the slums as “three-dimensional obscenities ... [and] the great stains on civilisation.”<sup>2</sup> These “great stains” were examined from beginning to end, with individual volumes devoted to the creation, living, and clearance of these slums.

Two distinct individual identities emerged from this: the identity of the slums themselves, as in Old Nichols; as well as the individual identities of the areas of London. Perhaps because of the consolidation of London areas, as Bethnal Green was folded into the Tower Hamlets subdivision, less focus was paid to the areas which had existed in Victorian London.

The *Victoria History of the Counties of England*, a project begun in 1899, contributed one volume on Middlesex history in 1911. In 1962, a second volume was produced. With the abolition of Middlesex County in 1965, volumes were regularly produced documenting the history of towns, villages, and hamlets which made up the greater part of the county. T.F.T.

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<sup>1</sup> H.J. Dyos, *Exploring the Urban Past: Essays in Urban History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 4.

<sup>2</sup> H.J. Dyos, “The Slums of Victorian London” in *Victorian Studies* 11 no. 1 (Sept 1967), 9-10.

Baker joined the project in 1972, beginning with the fourth volume in the series. A committee was formed in 1979 to ensure completion of the Middlesex volumes. These volumes followed a particular format, and were widely praised for their research. The eleventh volume in the series, published in 1998 and edited by Baker, covered the towns of Stepney and Bethnal Green, whose histories had long been intertwined. Chapters on the economic history, as well as housing, sewage, and social conditions laid out the most detailed and complete history of Bethnal Green to date. The information, however, is presented in the abstract: the sheer numbers of people in Bethnal Green precluded individual stories in such a format. The opening mentions Bethnal Green's depiction as the "archetypical slum."<sup>3</sup> Some effort is made to show that although Bethnal Green was the type, it was not the match. While Bethnal Green was consistently portrayed through books and articles as the worst type of slum, it was neither the poorest, nor the most unkempt part of Middlesex County. Bethnal Green is also not held up as the model of slum clearance it once was, as the text points to several instances where clearance made conditions worse for slum inhabitants. It was the first effort to align reports of slum clearance with historical investigations of slums and slum clearance, using the unique example of Bethnal Green.

The broad overview of slums and slum clearance has been covered in depth by many authors, prominent among them John Burnett. He wrote *A Social History of Housing, 1815-1970* in 1978. His was the first among many to offer a social history of housing that included slums, although the concept and idea are dealt with scantily. He was rather more concerned with the development of housing reform from the 1860s onward, and particularly in '5 percent philanthropy;' he was the first to fully flesh out the idea, and lay down the basis for difference

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<sup>3</sup> T.F.T Baker, ed. "Bethnal Green: Introduction" in *A History of the County of Middlesex 11: Stepney, Bethnal Green* (London: Victoria Country History, London), 1998.



between “exemplary ... [philanthropy, and that] which would reward the pocket as well as the conscience.”<sup>4</sup> The United Kingdom had recently sought reform for their housing practices, and Burnett was striving to find the right note between support of a new model, and condemnation of the old. Burnett did not use the term ‘slum’ to characterize the area, but that does not equal to a lack in description of slum conditions. Social housing during that time was shortsighted, and he was the first historian to note that slum clearance usually created new slums elsewhere: this had also been noted at the time of slum clearance, but was often rejected by leading politicians and philanthropists, who continued with the effort nonetheless.

Anthony Wohl originally published *The Eternal Slum: Housing and Social Policy in Victorian London* in 1977. It has since been reprinted several times, testifying to the impact of the work. Wohl’s work was meticulously researched, well-written, and presented several new concepts relating to slum clearance which had not been explored fully before. Wohl fleshed out fully the concept that slum clearance created new slums. Additionally, he argued that the first generation of slum clearances showed that it would never aid those directly affected by it. Whether it helped subsequent generations depended largely on how the area was controlled and influenced immediately afterwards. Bethnal Green was both a success and a failure by his count, because while the Boundary Street scheme had largely failed, other slum clearances enacted later were marginally more successful at revitalizing and renewing the urban spirit without removing the poor; this in turn eventually aided those poor people.

James Yelling followed up on Wohl’s work in *Slums and Slum Clearance in Victorian London*, published in 1986. His focus was on the political and practical mechanisms by which slum clearance occurred. He argued that slum clearance was not as clear as a failure, nor as clear

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<sup>4</sup> John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing, 1815-1970* (North Pomfret, VT: David & Charles, Inc., 1978), 174.

a success, as had been argued by contemporaries. Each instance of ‘failure,’ while creating new problems, also offered aid to finding new solutions. Slum clearance measures which had been in place from the 1880s through the First World War were used to create new programs, moving slum inhabitants out of the city. By recognizing the limits of poverty-stricken families, particularly regarding employment opportunities and transportation, these new programs were marginally more successful than their predecessors.

Ellen Ross is a leading women’s historian, specializing in late 19<sup>th</sup> through the first half of the twentieth century. She has explored the relationships between husbands and wives, women’s role in employment, income, and the house. The social habits of women were a particular interest, and she invested some time in researching the topic. The role of women in the household did not just exist within the confines of four walls, and Ross lays out in detail the public aspects of their lives as well. Ross argued that among the problems with slum clearance, laws aimed to address the situation failed to allow for a key factor; the destruction of kinship networks which enabled poor families to survive. Kinship networks provided much needed resources for struggling families, without the social stigma attached to government assistance. Without these networks, families were becoming increasingly dependent on the government.

Beginning in the late 1990s, and continuing into the new century, much more detailed breakdowns of life in the slums and rookeries of London have been written. Each is focused on specific social and cultural aspects of life among the urban poor. Some examples include Seth Koven’s *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London*, published in 2006; Lucy Inglis’s *Georgian London: Into the Streets*, which details the ‘birth’ of later Victorian slums (2014); and *Giving Women: Alliance and Exchange in Victorian Culture* by Jill Rappoport, published in 2012. Each author offers their own information and perspective to the history of

slums. The focus on social or cultural aspects, however, is limiting: it offers no in-depth examples of how individuals are affected. Some effort has been made to correct this: Sarah Wise published *The Blackest Streets: the Life and Death of a Victorian Slum* in 2009. It is an in-depth accounting of the Old Nichol's slum clearance project. By illustrating individual examples, Wise invokes the problems and panaceas that Old Nichol, the model of slum clearance, offered.

Histories of London, slum clearance, and the individual areas which make up the greater whole exist in multitudes. Individual projects have also been examined in great detail. There are few examples, however, of the social and cultural aspects of the individuals involved correlated with the public and political aspects which so deeply affected them. While it is true that slums and slum clearance were a major focus of the late Victorian period, there were many other efforts made towards alleviating overcrowding and poverty. Details of these can be found in many books as well, but they fail to relate the tales on an individual basis. Relating individual stories has its limits as well: they inevitably fail to address the change wrought in the local area.

Bethnal Green was once seen as the epitome of the slums, which excluded those parts of Bethnal Green which were not slums. Much like its human faces, Bethnal Green was considerably more complex than it has been portrayed historically. By examining other aspects of social housing, philanthropy, education, and moral character, in conjunction with the great slum clearance projects which it underwent at the time, Bethnal Green's complex character may be revealed.

### **The 'Happiest Corner' of London: Bethnal Green, 1881-1951**

The peppy Cockney, short, drunk, gabbling in a distinctive patter, is a stock character. There is no mistaking the sound of an East End London accent. Internationally, it is one of the most recognizable accents, beside "American", "German", and "French." Among native English speakers, it is the most widely recognized speech pattern. Cockney rhyming slang was invented

in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, modeled after costermonger's patois. To an outsider it is nonsensical to hear the sentence "I Adams an elephant" and to translate it to "I believe I'm drunk." Others spread throughout England, especially bread and sausage (two slangs for money: bread and honey – money; sausage and mash – cash). To "cheese it" was to flee the scene. All through the streets of the East End could be heard the cries of costers flogging their wares, and it was perhaps not surprising that the most enduring were terms for money. Cockney was about more than the language, though, and it was a long-lasting stereotype.

To be born within the sounds of Mary-Le-Bow Chapel, located in Cheapside, is good enough an identifier for Cockney. To be from the East End, the area of London defined as east of the Roman walls, north of the River Thames, and west of the River Lea, was another. These were broad and at times overreaching terms for a mass of people. It implied a homogeneity, a special grouping that glossed over differences between them. The emergence of these identities define two ends of an era. The invention of the Cockney slang was tied closely with the 1830s movement of people from the City to the outer areas of London, during a time of tremendous growth for the city. Many factors contributed to this growth, but the result was the consumption of land, particularly to the east of London. As the number of people in surrounding areas multiplied, small towns and hamlets at the edge of London began to be gobbled up. For some areas, particularly on the west end of London, the consumption of land was done in chunks, creating estates to house the rich. As the rising middle class moved into London, they sought land to the north and west of London. The poor migrated east, to areas notorious for poverty already. Mile End Old Town, Whitechapel, Globe Town, Bow, Bromley, Stepney, Hackney, Bethnal Green, and others were all former hamlets or villages in the county of Middlesex. In 1898, Middlesex was fully absorbed by the outer edges of the city of London.

For seventy years, the people of Bethnal Green and the surrounding area were the support for London, the makers of clothing, boots, shoes, furniture, and other products which required hard labor but produced little income. Each had its own distinctive smell, adding to the miasma of unwashed bodies and cheap food. Tanners and leatherworkers had the smell of urine, feces, alcohol, and lye. Weavers and dyers carried the distinctive smell of their product, whether wool and silk or chemical and natural dyes. The sweet smell of pine, tar and sweat pervaded the area around a furniture maker's workspace, but inside, it smelled also of grease, rosin, ash, coal, and sulfur. Each tradesmen, artisan, factory worker, or food worker carried home that smell in their clothes, which might be worn for as many as six days straight between washings. Men smoked pipes and drank beer or whiskey in the pubs and at home, and women smoked cigarettes and drank gin wherever they may. The vices of the poorer lot were notorious throughout London. They were recorded for posterity in Charles Dickens' articles and immortalized through his fictional works. He drew on real life inspiration, having become part of a philanthropic movement to improve the lot of the poor in London.

This movement gained international momentum in the 1880s, with the advent of "slumming" tours of the East End. Some surely went on these tours to feel better about their lives and circumstance, but others went with an urgent need to understand firsthand the life of the poor. Bethnal Green was an incubator for ideas, both civic and philanthropic, which were thought to be solutions to the overwhelming problem of poverty. By abolishing the county of Middlesex, and incorporating those towns and hamlets which made up its environs, the newly founded County of London began to put in place a system of taxation and bureaucracy which supported social programs in the East End.

The international attention paid in the 1800s to the alarming conditions of the people in Bethnal Green began to exert pressure for something to be done. The 1880s had seen a boom of philanthropic building, as well as a rising national conversation on what must be done to help the poor people of the East End. The 1890s began the rise of civic intervention, especially on issues which could not be addressed by those without authority. It was thought to be the perfect situation, a culturally identifiable people who were ethnically and religiously homogenous. Residents of Bethnal Green were the epitome of East Enders, but they were also the quintessential English man. Philanthropic social programs were reaching their peak of coverage in newspapers, and each endearing 'character' portrayed in the papers was seen as good advertisement for these programs. Each measure of success was celebrated in its own realm, and when combined with others, broadcast to the world. The dismantling of a typical overcrowded slum, Old Nichols was described in lurid detail, through first-hand accounts of those who had seen it to detailed and orderly statistical volumes of those who had studied it. Reporters filed copy on it, and pieces were published all over the world which told the tale. After several years invested in the project, a fundamental flaw was uncovered. If you built the buildings to house fewer people than had lived there before, where did the extra people go? Slum clearance caused overcrowding to spread in a ripple pattern throughout the surrounding areas, causing them to drop below the standard they had been before. Slum clearance was never again undertaken on the same drastic scale, but scaled back models of that first attempt continued throughout Bethnal Green.

Bethnal Green thus secured a reputation as the home of an impoverished but quick and bright spirited people. Patriotic to the core, they had the highest volunteer enlistment rate in

London when war broke out in 1914.<sup>5</sup> Many of those who applied to the military were initially rejected for failure to meet minimum standards of height and weight, a product of long poverty. As the war continued, however, special regiments were created for these volunteers, including the Bantams, so-called for their unusually short stature. Identification with Bethnal Green was a boon and a curse: the people were proud of their neighborhood, but ashamed of “their” poverty.

After the Great War, however, it was as though Bethnal Green ceased to exist outside of its boundaries. Attention was turned away from the poor lives of East Enders, and concentrated instead on the waning economy. In Bethnal Green, the period of philanthropic housing ceased, and the effort fell to London County Council and the Borough Council. H. Llewellyn Smith’s *Forty Years of Change* (1931) did not engender the same interest as its predecessor, Charles Booth’s *Life and Labour of London* (1896-1903). Unfortunately for residents, the developments from 1880 to 1920 did little to alleviate overcrowding. They did, however, change some of the ingrained cultural methods of dealing with poverty. Many backyard gardens were swallowed by factories and model dwellings. Many of the new residences banned animals, eliminating both income and food. Some slum clearance projects destroyed communities, as residents sought housing wherever they could find it.

Despite the myriad efforts to diminish overcrowding and remove unsanitary dwellings, Bethnal Green continued to be one of the most impoverished and overcrowded areas in London. Many residents clung to their homes, cultural identities, and kinship networks in the face of much opposition. By the 1930s, overcrowding had been somewhat relieved, but only a small portion of the population was directly affected. Levels of poverty, however, had been greatly reduced, and many residents could afford to move elsewhere. After forty years of civic and

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<sup>5</sup> T.F.T. Baker, *Victorian County History: A History of the County of Middlesex: Volume 11: Stepney, Bethnal Green* (London: Victoria County Press, 2008), 133.

charitable intervention, residents were left to face the results in one of the worst economic downturns in history. For the majority, it was only when they were forced to move elsewhere that they did. For those residents who left Bethnal Green from 1939 to 1945, given their history with the area, it was a wrenching parting. Many, for example, resisted or recalled their children from evacuation. At the end of the war, however, one-third of the population chose to leave permanently, effectively eliminating overcrowding.

What little remained of Bethnal Green's popular identity was swept away in yet another reorganization of London in 1965. The few tattered remnants of that pre-war identity are in the form of monuments, tube stations, park gates, and other physical structures. Of the residents, little evidence still exists. Gone are the accents, the cant, and the unique physiology. Yet the war was merely a catalyst for the mass-movement. The spirit of Bethnal Green had been degrading slowly over the previous decades, as more onerous rules and regulations were placed on residents to conform to the standards of London.

Many abstract, intellectual definitions of poverty exist. Too often they are defined by those who are not poor. Arbitrary numbers are thrown out, and cultural assumptions placed upon a group of people who will be labelled poor. In the late 1800s, there was a cultural assumption of poverty which was important as well: an "Us versus Them" mentality. While those in the east end of Bethnal Green likely felt superior to their western neighbors, they understood that too often they were lumped in with them. The mentality associated with poverty was not always negative, however. To be poor was 'to have a tenth the riches of a rich man, but twice the happiness.'<sup>6</sup> Fewer earnings, but less real authority, and less paperwork. The mental image of

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<sup>6</sup> Translated from Cockney cant. In the original: "Blimey! Less than a plover, on the floo', but happy" – the translated saying may have been taken from John Westley's brief stint as a preacher in Bethnal Green.



poverty held by those who lived in it every day is as strikingly different from the definitions offered by the elite as it would be to definitions of poverty today. Insular thinking colored this image, and also enabled the cycle to continue. Mental poverty carried with it the belief that the poor must stand together, for the government was out to get them. Although great headway was made in Bethnal Green, no amount of government relief could eradicate the true causes of poverty, nor could those programs form systems like the one which existed in Bethnal Green.

“It was a smell that used to pour out of some of the open front doors in our street, and always seemed tied up with children I was not supposed to play with.”<sup>7</sup> The smells, the sounds, and the sights of poverty were abundant in Bethnal Green. To outsiders, this was the sole measure of Bethnal Green. However, the selfless acts of kindness, compassion, and loyalty shown by the people of Bethnal Green towards one another were of an enduring cloth. They spanned generations, weaving in and among the people until they were tied together, united by threads of commonality. The boundaries of Bethnal Green did not encompass a civic area, but a common spirit, language, code, ethic, and social situation which promoted the spirit of belonging. The name Bethnal Green comes from Anglo-Saxon times, and means “happy corner.” No more apt a description for the people of Bethnal Green prior to World War II exists.

### **Bethnal Green Before 1800**

In 43 AD, Londinium was one square mile, enclosed by a great wall, and under the protection of the Romans. Roman engineering and crafting created strong durable roads, sewers, and aqueducts; many of the principal roads are still in use today. When the Anglo-Saxons invaded, they kept many of the trade routes, particularly to the east. Development was concentrated north of the River Thames. Agrarian hamlets began to divide the eastern area.

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<sup>7</sup> Doris Bailey, *Children of the Green: a True Story of Childhood in Bethnal Green, 1922-1937* (London: Stepney Books, 1981), 1.

Many of the hamlets retained their Anglo-Saxon names throughout their history, particularly *Soersditch* (Shoreditch), *Brambeleg* (Bromley), and *Blithenhael* (Bethnal Green). The earliest recording of these hamlets is likely *Hogesden* (Hoxton), in the *Domesday Book*.

During the medieval period, other towns appeared in the East End, usually named for religious structures in the area, as in St Mary Spital (Spitalfields), and St Mary Chapel (Whitechapel). The High Middle Ages added Hackney, Bow, and renamed *Blithenhael* to Bishopswood.<sup>8</sup> A small village green was created in the area around Cambridge Heath Road. Brick Lane, carved out of the fields in 1576, was the beginning of a western border for Bethnal Green. Collier Lane, near Brick Lane, had nine homes in 1603.<sup>9</sup> It was an area popular for sport hunting, and many farms and inns in the area could boast of having served royalty. The royal woods were nearby, and the gift of land in the area to the Bishop of London secured a prominent place for Bethnal Green. It was made more prominent by a Tudor ballad, *The Ballad of the Blind Beggar of Bethnal Green*. Despite royal patronage, the residents of Bethnal Green were poor. The *Blind Beggar* served to record the first instance of Bethnal Green's reputation for poverty, although the protagonist was in fact a rich man. There were some influential men in the area, and Rubens is known to have stayed as the guest of one such while in London. Samuel Pepys, when roused from his bed by fire in 1666, rushed his precious *Diary* to Bethnal Green to be saved (much of his furniture and most of his household were moved there for a few days as well). Kirby's Castle, a large farm off of Cambridge-Heath Road (from *Cambrischeth*, an Anglo-Saxon personal name), supplied fruits and wines to London, and Hugh Platt was the first

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<sup>8</sup> Bishop Bonner Hall was the largest manor in the area. The woods nearby were allegedly also a gift to Henry VIII, to hunt freely in.

<sup>9</sup> Both streets came by their names through growing trade in the area. Brick Lane was named for the clay being pulled from the area, shaped and baked into neat little briquettes. Collier Lane was named for the coal industry which sprung up, and at one point shared the name with as many as sixteen different streets in the East End.

to practice excluding air to preserve fruits.<sup>10</sup> The addition to Brick Lane of the Black Eagle Brewery in 1669 brought some manufacture to the farmland area. The largest plot of land in Bethnal Green belonged to Bonner Hall, so named after Bishop Bonner, the last lord of the manor of Stepney. Spital Hospital and Henry VIII's Artillery Ground (1538), located in the common area of Shoreditch and Bethnal Green, were in use until 1658. Already, there were people concerned for the welfare of poorer inhabitants: lands were purchased from Kirby's Castle in 1678. When they were created a trust in 1690, the income was used for poor people of the area. It was the first charitable trust in Bethnal Green. A second trust was endowed by Thomas Parmiter in 1682, but would not be organized until 1722.

Bethnal Green in the early 1700s was experiencing growth along the central north-south area, but the largest development by far was in the west end. The intersection of London growth and development was overlapping Brick Lane, so-called for the principal trade of the area: the extraction, shaping, and baking of bricks for ever-growing London. Thousands of Huguenots had fled France since the 1685 Edict of Fontainebleau. Many of the artisanal class settled in London, in communities similar to those they had left behind. Spitalfields was long an area known for weaving, and as silk- and coarse-weaving refugees flooded the area, they pushed into neighboring Bethnal Green as well. The situation seemed ideal: the area was near enough to London for trade, but far enough away to avoid officials, both clerical and civic. As the silk-weaving trade began to take off, complementary businesses took up residence as well. Many of these were noxious, particularly the tanners and dyers who used excrement in large amounts. Brick making began to die out as a trade, as areas which would have yielded the clay needed began to be developed instead. The commerce of the area shifted to clothing and furniture

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<sup>10</sup> Dee Gordon, *The Little Book of the East End* (Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2010), 92.

manufacture, and all of the necessary attendant businesses. Sawmills and the sweet smell of sawdust came in, countered by the offal makers and noxious industries being pushed further east out of London, downwind from the city.<sup>11</sup>

Considered as part of the parish of Stepney since the 1600s, Bethnal Green was the poorer cousin, benefitting from charitable institutions of the parish, especially almshouses. Throughout the early 1700s, as the population remained below ten thousand, a number of needs were recognized. Captain Fisher opened the first almshouse in Bethnal Green, a home for widows of ship commanders, in 1711. Bethnal Green also shared in Spitalfields' almshouses, opened in 1720, and expanded in 1739 with a special home for widows. Thomas Parmiter (died 1682) left lands and dividends to a trust upon the death of his wife, Elizabeth in 1705. One of the principal backers of the purchase of Poor Lands, Parmiter sought to meet other demands of the area, endowing the first school in Bethnal Green, as well as almshouses located away from the center of the town. This endowment, enacted in 1722, freed Poor Lands from being used for this purpose. In 1727, land located just east of Cambridge-Heath Road, long associated as the "happy corner" of the Anglo-Saxons, was leased to Matthew Wright, who developed a madhouse on the site.

St Matthew's began as an idea in the 1690s. The plan was to build a basilica-style church in Bethnal Green. Objections were raised by the Bishop of Stepney, who collected tithes in the area which would be taken, and the local population, who did not care for such a large church. It was not until 1725 that a site would be purchased, in what was then Hare Fields. "The reason that the site for the new church was to be so detached from the old village green was that there had grown up, with the Huguenot weavers' community, a sizeable new commercial hub in west

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<sup>11</sup> The location of Bethnal Green relative to London influenced its development in many ways. Please see Appendix III for further information.

Bethnal Green around Hare St (now known as Cheshire St).<sup>12</sup> In 1743, despite the objections of the Bishop of Stepney, Bethnal Green became its own parish. After the building of a parish church began, funds ran out. It took an Act of Parliament to secure funding to complete the church: “The want of a place for public worship of Almighty God hath been a great cause of increase of dissoluteness of morals and a disregard for religion, too apparent in the younger and poorer sort.”<sup>13</sup> It had a population of approximately fifteen thousand, all of whom had to go outside the area to worship. The first church in Bethnal Green would open three years later. The Anglican St Matthew’s was designed by George Dance the Elder, and situated in the western end of Bethnal Green. It would become the parent church of Bethnal Green, and governed parochial poor relief. Jews and Nonconformists visited neighboring areas to attend religious services.<sup>14</sup> The west end of Bethnal Green had one Protestant Dissenters cemetery (closed 1826) and chapel at Gibraltar Walk beginning in 1793.

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<sup>12</sup> Adey Grummet, *A Short and Anecdotal History of St. Matthews Church Bethnal Green* (Edinburgh: Shoving Leopard, 2011), 1.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Mile End Old Town Road had Jewish almshouses and a synagogue from 1644. The burial ground for these would be located within the border of Bethnal Green.

## **BETHNAL GREEN AND THE MOST POPULOUS CITY IN THE WORLD**

In 1800, London surpassed Beijing as the largest city in the world. By this time, it had expanded far beyond its one mile borders, and its influence stretched even further. As the population of the city expanded, so too did the population of Bethnal Green. In 1743, approximately fifteen thousand people lived in Bethnal Green. By 1801, the population would expand by approximately seven thousand. The development of Bethnal Green prior to this had been based on necessary architecture, with small shacks and cottages dotting most of the landscape.<sup>15</sup> Weavers' homes employed the new styles of row-houses, creating lines of homes two- to two-and-a-half stories tall, with workshops on the top floor featuring large windows to allow the maximum of natural light. In the east, and particularly around the center of town, large estates were in evidence, dating from the Tudor period through the Glorious Revolution. As London's population progressed east, development in Bethnal Green began to move rapidly from west to east. Globe Town was created in 1800, just east of Cambridge-Heath Road, as an enclave for weavers. Overcrowding in Bethnal Green was already an issue, and it rapidly followed the march of progress west to east. There was an average of six people per dwelling in 1801, and the dwellings were an average of two rooms.

The situation worsened considerably over the following decade. The number of inhabited residences increased by more than two thousand, but the population increased by over ten thousand. Bethnal Green was ill-prepared to cope with this invasion. The development of new blocks was primarily commercially and privately funded. The London Jews Society was an exception, founded in 1808. The society built the Episcopal Jews Chapel in north Bethnal Green, opened in 1811, to promote Christianity among the large Jewish population. Regency-

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<sup>15</sup> Necessary architecture as defined by its practicality, without any adornments or ornamentation.

style townhomes were developed in the west end of Bethnal Green, although of a far less ornate and grand scale than that of their West End counterparts. Circuses and closes began to appear, as well as planned squares. An Act of Parliament in 1812 created Regent's Canal, and the Regent's Canal Company rapidly began construction in the east end of Bethnal Green. The decade also saw the first bread charity, endowed through public subscription until 1840. It provided bread for the young children of St Matthew's, as well as funding a Sunday school program. By 1821, the population had increased to 45,676, more than double the 1801 population. Dwellings increased at the same rate, which did little to abate the overcrowding. The first pension fund was endowed in 1822, and created the Bethnal Green Philanthropic Pension Society, of which the rector of St. Matthew's was a prominent member. Another Act of Parliament (1824) created Sir George Duckett's Canal, connecting Regent's Canal to the River Lea in north-east Bethnal Green, opening in 1830. Sir John Soane designed and built St. John's Church in central Bethnal Green in 1825.

The decade between 1821 and 1831 saw the greatest growth in Bethnal Green's history, as a further 16,342 people were added. It was also the last decade before 1911 in which development of inhabited dwellings would grow at a relative pace to the population. Most development during this time was of terrace-style row houses. The increase in population was largely the result of an influx of workers in small trades, especially cabinet making. Silk-weaving was experiencing a decline, due to the lifting of tariffs against imported products. The increase in population was rendered more dramatic by the cholera epidemic which had claimed some five thousand lives in the previous decade. In 1823, Charles Greville wrote in his journal of an outbreak of cholera which had occurred throughout London. Through the course of investigating the outbreak, the impoverished conditions were brought to the notice of the king:

A man came yesterday from Bethnal Green with an account of that district. They are all weavers, forming a sort of separate community; there they are born, there they live and labour, and there they die. They neither migrate nor change their occupation; they can do nothing else. They have increased in a ratio at variance with any principles of population, having nearly tripled in twenty years, from 22,000 to 62,000. They are for the most part out of employment, and can get none. 1,100 are crammed into the poor house, five or six in a bed; 6,000 receive parochial relief. The parish is in debt; every day adds to the number of paupers and diminishes that of ratepayers. These are principally small shopkeepers, who are beggared by the rates. The district is in a complete state of insolvency and hopeless poverty, yet they multiply, and while the people look squalid and dejected, as if borne down by their wretchedness and destitution, the children thrive and are healthy. Government is ready to interpose with assistance, but what can Government do? We asked the man who came what could be done for them. He said 'employment', and employment is impossible.<sup>16</sup>

Despite these setbacks, the population growth of Bethnal Green was rapidly outpacing its East End neighbors. As even more people pushed into the area, sanitary conditions in Bethnal Green worsened and epidemics continued. By 1841, the population had reached 74,088, serviced by one water treatment area, no public sewage or rubbish disposal beyond dust piles, and little public lands.<sup>17</sup> Railroads began to be developed in southern Bethnal Green during this period, and by 1844 one line was complete. It was necessary for the developers to improve the areas they went through, described as boggy. Worse still, the lack of public sewage mean that many families drained their privies into communal ground, creating open cesspits throughout developed areas. One area that the railroad developed cut through “a quantity of putrefying animal and vegetable matter, the odour of which, at the present moment, [was] most offensive.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Charles Greville, *The Greville Memoirs: a Journal of the Reigns of King George IV and King William IV* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1875), 261.

<sup>17</sup> Dust piles were a common feature of the East End landscape – dustmen would cart night soil and other debris there. Locals scavenged among the detritus for items to sell. See notes on Columbia Square.

<sup>18</sup> Emma Dwyer, *The Impact of the Railways in the East-End, 1855-2010: Historical Archaeology from the London Overground East London Line* (London: Museum of London Archaeology, 2011), 16.



Hector Gavin, in his *Sanitary Ramblings* of 1848, described the result as “an enormous ditch or stagnant lake of thickened putrefying matter; in this Pandora’s box dead cats and dogs were profusely scattered, exhibiting every stage of disgusting decomposition.”<sup>19</sup>

Gavin’s *Sanitary Ramblings* brought to the forefront the many issues facing Bethnal Green. Despite almost twenty years of virulent epidemics, no effort had been made to clean the area, install sewage or drainage, or ensure a clean water supply. By this time, the problems of the greater East End had been noted, particularly regarding development and overcrowding. The Bishop of London decreed that the salvation of Bethnal Green was of imminent value to all souls in London, and from 1841 to 1844, ten more Anglican churches were created.<sup>20</sup> The Crown purchased parts of Bonner Hall and surrounding areas, creating Victoria Park (1842-46) as a grand open space in the East End, thought to be of general benefit to the people, and potentially improving their quality of life. The London Chest Hospital was founded in 1848.<sup>21</sup> The junction of Duckett’s Canal and Regents Canal formed the south-west border of the park, and the hospital was situated on the site of Bonner Hall. The surrounding area was developed quickly over the next decade, and even today features early-Victorian architecture, particularly in the church of St. James-the-Less and the Hospital, both fronting on the same road. Victoria Park, in common with other green spaces created in the era, reserved development space along the borders. This

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> St Matthew’s (1746) and St John’s (1825) were joined by ten more churches to complete the apostolic cycle, replacing Judas Iscariot with St Barnabas.

<sup>21</sup> London Chest Hospital, also known as the London Hospital for Diseases of the Chest, and the London Hospital for Tuberculosis and Rheumatisms, was founded and paid for by public subscription. Locals called it “the London” or Lunnon. It was noted that the East End had a large number of chest complaints, particularly tuberculosis. The hospital was well-funded, and made many innovations in the study of respiratory and pulmonary complaints. A chapel was added shortly after the building opened in 1851. At the time of its foundation, and for several decades afterwards, the majority of workers in the hospital were housed onsite, and came from places other than Bethnal Green.

space was intended to develop homes for the rising middle-class, thereby raising the standards of those around them. With Victoria Park came Victoria Park Cemetery in the south-east corner of Bethnal Green.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to previous charity, there was now a dole fund for parishioners of St Matthew's, a clothing fund for the children of St Matthew's, and two coal charities, one administered through Poor Lands income, the other privately entrusted. Other charities included an apprentice program called "Greenwood's Gift." Annual charity expenditures from 1818-1837 averaged £650.<sup>23</sup> Many of these charities focused on specific religious feasts to distribute their bounty, or relied on local churches to administer the funds and put forth candidates for relief. Some required abstentious living, but the majority sought to alleviate the suffering of those who

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<sup>22</sup> Unlike other areas of London particularly, but many urban areas generally, Bethnal Green did not follow normal growth patterns. The introduction of the railroad (alternatively the Great Eastern Line, Great Eastern Railroad, or the Northeastern Railway Company. Only one railroad company existed in Bethnal Green until operations were taken over by Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green in 1933) should have brought commerce flooding to the area. Instead, the railroad was limited to one goods station, located straddling the south-west border between Bethnal Green and Shoreditch. Despite this, the railroad prospered, and began to seek means of expanding in Bethnal Green. In 1845, they purchased Regents Canal, in an earnest attempt to expand rail service alongside the Canal. The plan was never put into action, and in 1883 the railroad sold Regent's Canal to the Regents Canal and City Docks Railway Co. This period resulted in the addition of a Coal Depot in southernmost Bethnal Green, and a switching/train yard at the eastern junction of Regent's Canal and the railroad. Development was further complicated by the two canals, which should also have increased commercial activity in the area. Where the canals and Victoria Park meet stopped progress for commercial development as well, and the area south of Old Ford Road was connected closely with Globetown. Globetown's expansion as residential space only slowed in the 1860s, despite two separate collapses of the silk-weaving market (in the 1820s and again in the 1850s). Locals turned to producing furniture silk and other coarse weaves, thereby ensuring continued employment.

<sup>23</sup> T.F.T. Baker, "Bethnal Green Charities for the Poor" in *A History of the County of Middlesex: Volume 11: Stepney, Bethnal Green* (London: Victoria County History, 1998), 260-263. See Appendix I for more information.

could do nothing to improve their situation, particularly the elderly, women, and children.<sup>24</sup> The rise of women as powerful philanthropists in the 1830s and 1840s saw much relief enacted to alleviate the cruel burdens placed on women.

The 1840s also saw the rise in interest of conditions of the poor. Charles Dickens, among other writers of the time, detailed the conditions of impoverished people in weekly newspaper columns.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Dickens created the archetypical East End characters in his works,

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<sup>24</sup> The social and economic status of widows was in turmoil during the 1800s. While it was common in upper-class families for widows to house with family members, or to live independently on their own means, they were often under the nominal control of men, who distributed their income and managed their non-social lives. For poor women, it was even more complicated. Too often, there was no man to step in and handle the financial aspect, and some women were cheated out of lawful inheritance. There was system in place in Bethnal Green to manage this: sister's husbands or father-in-laws might be called on, but commonly it was the pastor to whom appeal was given for a man to step forward and deal with any business. Widows with a man to 'speak for them' found the system rewarding, but for the priest of one Bethnal Green church, it was less so. In 1890, he had 4,312 appeals from widows for assistance. Monetary assistance was necessary in many cases, particularly those with young children. Most often, the appeal was for "a man of character" to appear on the lady's behalf, either in court or to a landlord. Landlords in Bethnal Green had little trouble renting to widows, and some advertised for them to serve as supervisors. Widow, however, was at-times synonymous with prostitution in Bethnal Green, and court papers of the time sometimes referred to prostitutes as "widows" to denote the higher social status they had achieved (within the class of thieves and prostitutes, at any rate). Respectable widows were often supported as an integral part of the Bethnal Green kinship networks: they child-minded, took in washing, did outworking, tailored, or continued in their late husband's occupation. Unfortunately, this often meant that they lived at the edge of subsistence poverty. The addition of pensions from their late husband's, instituted in certain occupations common in Bethnal Green in the 1880s, began to raise the social class of widows. Widows and children occupied their own special class among the impoverished, both because it was felt they had done little to deserve the status and because they could do little to get out of that situation.

<sup>25</sup> The newspaper industry in London took off in the 1830s. New newspapers designed for men in trade came out, and leisure and society newspapers geared towards the middle class also emerged. Unlike previous society newspapers, these were not solely focused on the activities of the rich and ennobled, but contained a mix of modern writers, stories, advertisements, and editorials. Newspapers also began to diversify, dividing themselves along political factions, hobbies, professions, etc. Bethnal Green yielded some 300 articles between 1824 and 1861, in every major newspaper in London, all the medical journals, many of the middle class society papers (as a feature of opinion columns, or the focus of stories such as Charles Dickens'), and among political newspapers as well. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s,

seeking to show a broad spectrum of poverty. The scenes he depicted of the East End were relentlessly researched by Dickens himself, and in doing so, he formed an attachment to the East End in general, and Bethnal Green in particular. The villain of *Oliver Twist*, Bill Sikes, was from Bethnal Green, as was his tart-with-a-heart victim Nancy. Dickens did not seek to just report on the situations he found, however. He was equally interested in solutions to the social problem of poverty, and he enlisted friends and acquaintances in his mission to save the East End.

### **Good Flats, Bad Stalls**

One such friend was Angela Burdett-Coutts, one of the wealthiest women in England, and a long-noted philanthropist. It was Dickens who introduced her to Bethnal Green, where she personally oversaw the implementation of two schemes to improve the lives of residents. Although none of her correspondence has survived, we know that she consulted Dickens and Benjamin Disraeli, among others, in an effort to best implement her ideas. Land was purchased in 1852 in the west end of Bethnal Green, including an exhausted brick field and dust pile, as well as a number of run-down cottages. Redevelopment was delayed by a dustman tenant, and when Burdett-Coutts visited the area in 1857, she encountered what a contemporary described as “the resort of murderers, thieves, the disreputable, and abandoned.”<sup>26</sup> The first area began development in that year, and was completed by 1859. By 1862, four blocks of flats had been completed, to create an open quadrangle with the latest in sanitary innovation, particularly

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with a rise in political or opinion cartoons, a common trend was to depict the East End as a ragtag group of people, wearing soiled and ripped clothing. Frequently, Bethnal Green was depicted as a small street urchin, clutching a (presumably stolen) purse. The period from 1861 to 1881 saw a further 400 articles published.

<sup>26</sup> Mary Spencer-Warren, “Illustrated Interviews XXXII – The Baroness Burdett-Coutts” in *The Strand* 7, no 43 (1894), 351. Locals were not pleased with the idea of redevelopment. The dust pile represented a source of income, and the loss of it was felt among poorer families in the area.

ventilation. It housed approximately 800 people in 179 apartments.<sup>27</sup> The outside was created in Muscular Gothic architecture, a style particularly favored by Burdett-Coutts in her philanthropic projects. In an effort to promote sanitation, the walls were finished without wallpaper, piped water was introduced (a first in buildings of Bethnal Green), and each of the flats was self-contained. Two-room flats rented for 3s. 6d. per week. Columbia Square was celebrated by some contemporaries, who trumpeted the high occupancy rate.

After the success of Columbia Square, Burdett-Coutts' next project in Bethnal Green was an enclosed market place. Columbia Market, also designed in Muscular Gothic, was established in 1869. Burdett-Coutts imagined that the costers and rough-sellers of Bethnal Green would flock to the more than four-hundred enclosed stalls, thereby raising the sanitation level of the street and increasing the availability of food. An archway over the entrance entreated sellers to "be vigilant, be sober, be pitiful, [and] be courteous;" it was perhaps this condescending advice which doomed the plan to failure. Locals, happy to take advantage of better housing, were less enthusiastic about the covered market. The building itself resembled a church more than a market, and the towering edifice may have intimidated some. In addition, despite the centralized layout, the enclosed stalls took away the costers' main source of advertisement, the street cry. Street markets were ingrained in the culture of the area, and even the patois of Bethnal Green had risen around street cries. Whatever the cause, it was not long before Burdett-Coutts turned over

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<sup>27</sup> Although not the first model dwelling, it was the first in Bethnal Green and the first to be privately financed. Burdett-Coutts was criticized by contemporary philanthropists for accepting as little as 2.5 percent profit on the tenements. Five story blocks of buildings went up, with the top floor devoted to laundry, baths, and drying. Tenements on the four floors below opened off a central corridor, with permanently open windows at either end, as well as open stairwells with dust shafts located nearby for refuse disposal. The total cost of the project was £43,765. One block contained 28 flats consisting of a living room and bedroom, 19 two-bedroom flats, and 5 one-room tenements.

administration of the market to the state. To outsiders, Burdett-Coutts could not possibly be at fault, as one contemporary observer noted:

The Lady Bountiful of our time, at once wise and gentle and charitable ... among her countless benefactions to her poor brothers and sisters, gave them Columbia Market ... [h]er design was to bring cheap and good food within the reach of those who could least afford to be cheated of a farthing's worth ... the spacious avenues of a fine architectural edifice were given up to the marketing of the ragged, the unfortunate, and the guilty ... yet so sunk were those ... in ignorance and the wantonness of vice, that they would not use the gift.<sup>28</sup>

The residents of Bethnal Green, like most areas of the East End, ran the gamut of morality, and it is certainly true that much of the area that Columbia Market was created in was notorious for drunkenness and vice.<sup>29</sup> Baroness Burdett-Coutts (created a *suo jure* peerage in 1871), was given Columbia Market back in 1874, but despite efforts to resuscitate it with railroads, it had failed by the 1880s. The market was a figure of public fun for the residents of Bethnal Green. Advertisements in the *Penny Illustrated* for Cope's Tobacco claimed that the tobacco shop did "more for the welfare of Bethnal Green than any Lady Bountiful."<sup>30</sup> The Columbia Market Railways (Abandonment) Act of 1890 was the last word on the subject before the war.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Blanchard Jerrold and Dore, Gustave (illus.), *London: A Pilgrimage* (London: 1872), 181.

<sup>29</sup> The area just south of Columbia Square and Market was the notorious Nichols rookery, and the areas north were typified by the name of streets, changed in the late 1800s to reflect a more virtuous society, of Cock's Lane, Whore's Lane, and Rogue's Lane.

<sup>30</sup> Gordon, *Little Book of the East End*, 59.

<sup>31</sup> Ian Jack, "The Statute Book of Law is Full of Dead Wood, and it's About to Get a Pruning" in *The Guardian*, 20 April 2012. With the return of soldiers from World War I, an idea was floated to resurrect the market. Veterans blamed the Jews for an increasingly high level of unemployment, and wanted to use Columbia Market strictly for veteran-owned shops. This idea was never implemented. The market remained abandoned. It was used as a deep bomb shelter

Residents of Bethnal Green, despite their openness to the many strangers who placed their lives under scrutiny, maintained privacy in many respects as well. Charity and intervention were distrusted, or seen as a conspiracy, by many. One reason for the virulent epidemics still sweeping the area was residents refusing vaccination orders. Heavy handed philanthropy was to be distrusted, and as Beatrice Webb discovered when she went undercover as a seamstress, much of the distress of poverty and the harsh working conditions of residents were disguised from prying eyes. Necessary philanthropy, such as Columbia Square, could be adapted to suit residents' purposes. Lady Bountiful's market showed how charity could go awry.

The line of open-air markets traced the western edge of Bethnal Green, where another common occupation was thievery. Cadging the silk handkerchief or wallet off a well-heeled west ender brought money into the household. Children were taught this trade from an early age. They were agile, wiry, and able to disappear into crowds quickly. Children usually worked in teams of four or five, with two spotters, a distractor, and two pickpockets fleecing the crowd. The distraction child would pitch a hue and cry, and as crowds gathered around her (it was usually a young girl), the pickpockets would move through, cutting ribbons and collecting coins. When police were seen, the spotters would set up a signal, and all the children would disappear at once. They made their way through the crowds easily, but also knew the back alleys and roads very well. They could scamper through streets and over walls, and be home before the policeman had cleared the first street. "We youngsters began to mix more with the older thieves. There were about a dozen of them who used to hang out at Clark's. They were six or seven years older than us. But we used the same coffee shop and so we became known to them. The young lads looked up to the 'heads,' as they called the older thieves, and some of them helped to

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during World War II, and was the recipient of a direct hit. See World War II section for further details.

carry the stolen goods.”<sup>32</sup> Arthur Harding, writing of his experience as a thief, recalled that “[he] learnt pickpocketing from a chap [name] Edward Spencer ... he was a real bloody villain ... his father worked for the Port of London Authority and his mother was respectable – they lived in Canrobert Street, Bethnal Green.”<sup>33</sup> Thievery was learned from older men, who took the poor, young children under their greasy wings, teaching new opportunities for income. Charles Booth, in his 1898 walkthrough of the Boundary Street area with Sergeant French, notes that the area east of Boundary Street was:

‘Thieves, prostitutes, [and] hullies’. Especially thieves. Here and there parties of three to six lads gossiping. French called them Bethnal Green ‘nibs’ and said they were all thieves.<sup>34</sup>

While walking through the streets, he and French also encountered “a quick bad looking man with a grey moustache, black bowler hat, brown coat, dark trousers, good boots, well brushed and gentlemanly looking.” As French noted, he was “a well-known thieves tutor.”<sup>35</sup> Opportunities present in education began to eat into the life of thievery with which the west end of Bethnal Green was synonymous.

### **Not Quite City, No Longer Country**

Some of the social impetus to improve the lives of East Enders came from the civic reorganization of London. In 1855, Bethnal Green was designated as part of the Metropolis of London, which granted the Metropolitan Board of Works limited power over sanitation, lighting, streets, and health. The Metropolitan Board of Works was continually stymied in its efforts by the local Council and Vestry, who neither accepted the jurisdiction of London, nor saw the

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<sup>32</sup> Jon E. Lewis, *London the Autobiography: 2,000 Years of the Capital's History by Those Who Saw it Happen* (London: Constable and Robinson, Ltd., 2008), 351.

<sup>33</sup> Lewis, *London the Autobiography*, 352

<sup>34</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 351 (Sergeant French, 24 March, 1898), 197.

<sup>35</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 351 (Sergeant French, 22 March, 1898), 175.



benefit in spending money as ordered by London. In 1899, when the Metropolitan Board of Works ordered the Council to install electric lighting on major streets, the Council ignored the Board. It took until 1905, despite repeated warnings, for Bethnal Green Borough Council to develop a scheme for this. It was not until 1911 that electric lighting was installed.<sup>36</sup>

The population of 1851 was 90,193, and there were 13,298 inhabited dwellings. Residential development had reached most areas of Bethnal Green, and very little farmland still existed. No longer the agrarian hamlet of ages past, Bethnal Green residents were now largely employed in industries termed invisible labor. It was the labor that created everyday objects, used in abundance, time-consuming to manufacture, but not valued, treasured, or passed down among families. Boot-making and cabinet making were the highest employers of the area. Unemployment was rampant.

Population in Bethnal Green passed the hundred-thousand mark between 1851 and 1861. There were an average of seven people per dwelling, and more than 70 percent of the area was developed. Workshops at home were common, and 24 percent of working age men were employed in the clothing industry (non-weaving). Over the following decade, 15,899 more people would settle in the area. By 1871, an average of eight people per dwelling showed the continuous overcrowding. Unemployment was staggering, and charities changed focus to dole programs. Average annual charity expenditures rose to £1,203, and six of eleven charities in place were dole programs.<sup>37</sup>

Worse still, Bethnal Green was running out of space. Much of the east end of Bethnal Green was devoted to public space and institutions, and the west end was fully developed. It was necessary to develop plans to reuse space, and the first rush of building after 1871 was led by a

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<sup>36</sup> Baker, *County of Middlesex History*, 88.

<sup>37</sup> Baker, "Charity," 262.

philanthropic institution focused on doing just that. An early forerunner of the explosion of philanthropic renovation in the 1880s, the Improved Industrial Dwelling Company began its first project in Bethnal Green with the Leopold Buildings (completed 1872), located in the north-west. Another would be completed before the end of the decade. Development of a unique project was underway as well, resulting in the opening of the Bethnal Green Museum in 1872.

### **Civilizing Savage London**

The Industrial Revolution was as much about changing cultures as it was about changing manufacturing. Religious and philosophical topics competed with scientific and pseudo-scientific discoveries for dominance over the minds of the people in England, and London especially. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution had been transmuted by the 1870s to the concept of "Social Darwinism," specifically, the idea that certain cultural, social, political, or sociological traits survived because they were the "fittest." Different groups in London began to debate which traits should be allowed to perish, and which should be saved. Bethnal Green's long-standing image as the ragdoll of London argued for the survival of its inhabitants, although not in their present condition. One idea for their improvement was to remove the stigma of overcrowding, thereby lifting residents above their present state. Another was the idea of "rational recreation," the desire to impose orderly activities on the working class which would force them to be better. Too much free time led to drunkenness and vice. If the workers were offered "rational recreation," so the thinking went, they would flock to it gladly, thereby improving themselves.

The Museum, alternatively the South Kensington Museum or the Bethnal Green Museum, had been a state institution from the start. It was first proposed by William Gladstone (not-yet Prime Minister) in 1851. The cause was championed by Prince Albert, perhaps the most

famous face behind the idea of “rational recreation” in the mid-Victorian era. Albert pushed through the funding for a state institution which encouraged education in leisurely form. An extension of the ambitious museum expansion in London under Victoria and Albert, the South Kensington Museum was the first to be entirely funded by public money. Henry Cole was the architect of the initial project, and he was charged with keeping costs low. Cole decided to reuse the iron lattice structure from the Great Exhibition in 1851, and covered it with corrugated metal. Originally constructed in Brompton, and known to all as the Brompton Boilers, it was considered quite the eyesore.<sup>38</sup> The South Kensington Museum was described by an unnamed civil engineer in London as a “huge lugubrious hospital for decayed railway carriages.”<sup>39</sup> The museum was a success, however, and in 1870 the Brompton Boilers were replaced. The temporary structure was offered to other towns as a branch of the South Kensington Museum. Most turned it down, but Bethnal Green did not.<sup>40</sup> Construction for the Bethnal Green Museum began on the Poor Lands, purchased in 1868 by Sir Antonio Brady, St Matthew’s Bethnal Green rector Reverend Septimus Hansard, and Dr. Millar expressly for that purpose. By 1872, the Museum was opened for business under the auspices of the South Kensington Museum. The foundation and façade of the building were typical mid-Victorian era civic building. A flight of marble stairs led to the lobby, a colonnaded long room with staircases on either end that led to the ground floor, closed to public access. Entry to the main atrium was through an arch, a continuation of the vaulted

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<sup>38</sup> Bethnal Green Museum was originally built as an extension of the Brompton Museum, and named South Kensington Museum at Bethnal Green as well. By the opening, it was referred to as the Bethnal Green Museum. It was at times known as the Museum of Bethnal Green, and Victoria’s Bethnal Green Museum. Locals nicknamed it “Ol’ Dusty” or simply called it the Museum.

<sup>39</sup> *Victoria and Albert Museum of Childhood, Bethnal Green Official History* (London: Victoria and Albert Publications, 2008). An abbreviated version of the history is available online at <http://www.museumofchildhood.org.uk/about-us/history-of-the-museum>.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

ceiling, created around the support of the metal framework. The reuse of the Brompton Boilers enabled the ceiling to be made almost entirely of glass, allowing significant natural light. Despite the call for rationality, once inside, the exhibits crammed two levels of floor-space and were devoted to whatever passing whim and fancy gift had been received by the Royal Family, as well as the Wallace Collection.<sup>41</sup> The bottom floor was a storage space, cluttered with cartons and exhibitions without floor space or interest. Other collections which had been gifted to the museum were pulled, including an exposition on new trade materials and technology, sent off to the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square.<sup>42</sup> No effort was made to drive people from outside of Bethnal Green into the area to see the Museum. It would have been impracticable for all but the rich, and they did not wish to go to the inconvenience to see certain exhibits. The Museum was intended for the people of Bethnal Green, but the exhibits rarely featured something that the people might find interesting, entertaining, or educational. Despite the best efforts of the government, the Museum did not perform well, nor bring in great crowds.

### **Out of Space**

By 1875, all of Bethnal Green's space was allocated for development or already developed. Brick makers and silk-weavers had shops in the area, but the largest employer was the Brewery in southernmost Bethnal Green.<sup>43</sup> By 1876, it produced 600,000 barrels of alcoholic product per year. In 1873, Robertson's Ginger Beer Factory opened, and the following year

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<sup>41</sup> The Wallace Collection was housed in the Museum *circa* 1872-1877. At the time, it consisted of a loan including French Masters and fine art objects. The 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, and 17<sup>th</sup> century tapestries may have been of interest to descendants of the Huguenot settlers, but the collection as a whole was not a crowd-pleaser. It was officially gifted to the state in 1897, at which time it filled a townhome in London, comprising twenty-five galleries.

<sup>42</sup> John Evans, Francis Hervey, Rayleigh B. Samuelson, Douglas Galton, Hervey E. Roscoe, "The Science Collection at South Kensington" in *Nature* 40 (Aug. 29, 1889), 425.

<sup>43</sup> The Brewery lived through various incarnations: Black Dog Brewery, Three Ales Brewery, Cambridge-Heath Brewery, Blind Beggar's Brewery, and House Brewery. Between 1881 and 1945, the Brewery was renamed thirty-some off times, although it is not clear why.

Davis Manufacture, specializing in vinegar, opened. There were six sawmills, and by the end of the decade two separate clothing factories had opened.<sup>44</sup> Industry was moving through Bethnal Green and the main thoroughfares could not handle the strain. A second rail line had been laid in 1866, running alongside the main line in southern Bethnal Green before branching off to run parallel to Cambridge-Heath Road. The expansion of the railway increased traffic along Bethnal Green Road, which until 1876 left the borough just south of Old Nichols, and was barely thirty feet wide. The re-routing and expansion of Bethnal Green Road was the first time that the Bethnal Green Vestry was obliged to rehouse the working-class families, approximately 800 people, it displaced.<sup>45</sup> After the expansion, a contract was awarded to Christopher Forrest to redevelop the area, and from 1877 to 1881, the Red Cow Estates, comprising 40 dwellings, were erected.<sup>46</sup>

The Metropolitan Board of Works was making no headway in reforming Bethnal Green's overcrowded slums and streets. Although the Board had the legal sanction to deal with sanitation and overcrowding, it had less local authority than the Vestry, who were slow to spend money. Almost every street now had sewage and drainage running through the street, but contrary to what was spelled out by law, the Vestry had elected to allow individual homeowners to connect to the sewer at their own expense.<sup>47</sup> Clean water and drinking wells were of primary concern to residents and non-residents alike, as the connection between fouled water and epidemics was a certainty. As the city of London grew larger, the space between people was

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<sup>44</sup> Baker, "Economic History" in *A History of the County of Middlesex*, 168-190.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Baker, "Building and Social Conditions, 1876-1914" in *A History of the County of Middlesex*, 126-132.

<sup>47</sup> Baker, "Public Services" in *A History of the County of Middlesex*, 203-212. Unsurprising, many landlords elected not to go to the expense of connecting to public sewer lines.

growing smaller, and an epidemic begun in Bethnal Green was as likely to spread to the West End as an epidemic begun in the center of London. As transportation through Bethnal Green improved, the offensive odors of cesspits became a city-wide health problem. Small pox epidemics hit the capital roughly every four years, an unusually high rate of recurrence. In a report published in *The Lancet* in 1870, Dr. Seaton, the president of the Epidemiological Society, explained the frequent infections: “in London the accumulation of susceptible persons was more rapid than elsewhere ... the Eastern district had been those that had chiefly suffered, because ... there had been considerable trouble about vaccinations.”<sup>48</sup> He noted particularly that “the worse [sic] unions were those of Bethnal-green and Mile-end Old Town, in which the guardians had shaken hands with the promoters of the so-called Anti-Vaccination League, and nearly half of the small-pox mortality had been in those two parishes [in 1869-1870].”<sup>49</sup> What little progress was made by the Board of Works came in the form of changing names, from the morally questionable street names favored by the locals to something more reflective of a higher society.<sup>50</sup> The residents continued to refer to streets by their old names, and many maps from the time record both names.

The Poor Law Board of Guardians for Bethnal Green had ruled the workhouses since 1834, but not well. The most frequent medical reporting of Bethnal Green was in epidemics, although a number of cases of malfeasance had been reported against the Guardians and doctors of the workhouses. While most of the doctors had been acquitted of charges, the Guardians

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<sup>48</sup> Dr. Seaton, “Small-Pox in the Metropolis” in *The Lancet* 96, no. 2455 (Dec. 17, 1870), 868.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Cocks Lane, Whores Lane, and Rogues Lane were so-named for their Tudor period reputation as home to brothels and gambling hells. They were swallowed up by Old Bethnal Green Road. Petticoat Lane was renamed (because of its association with the Huguenots) Middlesex Street, and again to Victoria Lane, but locals referred to it strictly as Petticoat Lane and Market, and eventually it was renamed to the original.

seemed to have license to do as they would. They were continually denounced in *The Lancet* and *British Medical Journal* for failure to uphold sanitary and health compliance acts. A report of 1868 in *The British Medical Journal* reported that one such instance resulted in fisticuffs between two board members.<sup>51</sup> These officers, charged with the health and welfare of Bethnal Green, seemed to be more interested in cost-cutting measures and sabotage than in fulfilling their duty.<sup>52</sup> It is perhaps little wonder that the residents of Bethnal Green distrusted their authority, and sought any solutions for aid and comfort other than the workhouse and the Poor Law Board of Guardians. The 1870s would see a breeze of change, however, in the arrival of George Paddock Bate in 1875 to the position of Medical Officer of Health.

### **Political Surgery**

The introduction of the Medical Health Officer in 1871 must surely have been used and abused in its time. Perhaps the crony system put in place one of two doctors who were not eminently qualified to provide real relief for medical emergencies. In richer neighborhoods, this would not have mattered. Instead, they relied on their own private doctors and specialists as needed. The middle class and working class had some relief. They had a club system of doctors, for which they paid a weekly, monthly, or annual fee. These club doctors provided basic health services, but they were fairly skilled and knowledgeable. Inhabitants of Bethnal Green

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<sup>51</sup> “Bethnal Green” in *The British Medical Journal* (March 28, 1868), 307. N.B., some effort has been made by statisticians and medical officers to convey the depths of malfeasance and the heights of epidemiology in Bethnal Green, and a number of special reports detailing the history of the Poor Law Board of Guardians. No survey is complete. The *British Medical Journal* published a series of articles beginning in 1955 which traced the epidemics of Bethnal Green, and various Medical Officers of Health of Bethnal Green, beginning with George Paddock Bate in 1878, have detailed the various methods employed to limit virulent cases.

<sup>52</sup> “The Poor-Law Medical Officers of Bethnal Green” in *The British Medical Journal* (Feb. 12, 1870), 163. This article reports that the Guardian Board sought to reduce their Poor-Law Medical Staff from seven to four. It was the last of a series of articles, stretching from 1855 to 1870, in which the Poor Law Guardians were charged with failure to discharge their legal duties.

subscribed to this system, if they could afford it. Generally, however, the only relief was the Medical Health Officer. He would oversee the cases of thousands of inhabitants who had come to the workhouse hospitals and infirmaries. It was not a particularly glamorous position, necessitating long hours and hands on labor. Occasionally, however, Medical Health Officers were positioned where needed, with the passion necessary to do a difficult job well.

George Paddock Bate was one such Medical Officer of Health. His first report was published in 1877. He was elected President of the Incorporated Society of Medical Officers of Health six months later. He would hold this position, as well as vice-president, at various intervals throughout his tenure as Bethnal Green Medical Officer of Health.<sup>53</sup> Arthur Morrison wrote of him in his *Children of the Jago* (1896):

Throughout the 1880s, the local medical officer Dr. George Paddock Bate, and then the Mansion House Council of the Dwellings of the Poor, urged the parochial administrative body, the Bethnal Green Vestry, to make use of existing legislation to fine the slumlords, require improvements, and/or raze properties deemed unfit for human habitation. Yet the Vestry ignored their recommendations, for, it turned out, some of the vestrymen, many of them local business owners, were themselves among the district's slumlords. They were reluctant to put a penny toward the properties' improvement, only complying when an investigative journalist and housing activist, Bennet Burleigh, threatened to publicize their identities. Further inquiries [conducted by Bate and others] revealed that at least two peers of the realm, as well as the Church of England, were absentee owners of Nichol slums.<sup>54</sup>

His first foray into public politics was published in the annual report on St Matthew's Parish in Bethnal Green of 1878. He had recommendations to make. To him, it was an antiquated process to lay out the dead bodies for the jury to view in a pub house. It was dangerous and unnecessary, and increased risk of airborne illness. Bethnal Green had no

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<sup>53</sup> *Minutes* of the Annual Meeting of the Incorporated Society of Medical Officers of Health (Friday October 16, 1896).

<sup>54</sup> Arthur Morrison, *A Child of the Jago* (London: Oxford University Press, 2012), 17.



mortuary, only a small watch-house (unused) which served the purpose.<sup>55</sup> The most important of his findings from this 1878 report, however, was that the calculations of vital statistics was erroneous.<sup>56</sup> He employed a new method throughout his tenure, and it would be adopted by a multitude of other boroughs.

The curate at St. Matthew's from 1873 until 1878 was Stewart Headlam, a social reformer.<sup>57</sup> He founded the Christian Socialist Guild of St. Matthew in 1877. He was very passionate about his work, and had trouble gaining influence in the Church. He was essentially blacklisted after his time at St Matthews. Headlam also provided part of the bail and a safe house for Oscar Wilde on his release from Reading Jail.<sup>58</sup> His ideals must have clashed mightily with A.F. Winnington-Ingram, the future Lord Bishop of London, who ran Oxford House from 1882. In the same year Winnington-Ingram was sworn in as Lord Bishop of London, he was also appointed head of the Public Morality Council.<sup>59</sup> While they may have respectfully disagreed on matters of religion, they both wholeheartedly supported Bethnal Green from new positions. Headlam found an outlet for his social work, serving as a member of the Bethnal

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<sup>55</sup> The watchhouse, originally a private endeavor, was located at the corner of Globe Street and Green Street. It continued there until approximately 1890.

<sup>56</sup> "The Health Report on Bethnal-Green for 1878," in *Medical Times and Gazette* (Oct. 4, 1879), 403. Vital Statistics as calculated by the Medical Officer of Health were used to distribute supplies and finances based on the information received. From 1875 onwards, excepting Census years, population estimates are based on the MOH reports published by wellcome.org. After World War I, MOH discontinued the practice of estimating population in Census years, but prior to that, Bate's calculations proved accurate within 1 percent of the population.

<sup>57</sup> For further reading on Stewart Headlam, see John Richard Orens, *Stewart Headlam's Radical Anglicanism: The Mass, the Masses, and the Music Hall* (2003); Edward R. Norman, *The Victorian Christian Socialists* (2002), Ch. 6: "Stewart Headlam."

<sup>58</sup> Gordon, *Little Book of the East End*, 95.

<sup>59</sup> Edward J Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance: Purity Movements in Britain since 1700* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1977), 102.

Green school board from 1907 until 1927. He was a staunch defender of the poor of Bethnal Green, and wrote often on the subject.

### **No Entrance**

The decade between 1871 and 1880 marked a number of important changes for Bethnal Green. The boundaries of Bethnal Green were in flux, but the area contained within even the furthest reaches of any border of Bethnal Green were in development or developed. By 1880, the area boasted a total of fifteen Anglican churches and sixteen chapels, two synagogues, one Wesleyan church in the west end and a chapel in the east end, and a number of other religious institutions. Various private and public ventures had also created 70 acres of parkland in the north-east corner, one non-denominational cemetery, one Jewish cemetery, and one Protestant cemetery. The privately owned Regents and Duckett Canals had been brought together under one company, and the railroad ran from west to east through the whole area, and north to south through most of the area. With loftier aspirations, the London Chest Hospital had been joined by the Hospital for Children on Hackney Road and the Mildmay Mission Hospital just south of Columbia Square. Overall health in Bethnal Green had continuously improved over the preceding half-century. New concepts of housing had a brief introduction: gone were the individual homes gone to rot, and instead these great ungainly heaps of buildings grew in their place, hemming in the sky. Bethnal Green residents had been subjected to numerous types of social observation and attempts at reform, and the failures of these were being studied for improvement opportunities. The failure of Columbia Market and the dim prospects of Bethnal Green Museum would not stem the tide of interference, however, nor dim the glamor of charities rolling their proverbial sleeves up and diving head first into more projects. Fine silk-weaving had ended as a trade, and coarse-weaving taken up in its place. Although the primary place of

employment was still the home, the first wave of factory building had begun in Bethnal Green. Although the people were packed into the area, they were reluctant to leave, moving at most a few blocks outside of Bethnal Green. The decade between censuses marked another important change: it was the first time since 1801 that the transfers out of Bethnal Green began to overtake the natural change in population. Bethnal Green would continue to grow in population, as the natural change in population remained unchecked for several decades more, but the number of people entering and/or staying in Bethnal Green was decreasing rapidly.

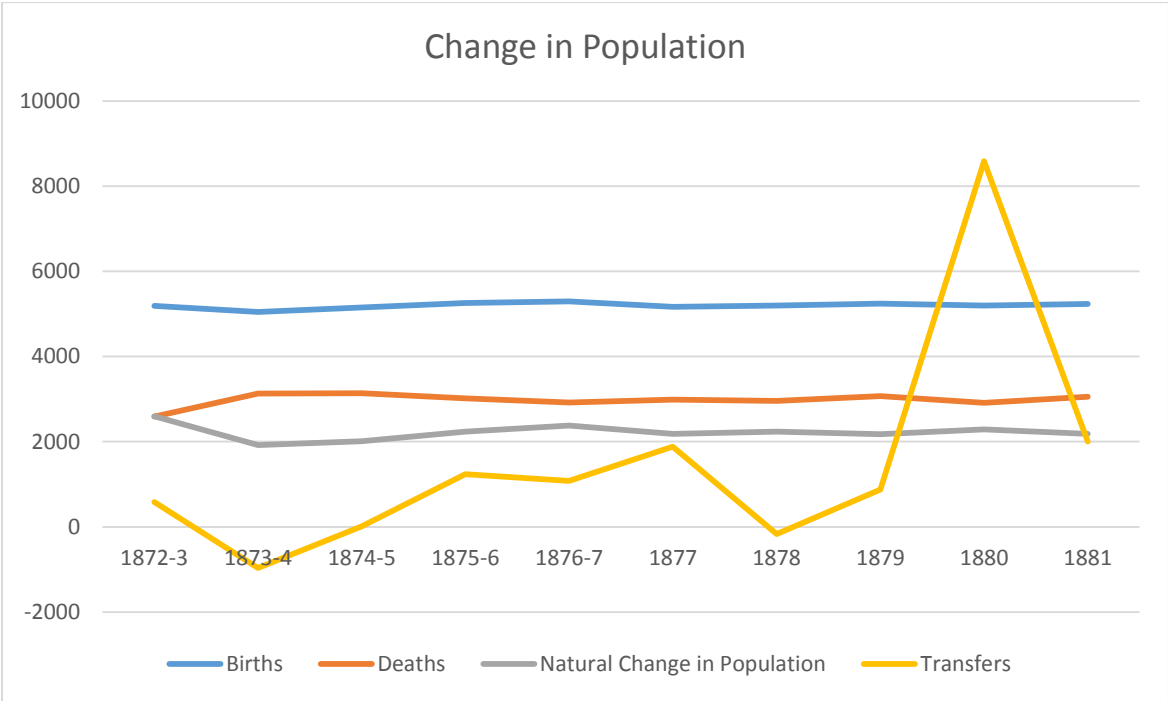


Fig. 1: Change in Population, 1871-1881

Perhaps the most important change of the decade was an Act of 1870 which enabled the school board of London to take control of education in the area. Moreover, it required that accommodations be provided for all children, as well as providing fee money for poor children. This was not to be considered parochial relief, but rather a right. The school boards were not

allowed to deprive children of this fund if they selected a school.<sup>60</sup> Bethnal Green had a long history of education, mostly funded through charitable trusts. In 1871, each of the fifteen Anglican parishes had a National School. In addition, there were seven British schools, five ragged schools, and seven miscellaneous parochial and private schools.<sup>61</sup> Of the 45,763 children under the age of fifteen in 1871, there was only accommodation for 16,644, and an average of 12,955 attended. Parmiter's was the only secondary school.<sup>62</sup> The main obstacles to education were money and time. Young children often brought income into the family, through scavenging, stealing, and errand running. They were also an integral part of the family care, watching over younger siblings. While many of the children may have been reluctant to attend school, the area as a whole was thirsty for education, as will be shown. The cost of schooling might be as little as a shilling, but even that expense was often too much to bear. An Act of 1880 made schooling compulsory under the age of ten, but provided no relief from school fees. Whether the 1870 Act provided relief to Bethnal Green residents under its scholarships is unclear.

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<sup>60</sup> Derek Gillard, "1860-1900, Class Divisions" from *Education in England: The History of Our Schools*, <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/history/chapter03.html> 2011 (accessed 23 March 2014).

<sup>61</sup> National Schools were based on Church of England teachings, under the banner of the National Society for Promoting Religious Education. British schools, also known as "free schools," were a series of comprehensive and endowed schools focused on educating the poor. Ragged schools were set up in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and unionized by the 1844 creation of the Ragged School Union: they provided free education, food, clothing, lodging, and other home services. Their primary focus was reading, writing, and arithmetic, as well as the Bible. They eventually expanded to include commercial and industrial trade training. The other seven schools were non-unionized.

<sup>62</sup> Baker, "Education" in *A History of the County of Middlesex*, 242-260.

## **BETHNAL GREEN IN THE LATE 1800S: THE ABLEY FAMILY**

The Abley family lived in the west end of Bethnal Green, in an area both in and out of Bethnal Green. By names, size, and breakdown of their family, they were the average Bethnal Green family.<sup>63</sup> The branch which lived in Bethnal Green from 1900 until the Great War typified a family of that era. The parents, Ben and Sarah, were typical of their generation. She was named after her mother, and there was a close relationship there. They had the average number of children in Bethnal Green per family by 1911. The Great War touched their lives considerably, as it would have most of the residents of Bethnal Green.

Our story of the Abley family begins in Bethnal Green in 1836. Edward Castle was born in Bethnal Green in that year, and baptized at St James the Great, the poorest church in Bethnal Green. He was born into a family of silk weavers, part of the silk-weaving boom that peaked in the 1840s and '50s, but lingered until the 1870s. In 1861, he was upholding the family trade. He was apprenticed to a silk weaver on Slaka Street in Bethnal Green. This would not last. Castle was admitted to the Waterloo Road Workhouse in late 1864 or early 1865. In April of 1865, he was voted for removal. It was found that he had “quarreled with his master,” voluntarily leaving his employ, and he was duly discharged from the workhouse.<sup>64</sup> By July of 1865, the month of his marriage to Mary Ann Salmon, he had adapted to the changing times. His occupation was listed on the record of his marriage as a grocer at St. Andrew’s. It is likely that he lived “above the shop,” as was common for the age.

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<sup>63</sup> At the time, it was most common for eldest children of each gender to be named for their parents. Bethnal Green averaged five to eight children per household.

<sup>64</sup> If he had been involuntarily terminated, for any reason, he would have been eligible for Poor Law relief. Voluntarily leaving an employment situation was grounds for termination of relief aid.

Edward and Mary Ann's oldest child, Sarah Anne Castle, was born in November of 1866. She was three years old when Emily, the next child was born. In 1871, Sarah entered school. Her family lived at 13 Wennington Road, a small street peopled mostly by those in the artisanal trades.<sup>65</sup> Two more sisters, Caroline and Alice, were born in 1875 and 1878, respectively. In 1880, at fourteen years of age, Sarah would have left school. Thirteen people lived in the house, including her family, the Davis family, and the Wright family.<sup>66</sup> In 1881, Sarah is listed as a shoe fitter, with her mother pursuing infant shoe sewing. Her father had abandoned the grocery trade, working briefly as a laborer, before pursuing a position as a tea merchant at a warehouse. After a brief period as a traveler (salesman), Edward reverted back to laborer before the end of the decade. Their father's unstable job situation may have had profound effect on Sarah and Emily. The family, however, was relatively stable in terms of income and location. In 1881 they were settled at 15 Wennington Road. Four of their immediate neighbors were in the shoe business.

The western and northern borders of the neighborhood were formed by the Regent's Canal, built between 1812 and 1820, and the Hertford Union Canal, opened in 1830, respectively. Wennington Road itself dead-ended onto the Old Ford Road footpath and overlooked the Old Ford Road Bay. Two streets connected it to Roman Road, Ashwell and Gardener. Along Wennington Road, two-story dwelling houses made of honey-colored stone

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<sup>65</sup> The area around Victoria Park had been reserved for development of middle class housing. This had proved to be a failure, and it was the upper-lower class, mostly skilled artisans, who inhabited these homes instead. Wennington Road and Ashwell Road were developed first, beginning in 1845 when two docks were situated in the area. Gardener's Road would be added in the 1880s, although there was some residential development before the addition of the road. Ashwell and Gardener's Roads were named after their developers.

<sup>66</sup> The house was five rooms total, not including a semi-detached kitchen in the back, giving an average of 2.6 persons per room, below the average of Bethnal Green in the same era. The family, however, likely lived on the top floor (two rooms), in which case, the girls would have shared one room and the parents the other.

lined the streets, and reflected the social condition of the inhabitants. Kept clean, with stoops white-washed weekly by house-proud wives, Wennington Road was an oasis away from Grove Road, listed in 1868 as “very dirty,” with full gutters and trash visible in the street.<sup>67</sup> Two pubs existed on Wennington Road, both dating from 1848. The “two-up, two-down” dwellings that lined the street, twenty-three on the south side and seventeen on the north, were built with the idea of maximizing space. Each had a small plot behind, sometimes held communally between a few houses. There was no separation between the buildings. “Sharing was literally built into the housing in which probably the majority of inner London residents lived.”<sup>68</sup> The street-face of the buildings was intended to be uniform, as was the street itself. Over time, however, various philanthropic beautification projects had taken hold, and the street was dotted with trees and decorative sewer grates. Local markets likely provided window-boxes, which would be filled with bright flowers tended by the mother, or vegetables and herbs tended by the father. A wrought-iron fence, hip-height, cordoned the doors from the street. Each house’s door opened alternatively on the right or left side, meaning that every two houses had their door less than two feet away from each other.

These paired households likely shared a good relationship with their neighbors out of sheer necessity. The walls were thin and the houses set very close together, so that neighbors would very likely be aware of every conversation, argument, or fight in the house next door. Babies crying and pots boiling carried their sound and smell next door as easily as though walls did not exist. Men would often leave the house in the morning at the same time, likely conversing, carrying news and conversation down to Grove Road, there to separate and head

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<sup>67</sup> Anonymous, “Sanitary Conditions of Streets” District 2, published in the *British Medical Journal* (May 1868).

<sup>68</sup> Ellen Ross, “Survival Networks: Women’s Neighbourhood Sharing in London before World War I” in *History Workshop* no. 15 (Spring, 1983), 9.

their respective way to work. Women would follow out the door soon after, carrying laundry to be hung out on the front fence when the line was full out back, pots to be tipped into the sewer, or perhaps to head to market or drop off wares at their employers' shop. Only the finest of linens that the house had to offer would be hung in the front of the house. This was a sign of material wealth to the neighbors. "Sunday outfits, mantel ornaments (which could multiply in prosperity and disappear to the pawnshop during bad times), ... elaborate funerals, pub treating, and white starched pinafores for girls' Sunday best – all of which proclaimed to those best able to interpret their meaning, household respectability and at least a small cash surplus."<sup>69</sup> Washing lines also crisscrossed the street, from second floor window to second floor window. "As close together as nine feet," the street provided little insulation from the houses across the way.<sup>70</sup> Theft was not a concern, but appearances were. Greater privacy was granted in the separated backyards. Most of the dwellings on Wennington Road, in contrast to Ashwell Road and Gardener's Road, had private backyards.

In these backyards, housewives pinned up the week's washing, carried large pots to be scrubbed out, and allowed the children to run around. Along the north side of Wennington Road, the houses were equipped with semi-detached kitchens. Fathers used the backyard for space-consuming hobbies, such as kilns and bird-cages. The even-numbered side of Wennington Road backed directly up to the Hertford Canal, and it is likely no fence existed on the back side. There was a stone wall, varying between three and six feet high. This ease of access to the Canal enabled many to use it as a tip, leading to trash-strewn waters and a unique miasma. Bertha, who lived in a house like the Abley's, once "threw a rat over the wall. It came flying back with a

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<sup>69</sup> Ellen Ross, "'Not the Sort that Would Sit on the Doorstep': Respectability in Pre-World War I London Neighbourhoods" in *International Labor and Working-Class History* 27 (Spring 1985), 43.

<sup>70</sup> Ross, "Survival Networks", 10.



string of oaths, having hit a bargee fair and square as he passed by.”<sup>71</sup> The canal had been instituted as a means of transporting goods, and the river was often teeming with barges, preparing for the Old Ford Lock.<sup>72</sup> When the canal backed up, as was a frequent occurrence in the spring, the trash washed up onto the backyards of these residents. The south side of the street had fences on three sides of their backyard. They backed up directly to the housing on Ashwell and Gardeners Road. The fences were tall enough to ensure some privacy, although the sounds and smells, and particularly ash from fires, would carry over with no issue. Many backyards had outhouses well into the 1950s.



Fig. 2: West from Wennington Road Regent's Canal<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Bailey, *Children of the Green*, 29. Doris Bailey grew up in the same area of Bethnal Green, a few streets away from the Abley Family. Her memoirs were published, telling a common tale of child life in the 1920s and 1930s in Bethnal Green.

<sup>72</sup> The Old Ford Lock was installed in 1820, raising barges passing through to the next elevation of water. It is still in use today.

<sup>73</sup> Modern pictures used throughout, author's own, taken March 4-14, 2014.

Inside the house, three rooms dominated the bottom floor, a bedroom, a “sitting room” and the kitchen. The sitting room was commonly converted to a bedroom, especially in crowded households. The upstairs, reached by a narrow staircase usually located in the front entryway, consisted of two bedrooms, one at the front and one at the back. The narrow pokey halls were poorly lit, receiving a little light from the windows during the day. The bedrooms were not large, usually a little larger than the straw-filled sacks used as mattresses that the elders of the house would sleep on. There was a social cachet in having the bottom floor, as well as a practical one: “ground floor apartments included a kitchen ... as well as direct access to the yard with tap and lavatory.”<sup>74</sup> Furnishings might consist of a small chest (usually kept in the parents room), a table and chairs in the kitchen, and the straw pallets, although many houses would not have enough for all the members of the family.<sup>75</sup> Children might sleep on blankets. They often shared, saving space and using body heat to survive the chill of winter. Bedrooms were rooms intended for two purposes, sleeping and dressing. Clothes were often held in common, usually in the parent’s room depending on the number of children.<sup>76</sup> Rooms were given based on seniority, with the eldest receiving the best and largest, and the younger members of the family sharing, as many as five to a room. Children were divided by sex, although they may have still been placed in the same room. In 1895, when the electoral register came to register those to vote, it listed

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<sup>74</sup> Anna Davin, “Loaves and Fishes: Food in Poor Households in Late Nineteenth-Century London” in *History Workshop* no. 41 (Spring, 1996), 170.

<sup>75</sup> In houses where furniture making was an occupation, furniture was made from cast-off wood. Families might trade for other goods. Chests (similar to Hope Chests) were a common marital gift.

<sup>76</sup> For many impoverished families, most members of the household owned only one outfits. In some families, the father had his Saturday night and Sunday morning suit, the mother would have a separate church outfit, and the children might have spare trousers and skirts. For those economically sound families in Bethnal Green, they might have a spare set of clothes for every child, reserved for church and funerals.

Benjamin Abley as living in the three rooms on the bottom floor, which were unfurnished.<sup>77</sup> In crowded households, of two or more families, married couples may have shared rooms with their children. In unrelated shared households, the top floor would have been given to one family and the bottom floor to the other, who paid more in rent.<sup>78</sup> They shared the kitchen and washing-up duties. In shared households where the families were related, there was not so easy a division of the families. Cousins would have shared rooms, as would elderly parents of the primary breadwinner and his wife.

Division of labor in the household was simpler in family-shared households such as the Abley's. The women shared the tasks of child-minding, cleaning up, cooking, and various other chores. Children chipped in, occasionally rewarded with pocket money for their efforts. An extra bob in the house was shared equally, buying treats to share or paying for an outing for all. Books were common property, with special volumes and new releases being treated with reverence. The family would gather around the fire after dinner, taking turns reading the latest chapter released in the penny press, or sharing a story from the Bible.<sup>79</sup> Children in school would be called upon to demonstrate their learning, invited to read a section of the newspaper or latest novel aloud to the rest of the family. For many in Bethnal Green, this was a watershed

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<sup>77</sup> "Wennington Road", Electoral Register Rolls Middlesex County, 1895. While Middlesex County as a civic structure did not exist, the voting block remained the same until creation of the Borough in 1900, at which time Bethnal Green was divided into two voting districts, Bethnal Green North-East and South-West. Sarah's mother was listed as the landlord for Benjamin, although it is unlikely she owned the house. She may have inherited the lifetime lease, and in turn passed it down to her daughter. Benjamin would have paid her rent, and she would have paid the landlord.

<sup>78</sup> Davin, "Loaves and Fishes", 170.

<sup>79</sup> Bethnal Green was deemed to have an "unusual atheistic tradition," but most families were connected with a church.

moment. The eldest in the family might be quasi-literate, capable of reading order forms or instructions but little else.<sup>80</sup>

Sarah married Benjamin Matthews Abley in 1886. As was traditional in a family comprising of all girls, he moved in with her family, ready to take over the role of head of household. Sarah's two youngest sisters were eight and eleven years old, still in school. Emily, who was seventeen at the time, witnessed her sister's marriage. That hot Sunday morning, the Abley wedding was the second of twelve scheduled at St Jude's. Traditionally, marriages cost less than 10 shillings, including the dress and feast afterwards, held at the nearest family member's house. The married couple was responsible for the vicar's fee, and Alfred Brugnell would have received his six shillings gladly at the completion of the ceremony. This was compensation for having read the banns for three weeks, the ceremonial robes, and his blessing on the marriage. Flowers were provided by a rota of the local ladies. Thomas Abley stood for his son. He and Benjamin were in the business of decorating, including house painting. Benjamin's family would have travelled from nearby Poplar to bear witness, and accompanied the family back for the feast. His two brothers and two sisters, mother, and father would have parted with their son, whom they would see on rare occasion, as time and events allowed. He was now a resident of Bethnal Green.

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<sup>80</sup> Literacy rates were not measured or studied in the Bethnal Green area during this period. Many of the chroniclers of Bethnal Green, however, noted that those born before approximately 1870 were fully illiterate, and that those born from 1870 to 1880 demonstrated only 'adequate' reading skills. Children who were 'deprived' of the opportunity to go to school during this period could usually form their names and read at a basic level. Many of the Sunday Schools provided this opportunity, teaching children to read from the Bible and furnishing free copies to impoverished families.



Sarah gave birth to Henry, who lived for only three months. Her father had died earlier in the year. Benjamin applied to vote that year, listing Emily Castle as the person to whom he paid rent. April of 1899 would see the last of their male children born, John Thomas.

### **Charity Rushes In**

The established elite, still grappling with the uneasy task of accepting the assimilation of the middle-class, were willing to let the middle class donate to their philanthropic drives, but less willing to let them sit on the board. This reached a dead pass in the 1860s, when middle class women began to take on the role of philanthropic endeavors themselves. New institutions geared up, fuelled by the scandal of the century, the conditions of the poor. This scandal consumed the newspapers, who daily ran articles decrying the conditions of different places in different parts of the United Kingdom. In London, “slumming” became a spectator sport.<sup>82</sup> Those with a spare coin could ride on special busses to locations throughout the rising cities, where living conditions had reached unsatisfactory status. Workers in the new factories were forced to live in cramped conditions, with poor hygiene and little thought put into urban planning. This outrage engendered was no less in London, where a mirror was being held up by the people and the world. Not far from the glitter and gleam of the capitol business were the unwashed streets and the unwashed faces of the poor. London, the greatest progressive city in the world, was examining its own soiled linen.

The practical applications of new scientific theories were being explored, and new schools of thought began to emerge. The publication of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution attracted attention from many disciplines, many of whom sought to use this new theory to further their studies. Darwin’s half-cousin, Francis Galton, published a work in 1883, titled

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<sup>82</sup> For more on slumming, see Seth Koven’s *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (2004).

*Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development*, which first explored the new field of eugenics. He would coin the term in 1883, relying on the Greek to replace his previous name, “stirpiculture.” Eugenics, from Galton’s perspective, was about studying any and all effective means to promote the next generation, particularly racially. Others applied eugenics more socially, preferring instead to focus on class. Both ideas were well-spread and popular among the upper classes. Many organizations began to expand Darwin’s theories of natural selection and survival of the fittest to sociology and politics. Definitions of the strong and weak differed from group to group, but each focused on fostering certain social customs among different classes. There was an inherent belief that once these social practices were taught, they would be passed down the generations.

Charles Booth was a noted philanthropist and an early sociologist. He had been actively involved in the East End of London since the 1860s, but from the periphery. He believed that the accounts he received of the area, taken in consideration with his own view of the area, were wildly exaggerated. Beginning in 1886, he began the task of compiling a study, based on statistical information collected by his researchers. He dispatched men and women to the grounds of Bethnal Green, Poplar, Hackney, Stepney, and others. His object was a street by street survey of the area, particularly noting characteristics of poverty and overcrowding. By the completion of the first set of volumes, published in 1889, Booth was still clinging to his initial assumption, though his poverty maps clearly contradicted it. Beatrice Potter Webb and her husband Sydney visited Bethnal Green beginning in the 1870s. They were noted Fabian Socialists and reformers. Beatrice was cousin to Charles Booth’s wife, and she would be asked to include a section in his 1886-1903 publishing *Life and Labour in London*. She lived in the Katherine Buildings, on the boundary of Whitechapel and Bethnal Green near Brick Lane, a

heavily Jewish area. She also worked undercover as a seamstress for a time, and gained first hand insight of the people. She wrote of them that they were “a happy lot of people ... men and women mixing together in a free and easy manner ... in the Garden of Eden of uncivilized life.”<sup>83</sup> She was not the only one to immortalize views of the East End as a place of some brilliance among the soot. Many of the reports, however, contained the truth of the streets, describing degradation of a level which could not continue to be ignored. The East End was a popular spot for spectacle tourism of “misery-seeking middle-class women who went to the slums asking to be shown titillating cases of unmitigated desolation.”<sup>84</sup>

Booth defined poverty by income; 21 shillings for a moderate family would purchase only the bare necessities, if that. In western Bethnal Green, 58.7 percent of the population lived in poverty.<sup>85</sup> As part of his first set, Booth created a poverty map of the East End, color-coded to reflect the social status of each individual street. It showed, on a street level, the mean income and poverty level associated with the East End. Broad swaths of red crossed the main streets of Bethnal Green, crisscrossing with pinks, and splashed with black. Occasionally, these bright red streaks would travel for a distance, going on for a few blocks before fading to pink, then blue, then black. These bright red streaks were on the major roads, delineating the importance of each to the community. They represented the relatively well-to-do merchants and publicans, storekeepers and clerics, who made a comfortable living and were tied to the community by their business. Pink represented the comfortable and secure low-income people. People in the pink sections worked for a living, provided food and shelter for their families, and generally got by.

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<sup>83</sup> Nils Roemer, “London and the East End as Spectacles of Urban Tourism” in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 99, no. 3 (Summer 2009), 422.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 423.

<sup>85</sup> Anthony S. Wohl, *The Eternal Slum: Housing and Social Policy in Victorian London* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1977), 315.



Purple was a rare classification in Bethnal Green, those who could be pink, but were restricted by income to the neighborhood they lived in. Blue represented working-class labour which either was low-paying or seasonal. Blue was still semi-respectable, but rough. Black was disreputable, the poorest of the poor mixed with thieves and morally low people. It was a curiosity that often the main street opening of a road would have clusters of red, but immediately beyond them were thickets of black. Two large areas of criminal poor existed in Bethnal Green, just west of Cambridge-Heath Road and south of Bethnal Green Road. “It took Booth seventeen years and seventeen volumes to discover that, if anything [exaggerations of poverty by others] had erred in underestimating the extent of London poverty.”<sup>86</sup> The discovery was largely due to investigations conducted for his third set, by Booth and others.

Philanthropy and social groups’ effect on the impoverished of London cannot be accurately measured. While temperance movements in Bethnal Green were very well attended, it seemed to make not one dent in the drinking practices of the natives. Children attended for the free cookies, adults attended out of curiosity, and as a social event. Those in Bethnal Green predisposed to believe ill of alcohol attended, a weekly affirmation of their own long-held beliefs. The preaching of social policies fared little better, although it met with more fertile ground. Residents of Bethnal Green were willing and eager to embrace institutions of learning, apartment buildings with running water, and all manner of other unforeseen luxury from these philanthropic groups. They would happily endure strict rules and guidelines from these groups for cheaper rent in nice buildings. These social experiments conducted on the residents of Bethnal Green would be eagerly embraced, at first. Eventually, the pitfalls of each would be

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<sup>86</sup> Albert Fried, *Charles Booth’s London, a Portrait of the Poor at the Turn of the Century, from his Life and Labour of the People of London* (New York: Pantheon Publishing, 1968), xvii.

detailed, and those locals who wished to could avoid them. Practical applications of new “scientific discoveries” were suggested, debated, and implemented in carefully controlled social experiments in Bethnal Green. One such social experiment was translated to the government level, where more could be accomplished by force of law: slum clearance, which had shown some success in the 1870s in Westminster. Jack London visited the East End of London, and he came away from that seeing it as “helpless, hopeless, unrelieved and dirty.”<sup>87</sup> He was not charmed by the people. William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, compared exploring the East End to exploring the heart of darkest Africa.<sup>88</sup> Perhaps they never set foot in Bethnal Green, as Charles Dickens did. By the 1880s, the area of Bethnal Green had been fully absorbed by London. It was not a darling of London, certainly, but it was perhaps its ragdoll. It was beat-up, unkempt, and disheveled, but a plucky Cockney could charm the world over, and Bethnal Green was full of them. This perception of Bethnal Green was shown in newspaper clippings from around the world. The *Sydney Morning Herald* in Australia had this to say in an 1884 report: “Bethnal Green is a more recent conquest of all-devouring, all-annexing London, and though it has less touch with the higher class London life, it has a more vigorous life of its own, with its museum and free library, than Whitechapel has.”<sup>89</sup> The sentiment common among international writers was that there was something more to being from Bethnal Green than anywhere else in the East End. Numerous times, the people of Bethnal Green were described as polite, poor, refined, and embracing of others. This perception of the people of Bethnal Green, the “deserving poor”, was prominent throughout England and the world.

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<sup>87</sup> Roemer, “Spectacles of Urban Tourism,” 418.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> “Work in a London Parish”, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Dec 4, 1884), 5.

Residents of Bethnal Green were easy to characterize and propagandize, making them prime targets for rehabilitation. Indeed, “there was little to be scared of in Bethnal Green and much to be sentimental about.”<sup>90</sup> The people were small in stature, the houses like a doll’s, and the area thrived on small animals such as rabbits. “It was a needy yet safe place in which to do good, its image flavored with a distinctly aromatic combination of pathos and sentiment.”<sup>91</sup> The 1881 Census showed only eight hundred some residents who were foreign-born.<sup>92</sup> The majority of residents claimed the Anglican Church as their own. Residents had not descended to a level of savagery that many expected from the poor, and they were perfect for social experimentation. Along with an onslaught of factories, the 1880s marked a period of tremendous charitable output in Bethnal Green. No new charitable trusts were established within Bethnal Green. Instead, institutions were brought into Bethnal Green, with long-reaching aims.

Each charitable institution began with an express purpose, a charter, a board of directors, and a charitable fund at their disposal. As they put their feet onto the soil of Bethnal Green, however, that purpose often changed. Offshoots began to appear, each specializing in their own type of poverty relief. Some dealt with only children, others only food; still others dealt with widows, orphans, veterans, specific labor types, and so on. No matter the purpose, their relief was much welcome: Bethnal Green could supplement their established neighborhood bartering system. It is likely that residents saw the charitable institutions in a different light than government intervention, although it is not immediately clear why.

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<sup>90</sup> Cathy Ross, *The Romance of Bethnal Green: a Tale of London, Past and Present* (London: Bacton Books, 2007), 15.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Defined for the 1881 Census as not being locally born. The definition would change before the 1891 Census, when it was split into three groups: born outside of the country, born in the country but outside of London, and born in London.

Both men's and women's colleges began to institute chapter houses in Bethnal Green. Oxford House, one of the first settlement houses in London, opened there in 1882. Although it was overshadowed by nearby Toynbee Hall, opened the same year, it produced two offshoots in Bethnal Green: St Margaret's House, the "ladies' Oxford House;" and University House. It also linked Bethnal Green with Oxford University's Keble College.<sup>93</sup> Cheltenham College sponsored the Ladies' Settlement at Mayfield. These Bethnal Green settlement houses were like many others: staffed by a small selection of paid positions, they were mostly run by students from the college, who volunteered their time on breaks and after exams.<sup>94</sup> These students were eager to tackle the problem of poverty, particularly the women at Mayfair and St. Margaret's. Every means of alleviating suffering was examined, with suggestions made for improving resident's lives. Many benefitted from this system, and the settlement houses were popular.<sup>95</sup>

The most wildly popular institution brought in in this period was educational. Bethnal Green Free Library, funded through private donations, opened in 1882 in London Street. The chief financiers of the project were Her Majesty Queen Victoria, who donated volumes and cash to the project, and her son Edward, the Prince of Wales, who patronized the project extensively. Other philanthropists, including John Passmore Edwards, owner of one London newspaper, contributed as well. The Bethnal Green Free Library, in addition to housing a patents office and lending library, hosted free lectures and concert series. The most popular aspect was the newspapers, however. The advertisement section was posted outside the door every morning at

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<sup>93</sup> Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance*, 102.

<sup>94</sup> Ellen Ross, *Slum Travelers: Ladies and London Poverty. 1860-1920* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 19-20.

<sup>95</sup> Oxford House remained in the same location throughout the period studied, but expanded its operations between 1881 and 1900. It is still active today.

7:30, and the locals flocked to read the newspaper.<sup>96</sup> The lectures and concerts were well attended, assuming they were free.<sup>97</sup> Circulation in 1882 was roughly 7,000 volumes. By 1898, the number of volumes in circulation increased to approximately 60,000. The library had grown so fast through donation and use that it had outstripped two separate buildings in London Street.<sup>98</sup>

On the problem of overcrowding and slums, however, no solution had been hit upon. Slum clearance in Westminster, Manchester, and other areas of the United Kingdom had been affected, with mixed results. As the Bethnal Green Vestry had learned already, however, slum clearance in Bethnal Green was very complicated. The tumbledown, degenerate buildings located in the west end of Bethnal Green were an easy target. The question became what to do with the people. To relocate them in Bethnal Green meant moving them from one bad situation to another which was only tolerably better. The Vestry was unwilling to tackle another project of a similar nature, and the 1880s was a decade of private slum rehabilitation. During the period from 1879 to 1890, only twelve of twenty-eight projects resulted in model dwellings. The rest were a mixture of private homes and row houses, which while significant improvements over their predecessors, did little alleviate the conditions of overcrowding.<sup>99</sup>

### **The Causes of Poverty**

A common assumption of the time was that to remove the effects of poverty, particularly overcrowding and squalor, would strike at the roots of the problem. Despite repeated findings

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<sup>96</sup> “On Museum of the Science and Art Department” from *Minutes of Evidence Taken Before the Select Committee* (London: 13 May 1898), 146-47.

<sup>97</sup> One report of the time mentioned that attendance at free events was as many as 300 people, but if there was a charge, as low an attendance as 30 people.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Baker, “Building and Social Conditions, 1876-1914” in *A History of the County of Middlesex*, 126-132.

that the only solution to poverty was regular and steady employment, efforts by most civic and philanthropic groups focused on the symptoms, seen as fixable.<sup>100</sup> The period from 1881 to 1890 was a time of economic decline in Bethnal Green and surrounding areas, as mechanization and factories pushed in, offering stiff competition to the local workers. The wages offered at these establishments were less than was made previously, but the factories changed Bethnal Green in other ways as well.<sup>101</sup> They fronted on to some roads, but mostly, they moved into the interior of blocks already established, replacing backyards. Employment among women decreased significantly (41%) during this period as their jobs were rendered moot by mass production. Men's jobs also declined in this period.

Table 1: Employment among Males and Females of “Working” Age, 15-65

Year	“Working Age” Population			Working Men	Working Women
	All	Men	Women		
1881	73,236	35,866	37,350	33,593	17,938
1891	75,490	37,083	38,407	33,221	10,587

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<sup>100</sup> One reason for the Free Library's popularity was its immense devotion to technical volumes, patents and patent filing, and access to the help wanted advertisements of London newspapers.

<sup>101</sup> As factories pushed in, the old trading ways of Bethnal Green began to decline. Specialization of labor increased, and people began to have fewer whole goods to trade. The wages offered at factories, while stabilizing income across the year, were pitifully small compared to the demand of exorbitant rents. While the standard system of money used in England was in place, most of Bethnal Green dealt with the lowest end of that money, ha'pennies and thruppence, for their day to day needs. The practice of clipping money to save shavings of gold was so common throughout Bethnal Green that one pub had a special display installed demonstrating the illegality of the practice. (The display was saved from the Blitz bombing of the pub, and reinstalled in another tavern in Globe Street).

The above table, based on census information for the area, does not adequately show the unemployment of the area.<sup>102</sup> The “working age” of 15 to 64 years old was a misnomer, as many residents did not have the money to retire and would not choose to go to the workhouse. Many under the age of 15 brought in stable and consistent income for their family, through a variety of means. They were often not census-identifiable jobs however, and no attempt was made (until 1901) to further clarify unemployment among adults of the area. The year 1891 saw 57,593 people (44.6 percent of the population) identified as living in poverty.<sup>103</sup> Just under four thousand people were living in non-private accommodations.<sup>104</sup> The population continued to increase during this time, but with slum clearance and other methods used in the early 1890s, people were beginning to move out of the area.

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<sup>102</sup> Detailed information regarding child labor in Bethnal Green is not readily available – although statisticians and watchdogs crawled the area, they missed the flouting of children’s labor laws. For more information, see footnote for 1901 Census working population. Statistical information from all censuses taken in Bethnal Green from 1800 to 1911 was found at <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/place/968/units> (accessed 04 January - 23 July 2014).

<sup>103</sup> The poverty count was based on Charles Booth’s findings, but is recorded in Census findings for Bethnal Green in 1891. Specific information extracted from H. Llewellyn Smith’s *Forty Years of Change*. Various sources identify the number of people living in overcrowded conditions (more than two people to a room) as 65,610, although Booth and Smith both dismissed this number as impossible.

<sup>104</sup> Non-private accommodations included the workhouse, charitable residences set up in the surrounding area, the military, and any doctors, nurses, volunteers, etc. who claimed Bethnal Green as their full-time residence, but lived in housing provided for their purpose. All of the hospitals in Bethnal Green provided housing for their nurses at a minimum. Many also provided accommodation for doctors and aides. Oxford House boasted thirteen full-time residences, although the number of volunteers exceeded that.

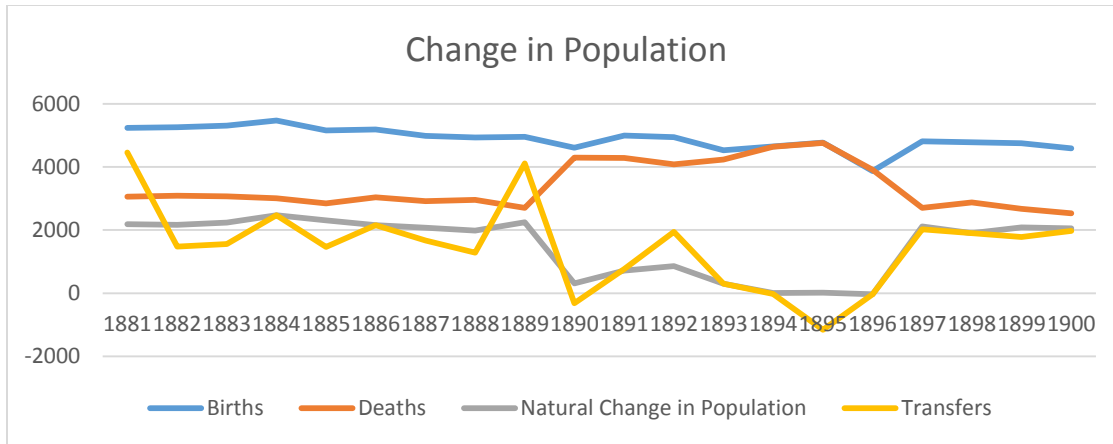


Fig. 4: Change in Population, 1881-1891

Efforts had been made in the north-west corner of Bethnal Green to clean up. Between 1883 and 1887, 265 private residences were constructed. Of these, only seventeen were not in the north-west area. Of the total construction during the period 1881 to 1900, seventeen projects were model dwelling buildings, located in the west end, housing as many as 200 people.<sup>105</sup> In 1888, a new project was the first introduction of the East End Dwellings Company to Bethnal Green: the Museum House, located in Victoria Park Square and Globe Street (east end), housed 166 people, and because of proximity to the center, was of a higher social caliber than other projects attempted. The East End Dwelling Company was part of the “five-percent philanthropy” movement, and it would leave an indelible mark on Bethnal Green in years to come.

### **The Greatest of Slum Clearance Projects**

Descriptions of the horrid poverty and squalor which existed in the East End were popular for publishing in the 1880s. Respected doctors, philanthropists, Poor Law Officers, and others wrote letters to the editor of London’s newspapers, the *British Medical Journal*, *The Lancet*, and many other notable publishing, recording their findings. Yearly publishing reported

<sup>105</sup> Baker, “Development, 1876-1914.”



in earnest on the various tours and adventures in slumming. The Metropolitan Board of Works, stymied by local interests, had failed to make much headway in Bethnal Green. In 1889, London was again reorganized, this time with lasting results. The London County Council was created, and held jurisdiction over Bethnal Green as part of London. The Council began to investigate the slums and degraded areas, and various slum clearance plans were debated.<sup>106</sup> Of the slums investigated, the 'Old Nichol' was particularly famous, and the location upon which Arthur Morrison based his *Child of the Jago*. It was the quintessential slum to the people of London in the late nineteenth century. It would be a great triumph for the newly formed London County Council to tear it down. It was an ambitious project from the start, intending to tear down most of Boundary Street through High Street. As the scheme progressed, the number of houses to be taken down increased. By completion of the project it included parts of neighboring Stepney and Spitalfields. A description of the area in 1862 shows the need for reform:

Nichol-street, New Nichol-street, Half Nichol-street, Nichol-row, Turvil-street, comprising within the same area numerous blind courts and alleys, form a densely-crowded district in Bethnal Green. Among its inhabitants may be found street vendors of every kind of produce, travelers to fairs, tramps, dog-fanciers, dog-stealers, men and women sharpers, shoplifters and pickpockets. It abounds with the young Arabs of the streets, and its outward moral degradation is at once apparent to any one [sic] who passes that way. Here the police are *certain* to be found, day and night, their presence being required to quell riots and to preserve decency.<sup>107</sup>

A further twenty years of crowding followed. The Vestry and Council were slow to respond to the pressing needs of the area, for many of them shared in the profits of rack-renting

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<sup>106</sup> The reorganization of London in 1889 marks the official inclusion of Bethnal Green as part of the city proper, rather than the county of London. The county of Middlesex was dissolved in that year, and any responsibilities of the Metropolitan Board of Works and the county were transferred to the London County Council.

<sup>107</sup> John Timbs, *Curiosities of London: Rare and Remarkable Objects of Interest in the Metropolis with Nearly Sixty Years Personal Recollections* (London: John Camden Hotten, 1867), 50.

in the area. Rent rates increased between 1880 and 1895 by as much as twenty percent, without a corresponding rise in quality.<sup>108</sup> The practices of ‘key money’ and rack-renting were prolific in Bethnal Green. Absentee landlords relied on their supervisors to maintain control of the buildings. Supervisors began to charge a deposit, called ‘key money,’ to hold dwellings for tenants. As demand grew, landlords erected walls in rooms, and installed doors in existing walls, subdividing the space. They then charged rents according to the value of the area, so that residents of a five-foot square room were paying the same rent as residents of a ten-foot square room. Landlords of the ten-foot square rooms would then raise rents accordingly, and when residents could no longer afford the new rates, the landlords subdivided. These practices gave rise to a very mobile population, continuously on the move to find better residence or to continue to afford rent. Key money was sometimes equivalent to one week’s rent, but often was much more. With such obstacles, residents had difficulty securing new residence. What to do with the residents of Old Nichols? London County Council developed a small enclave north of Hackney Road for some, and others simply moved into the surrounding area.

The first of the Boundary Street Dwellings would be completed in 1895, although it would do little to abate the rise in rents.<sup>109</sup> Official enquiries were undertaken. The report of one such enquiry was published in *Public Health* in 1889, recorded the conditions of Bethnal Green:

A fault common to many houses in the district is the situation of the ground floor below the level of the street pavement. In numerous instances these houses have no basement or cellars ... access to the backyard, where is situated the water closet is unattainable for those living in upper rooms ... the condition which above all others characterizes dwelling-houses in Bethnal Green is the dilapidated state in which they are allowed to remain ... such houses showed badly paved yards, defective roofs, broken floors, dirty walls and ceilings, broken plaster,

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<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, 96.

<sup>109</sup> Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*, 272.

dilapidated window frames, together with faulty gutters and defective pointing of walls, giving facilities for damp to enter.<sup>110</sup>

Perhaps most damning was that the 1889 report concluded “while fully recognizing the great improvements effected ... we are led to the conclusion that the efforts of the Vestry to maintain houses in proper habitable condition have not sufficed for the purposes of a parish containing population and houses of the character of Bethnal Green.”<sup>111</sup> Conditions of the dwellings were not the only problem.

In Bethnal Green in 1891, there had been 6,561 single room tenements, of which 45 percent were occupied by three or more people. In 1901, the number of tenements was 5,378, of which 38 percent were occupied by three or more. These structurally separate dwellings ranged from small apartments to weavers’ homes, which had been built to take advantage of as much sunlight as possible. Great windows graced one side of these tenements, often reaching into the roof. The houses were often narrow, with a staircase from the second floor letting down into a first floor room, which was intended for sitting, but most often used as a bedroom.<sup>112</sup> This rendered these dwellings, in the eyes of many, as useless for anything but single family dwelling. Even that was questionable. A great many had been put up with “Sweet Billy,” mortar created from soap-factory refuse.<sup>113</sup> The buildings themselves were rarely even with the pavement. Little thought was put into slope and drainage; as a result, the lower levels often leaked and flooded. “Sweet Billy” held the damp as well.

The London County Council termed structurally separate dwellings as houses. A creative landlord with some spackle could create a number of dwellings in a house, so long as they

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<sup>110</sup> “The Bethnal Green Inquiry” in *Public Health I* (London: Academic Press, 1889), 83.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-5.

<sup>112</sup> In richer houses, the stairway usually led into an entrance hall or hallway. One observer of Bethnal Green noted that doors often opened directly into a bedroom.

<sup>113</sup> Anon., “The Administration of Torrens’ Acts” in *Public Health I* (London: Academic Press, 1889), 356.

allowed 110 square feet per room, the legal minimum.<sup>114</sup> Tenants might have to run through another family's room in order to reach the water closet, or crawl through the filthy, dirt-filled cellars.<sup>115</sup> Something had to be done. Popular resolution in 1890 was that the overcrowding situation must be taken in hand. Thus began the second round of slum clearance in London: Bethnal Green was the first borough to successfully submit a scheme. The first slum clearances in the East End began as early as 1875, but Bethnal Green did not participate. In the second round, the newly found authority of the London County Council set to work. They intended no less than the removal of Old Nichol. They employed new and unusual methods to make it work.

London County Council bought tenants out of their leases; if they refused, the building was bought out except for them. It was then London County Council's responsibility to physically remove the tenant. They were often given little notice, or they ignored notice given, to pack their belongings and leave. Council authority was used to declare certain places as condemned, and local officials sent in teams to clear out the building. It was then razed. The tenants, meantime, gathered their belongings. Poor luck would be found on the nearby streets, as they were overwhelmed with others who had already sought residence. Thousands would be displaced in a matter of days and weeks, and they had to quickly find another place. Rent rates soared as demand increased.

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<sup>114</sup> Per Housing Acts passed in 1868, 1870, and 1873. With little formal procedure to make sure the law was being followed, it is likely that private landlords made rooms even smaller.

<sup>115</sup> Anon., "The Bethnal Green Inquiry" in *Public Health I* (London: Academic Press, 1889), 83.



were much used. The foundations of the buildings were sinking into the ground, the area having long been in use as dumping grounds, and thoroughly mined for clay. The buildings were caked with decades of dirt and grime, the local clay so popular for brick-making being particularly difficult to remove. Residents had taken little care of them, either through deliberate neglect or indifference, and the landlords rarely checked on them.<sup>119</sup> Reports of buildings falling down were conveyed to the landlords, but it often required judicial intervention for anything to be done about the reports. Residents were unwilling and often unable to pay court costs, and relied on the government and churches to take up the case on their behalf. In the meantime, they simply moved on.

### **A Walk Through Turn of the Century Bethnal Green**

Charles Booth and his crew of volunteers had knocked on every door in the East End to compile the first set of *Life and Labour in London*. He had then produce a set of volumes detailing the poverty conditions in which he had once so passionately disbelieved. In anticipation of his final set of volumes, detailing the religious, social, and cultural life of the people in the East End, Booth took walks around Bethnal Green and other East End areas with the local police force to compare his map, composed in 1888, with the reality of late 1898

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<sup>119</sup> With little written evidence, it is difficult to know for sure how residents felt about their landlords. In 1898, there was a revolt led by displaced Old Nichols' residents against the landlords in Bethnal Green. Some landlords reported vacant houses which were dilapidated through years of use and abuse. Although not officially recorded, there was a protest of sorts in 1889 in the west end of Bethnal Green: residents of a three block area, in one large movement, emptied their buildings, leaving behind feces smeared walls (the houses all lacked sewer connections), piles of rats in the street (the main complaint of the area being the infestation of rodents, and the rules prohibiting small animals, particularly "ratters" (semi-feral cats) from being kept in the area), and urine soaked rags across the doorway of each house (the situation of a nearby tanners may have a lot to do with that). More, residents of the west end of Bethnal Green began to complain of a perpetual odor: the stench of poverty. It is interesting to note that this had long been recorded by residents outside of Bethnal Green, leading one to conclude that the stench had significantly increased with the rise of factories. (Account of protest taken from "Oral Interview" conducted with Alicia Grimsby, March 3, 2014)

through early 1900 East End London. It was then that his eyes were opened to the true excesses of poverty, overcrowding, sickness, dilapidation, and vice. In Bethnal Green, he found that often it was incorrect in its classification, although on occasion it only exaggerated the social class of inhabitants. On Warner Place, in the west end of Bethnal Green, Booth saw “a respectable [street], quiet, china pots – clean steps, curtains, windows, [colored] pink on map into Hackney Road ... Well-kept, square, should be pink, but in bad lot here, prostitutes, windows broken, two-story houses, [which French said] ‘they tried to improve it by doing up the square, putting in benches, but nothing has come of it.’”<sup>120</sup> Chambord Street, even further west, “looks rougher than Newling Street, more windows broken, women apronless, ragged. Birdcages wrapped up in black stuff and on window ledges, windows dirty [and] blinds, curtains holey.”<sup>121</sup> These examples, colored light blue and pink on the map, were in far worse condition than originally assessed. Booth based his reassessment mostly on social standards: shoeless children were very poor, hatless children poor to upper lower class, clean but patched clothing on children denoted upper lower class, whereas well-to-do children were kitted out in new to nearly new clothing. Similarly, broken and dirty windows were the hallmark of the poor, and clean, well-kept windows with decorations were the hallmark of the better off. Booth also assessed the houses based on the outer décor and cleanliness. These were indicators of house pride, but also of elevated social class. French and his fellow police officers offered a unique perspective of Bethnal Green, both as inhabitants and outside observers. Their views and opinions are represented through Booth’s and their own words.

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<sup>120</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 351 (Sergeant French, 24 March, 1898), 193.

<sup>121</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 351 (Sergeant French, 24 March, 1898), 187. It is unclear which is the first development mentioned, but the second is likely 23 dwellings erected in 1893 and 1894 by a private builder



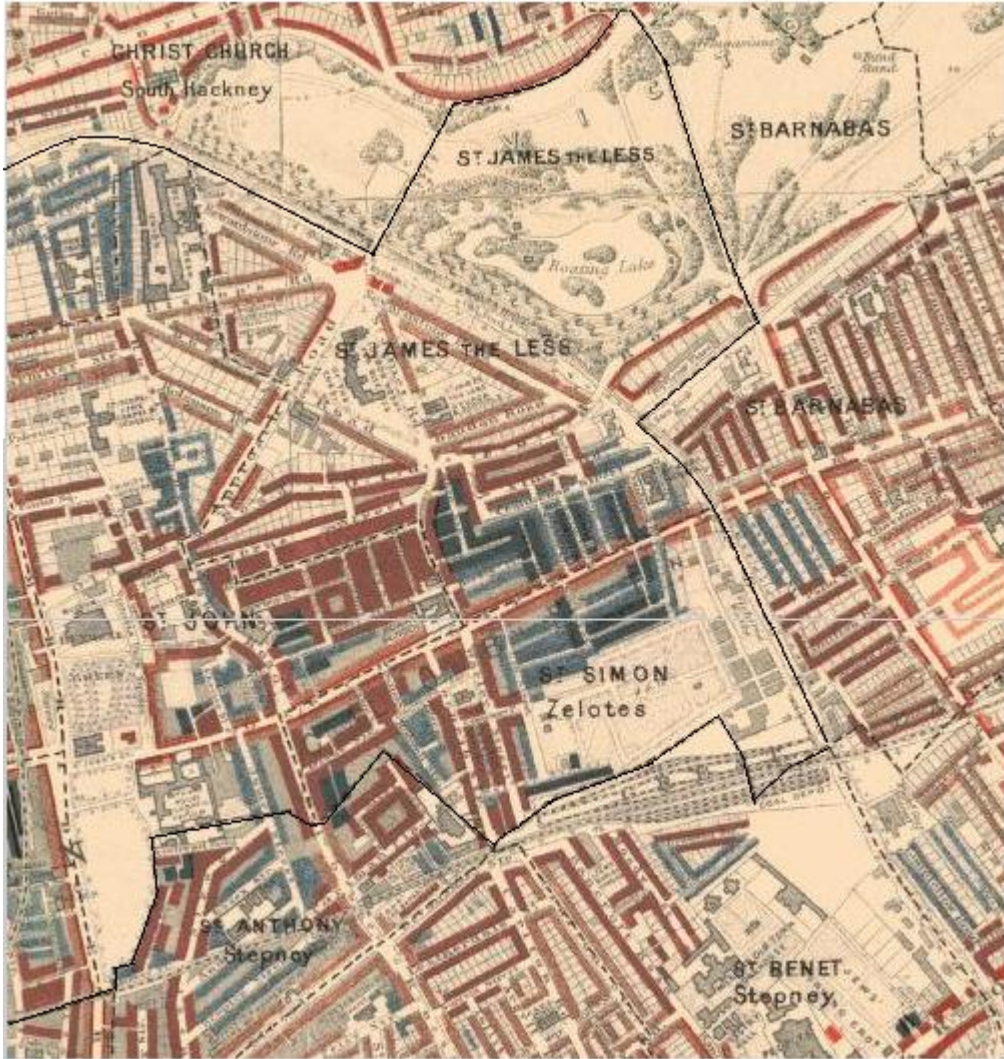


Fig. 6: Charles Booth Poverty Map, East End of Bethnal Green 1889<sup>122</sup>

Inspector Pearn walked through the most area in Bethnal Green with Booth. “Of medium height, sturdy, dark moustache,” he patrolled the east end of Bethnal Green, from Cambridge-Heath Road to Victoria Park, east to Regents Canal, and north of Mile End Road.<sup>123</sup> He had spent four years as Division Inspector, and had also been in Bethnal Green ten years prior, as a sergeant. Pearn’s area was colored wrongly, but unlike on the west end, it was mostly positive.

<sup>122</sup> “Poverty Maps,” *Charles Booth Online Archive*. [http://booth.lse.ac.uk/cgi-bin/do.pl?sub=view\\_booth\\_and\\_barth&args=531000,180400.6,large.5](http://booth.lse.ac.uk/cgi-bin/do.pl?sub=view_booth_and_barth&args=531000,180400.6,large.5)

<sup>123</sup> Inspector Pearn and Charles Booth, *Notebooks* 349 (28 December 1897), 205. This area was the most recently developed from uninhabited land in Bethnal Green.



He began with Approach Road, “about the best street in Bethnal Green,” according to Booth.<sup>124</sup> From late 1897 to January 1898, Pearn and Booth patrolled the area. Pearn was well-educated in his beat. He knew the rent system and the people, and also seemed to realize that he was well-off in his position. He cast a jaundiced eye on the west side of Bethnal Green, and described the movement of westerners into east Bethnal Green.

Booth and Pearn began their walks on December 28<sup>th</sup>, 1897 in the north-west corner of Bethnal Green. As they walked they saw “a great number of small [Christ]mas trees fully decked out with sugar plums [and] candles in the front windows – especially noticeable in the poorer streets.”<sup>125</sup> By the end of the night, they had walked the entire eastern border, had gone up and down various side streets, circles, squares, alleys, and byways, and had progressed north on Globe Road, their first major intersection. This area represented the 1890s eastern border of Bethnal Green. Across the Canal was Bow and Bromley, two areas which would be folded into Bethnal Green in the civic redistricting in 1900. According to Pearn, “as far as he could see, Bethnal Green was now what it had been ten years ago. He said we had seen in this walk the best [and] the worst parts.”<sup>126</sup> Some changes had been wrought, as Pearn continues: “though we have nowhere such violence leading to police casualties as we used to have, yet the streets north [and] south of Green Street do seem to have changed for the worse.”<sup>127</sup> The flight of weavers was noted by Pearn as a major factor as well: with the numbers of weavers less than ten years before, this “quiet respectable set of people” were aging.<sup>128</sup> The only “respectable men in sight were one or two old men who Pearn pointed out as weavers: the rest were of the coster class with

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<sup>124</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 349 (Inspector Pearn, 28 December 1897), 205.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

neck cloths instead of collars.”<sup>129</sup> There was “no attractions, no railway depots to bring country men,” opined Pearn.<sup>130</sup>

In the north-east corner of his area, there was a quiet, respectable, settled community. According to Booth, “families live on from generation to generation almost always in the same house. The lodgers migrate from street to street but not the tenants. The house owners are mostly small owners living in one of their own houses themselves. Population increases but no



Fig. 7: Meath Garden Gateway

one leaves if they can help it. Inhabitants form a great family party. [Pearn] does not see why the district should ever change.”<sup>131</sup> There were not prostitutes or thieves thick in this area. Beer was the drink of choice, for men and women, and drunkenness was not common. As Pearn and Booth continued south they passed by Meath Gardens, which had opened earlier that year and

had previously been Victoria Park Cemetery. The space had been taken over by the London County Council as a renovation project. Fanny Wilkerson designed the new layout.<sup>132</sup> Before, Pearn said, it “used to be an awful place, graves pulled to pieces [and] often the coffin edges showing.”<sup>133</sup> Now it was a showpiece of public space: walkers entered the fenced-in green space under arches which were inscribed VPC 1895, signifying the end of the cemetery, which had closed for burials in 1876.

It was beautifully created green space in its newness, and the Council promised to provide

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<sup>129</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 349 (28 December 1897), 219.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> Gordon, *Little Book of the East End*, 107

<sup>133</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 349 (28 December 1897), 223.

regular maintenance. New trees were planted, further screening in the area, giving a feeling of privacy; and succeeding in cutting off much of the outside world.

As Booth and Pearn neared the southern border of Bethnal Green, the streets became more mixed, with as many as three different colors on a street. A small court, marked black on the map, was eight cottages comprising three rooms apiece, with one family in each house. One woman on the court explained that “they won’t allow more than one family in each of these houses.” It was from these little courts and squares that Pearn claimed “juvenile thieves came[,] but he knew of no adult thieves living there, nor had the place a particularly bad reputations.”<sup>134</sup> The houses were also undergoing renovations. A pub nearby was more trouble than that court. On the corner of Longnor and Buckeridge Roads was “a great source of trouble by reason of illegal Sunday trading; crows always posted [and] alarm given before the police can get near.” Pearn had personally lain under a railroad truck and tried to rush them, to no avail.<sup>135</sup>

At the northern borders meeting with Regents Canal was a rough street: “quite the lowest class here occupying one room per family. Windows dirty, nearly everyone cracked or patched with white and brown paper,” according to Pearn.<sup>136</sup> They likely went down the tow path in existence alongside Regent’s Canal since its inception. They picked up again in Mile End Road, where “respectable ... policemen [were] living ... well-dressed children, pink to purple in character.”<sup>137</sup> It was worth six shillings per week for a four room, two-up, two-down cottage. From Mile End Road, Booth and Pearn went north up Globe Road, where the rents were sixteen

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<sup>134</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 349 (28 December 1897), 225.

<sup>135</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 349 (30 December 1897), 229.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 231. The area between Bishop’s Way and Vyner Street, at times part of Hackney and/or Bethnal Green. It was officially incorporate into Bethnal Green in 1900, and remained part of Bethnal Green until 1966. The length of time between identifying a block as dilapidated and its renovation can be seen in this example: Vyner Street and the surrounding area were finally tackled as a project in 1937 by the Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green.

<sup>137</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 349. (28 December 1897), 209.

to seventeen shillings per week, for a house of two-and-a-half to three floors. The half floor might be either dormers or a basement, although most often the latter. Dormers were preferred for sleeping space, but basements were also useful. This area was near to the town center, but cut off from developments along Cambridge Heath Road. There were not many connecting roads or alleys besides Green Street, which at the Regent's Canal footbridge became known as Roman Road, as it was in Bow. On the north side of the street, some roughness had crept in, and some had been there for a long time. Pearn said it was a "bad quarter, card sharpers, thieves, a few prostitutes here" (although on the map it was marked pink).<sup>138</sup> In his general remarks for the night, Booth noted that "the dwellers in the pink streets are chiefly the shop assistants from the Mile End Road. Here is a great demand for small houses. The amusements of the neighborhood are pigeon flying, street gambling and music hall going." There were few Irish; according to Pearn, "[there] used to be a good number but they have left Bethnal Green [and] gone east."<sup>139</sup>

Pearn and Booth resumed their walk the next night, New Year's Eve, with the northern area of Cambridge-Heath Road, both east and west, which included the area of the London Chest Hospital, the Museum, and the Waterloo School. It had been an unusually wet and cold November and December, and New Year's Eve was no different. Perhaps Booth and Pearn turned up the collars on their jackets as they went down the street, to avoid the stiff, cold wind which only seemed to intensify in the maze of streets which this area comprised. It was a mixture of two- and three-story dwellings, in shades of dark brown with tiled roofs and terraced gardens. Some areas were being vacated for new building efforts, and others had quite respectable homes in them already. Here, theft was not common. The great mystery of the area was an

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<sup>138</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 349 (30 December 1897), 235.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid*, 237.

Old lady discovered with her skull broken. Murder [was] suspected, but no murderer forthcoming, police [theorized] that she fell downstairs [and an] open verdict [was] returned. It was suggested that she had been followed into the house [and] murdered by a thief who wanted the rents he supposed she had been collecting. She was a property owner [and] lived upon the proceeds of [two] or [three] homes in the neighborhood. This theory was disproved by a witness who knew her well [and] said he was satisfied she had not been out because she always washed her face [and] hands before going out.

Pearn described the old lady's house as "such a filthy vermin infested house" as he had never seen. This dichotomy of public and private appearance was ever-present in Bethnal Green.<sup>140</sup>

Continuing north on Cambridge Heath Road, Pearn and Booth passed a few neighborhoods slated for levelling to make way for institutions such as a new parish infirmary as well as for improved housing. They turned onto Parmiter Street, now home to the boys' school, and a respectable street of pinks and purples. Their walk took them down respectable streets, pinks, purples, and lights blue throughout, with decently clothed children and no rubbish. They were still five or six shillings a week. Old Ford Road, with "substantially built" buildings, was a respectable neighborhood. Yet here, too, the disreputable edged against the respectable. Russia Lane was particularly notorious, with Quinn's houses "very rough, very poor, very noisy" according to Pearn.<sup>141</sup>

Traditional public house drinking was one matter. Home drinking was another. Families could save money by ordering beer from the publican, bringing it home and drinking it there. Children might be sent on such an errand. Pearn lamented the loss of publicans giving sweets to children. "The idea was that if the children were not given sweets they would not be so keen to go to fetch their parent's beer. But they have to go just the same [and] I can't see that it makes

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<sup>140</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 349 (30 December, 1897), 241.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid*, 245. It is interesting to note that the buildings along Russia Lane were model dwellings built privately in 1882-83.

much difference whether they are given sweets or not.”<sup>142</sup> Many questioned the propriety of children in pub houses, and legislation in 1904 outlawed the practice. The police were required to stop children entering pubs by police headquarters, and so they did. Of the people who did drink at home, Pearn “unhesitatingly put boot makers first as the largest drinkers.”<sup>143</sup>

Booth and Pearn picked up again four days later. This time, they patrolled the area immediately around the Museum, St John’s, and the center. This area was under careful scrutiny by the Council, as proposals of how to aid the ailing Museum began to flood Parliament, the Council, and local Vestry meetings. The ethnically homogenous area of Bethnal Green had recently elected the second ever British-Asian Member of Parliament. Mancherjee Bhowndree, ethnically Parsi, served the parliamentary constituency of Bethnal Green North-East as a Conservative until 1906. During that time, he spoke on the floor a few times, usually in pursuit of solutions to the pressing problem of poverty. He asked, particularly for his constituents, to alter the collection of income tax from yearly to quarterly or half-yearly “for the greater convenience of tradesmen and professional men in the poorer districts.” The plan would be taken under advisement, replied Beach, “but I doubt if it will be possible to make the change. The tax is not due in such cases till the fourth quarter of the year.”<sup>144</sup> He was known locally as Bow-and-Agree for his sympathy towards Britain’s imperial stance.<sup>145</sup> He was granted an order of the Knight Commander of the Indian Empire in 1897. In 1898, he appeared before the London County Council, Parliament, and several other civic boards, making the case for an unusual situation. Bethnal Green Free Library, located in the south-west of Bethnal Green, had more

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<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 349 (31 December 1897), 247.

<sup>144</sup> Exchange between Mancherjee Bhowndree and Chancellor of the Exchequer Sir M. Hicks Beach, *The Parliamentary Debates* 93 (6 May 1901), 750.

<sup>145</sup> Gordon, *Little Book of the East End*, 79.

volumes than could be reasonably contained or displayed. Efforts had been made to put together a building fund with the intention of purchasing a new lease. By 1898, the building fund was still £20,000 short, and the Library Board was concerned that they would have to close. The other great free learning institution of the area, the Museum, had been intended as a teaching institution at its inception. Despite this, no classes were offered, no classrooms reserved (they were instead filled with storage containers of excess exhibits), and attendance very sparse. To Bhowndree and others, the solution was simple: house the library in the museum, and both problems would be solved. The Museum had cost ratepayers £132,000 since its opening.<sup>146</sup> According to one investigator, there was “great disappointment locally that [the teaching institution and library promised with the Museum] have never been supplied ... [and that there was] very little real use of the museum in an educational sense, though some of the exhibits have been very good.”<sup>147</sup> The plan of attaching the existing free library fell through, and the Museum continued its unpopular reign throughout the early 1900s.

Pearn and Booth walked along an area abutted by Victoria Park, the Canal, Green Street, and Cambridge Heath Road, and representing the full spectrum of colors on Booth’s map. It was a complete mixture of housing types, and the area most actively under construction at the time. Some buildings were alternatively houses or factories, others only could be used as homes. Weaver’s homes, London County Council and philanthropic buildings of three to four stories, and buildings constructed in the 1850s crowded the area, both sturdy and uneven. The factories were taking over, especially on Victoria Park Road. Boots, shoes, and clothing were beginning to be mechanized in Bethnal Green, although much of the work was still done by outworkers.

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<sup>146</sup> “Report on Bethnal Green Museum before the Select Committee, 1898,” in *The Sessional Papers of the House of Lords: Session 1898* 10, 240.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid*, 239.

The rents in this area might be as much as 35 shillings per week. There down the back alleys and streets were once again found the “dirty, ragged children,” usually hatless and occasionally bootless as well.<sup>148</sup> Pearn informed Booth that here “you will find a sprinkling of thieves as you will in even the most respectable streets about here, but that is not the regular employment of the inhabitants.” The buildings were usually single family dwellings, and Booth was quick to note the social implications: “Here is less interference of the family life of one family by its next door neighbor than there would be in a small house with one family on the ground floor [and] another above it.”<sup>149</sup> Houses which consisted of one family, albeit an extended one, usually turned to their neighbors for extended kinship networks. There was an inherent privacy, however, assumed by and associated with the walls of the building.

Housing was tied to occupation as well. Throughout, Booth continually mentioned the weavers, their former homes (inevitably sturdily built), and their current homes (among the nicest houses), “kept in good repair.” Bootmakers and weavers tended to congregate together in the eastern area known as Globe Town. They were in a cul-de-sac, or dead end street, and it was an insular society. Around the corner, you would find the coster streets, “very poor, windows broken [and] dirty, doorposts black, bread [and] beers in the street, old tins, orange peel.” It was not solely the fault of the inhabitants, however, who “you cannot convict” because they cannot find other places to sell the wares. Poor sections invited classes of occupation that fell outside of the census, outside of the tax rolls, especially prostitution and thievery. Pearn remarked that “it is in the kitchens of the lodgings in Whitechapel that the thieves are taught. It is a track you must learn when you are young or not at all. That is why you never find an old thief who has not

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<sup>148</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 349 (28 December, 1897), 213.

<sup>149</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 350 (4 January, 1898), 27.



been a young one too.”<sup>150</sup> Those who had been convicted and sentenced stood out as well, as Pearn remarked: “there is a look about a man who has been a convict which you don’t see in other men.”<sup>151</sup>

Pearn and Booth attended a funeral that day, one put up by public subscription. A widow and child had died in a house fire, and the vicar of St Bartholomew had to make an appeal for funds to host the funeral. Bethnal Green, however, as Miller noted, “was one for a whip round” if ever anything was needed. The patrons of a pub emptied their pockets, and the pub would stand a round. Funeral customs were important to the people of Bethnal Green. In this one, there was a “band playing dead march paraded by a number of men [and] children. Roads blocked with people ... [the] day being observed as a general holiday.” Pearn remarked, “Nothing very unusual by that because Monday generally is in these parts!” The mother and child drew “a respectful crowd ... everybody out in their Sunday clothes [and] washed for the occasion. Most women in bonnets, a few in shawls, men in caps, ties, black coats [and] brown. Hardly a man above [five] feet [four] inches among them.” To Booth, it was unusual, but to Pearn, it “was wonderful what a lot they think of a funeral down here. There’ll be so many of them here making they’d been lucky to have such a turnout as this! A man may beat his wife, ill-treat her so that she dies of it but of her funeral here [and with a] good funeral he will be forgiven by the women of the neighborhood who say ‘but he can’t be so bad, poor man.’”<sup>152</sup> “Even the poorest will pay £2,00 or £2,50 for a burial [and] then starve the week after.”<sup>153</sup>

The next day, Pearn and Booth ventured around the area of Bethnal Green just east of Cambridge Heath Road and north of Green Street. It was a respectable area, pink and purple.

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<sup>150</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 350 (3 January 1898), 13.

<sup>151</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 350 (3 January 1898), 13.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

The rents were reasonable to the area, with rates as low as one-quarter of income for the week. This was the area of well-to-do shop clerks and professionals who could afford to live somewhere other than ‘above-the-shop.’ There was a slight decline noted by Pearn in the surrounding area, as the progression of the people east of Cambridge Heath Road continued. Businesses in the area occasionally provided so-called “extra money” to policemen, to keep an eye on the shops and offices on nearby Bethnal Green Road. “Police are occasionally traded off to other districts [and] are not therefore certain callers. So a run of professionals have taken their place [and] each morning at 4 a.m. you can see them.”<sup>154</sup> St. John’s served as the parish of the mostly Anglican residents of the street. The block included access to the Museum and Museum grounds.

A month later, Booth visited one more time with Pearn. This time, they explored the area around Bethnal Green, but it was not the same diffusion of class. Pearn noted that the main difference between the east and the west of London was the “proportion of police per head of people,” which was “probably greater in the west end than the east side ... Here you have to look after people [and] there after property.”<sup>155</sup> If they chose to, the inhabitants looked after their own property. It was more likely they possessed little of value, and more often there was someone at home every hour of the day. Street thievery was a separate issue. “If a tradesman’s cart disappear [and] with it all its parcels, tea, cheese, etc. ‘you may pretty surely expect to find the cart standing unattended in a back street in Bethnal Green with its contents gone.’”<sup>156</sup> The

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<sup>154</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 350 (4 January, 1898), 22.

<sup>155</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 349 (3 January, 1898), 11.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

contents were sold at local markets, and according to Pearn, you could not blame them, for “how [else] could they afford to sell the tea [and] cheese they do as cheap as they do sell it?”<sup>157</sup>



Fig. 8: Charles Booth Poverty Map 1889<sup>158</sup>

In 1898, Sergeant French, a local constable in Bethnal Green, took Booth on three walks through Bethnal Green. French was not a Bethnal Green native, but he, like many policemen working there, lived in Bethnal Green. A number of philanthropic institutions operating in Bethnal Green encouraged policemen to live in their dwellings, often offering reduced rates, as well as good location. Others did not offer these same accommodations, however. French noted that a number of places in Bethnal Green would not allow policemen to live there, as “they are too well off.”<sup>159</sup> Locals were not friendly to the police either: “publicans did not now offer either drink or money to constables. ‘They do not like us enough for that, we summons them too

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<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> “Poverty Maps,” *Charles Booth Online Archives* [http://booth.lse.ac.uk/cgi-bin/do.pl?sub=view\\_booth\\_and\\_barth&args=531000,180400,6,large,5](http://booth.lse.ac.uk/cgi-bin/do.pl?sub=view_booth_and_barth&args=531000,180400,6,large,5)

<sup>159</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 351 (Sergeant French, 24 March, 1898), 195.

often,” French said, (although Booth cheekily notes, “[he thought] it was only true of [French]”).<sup>160</sup> There was a palpable wariness of the inhabitants towards the police.

On this later tour, Booth discovered that his earlier map consistently colored the west side of Bethnal Green incorrectly: Pinks should have been light blues, purples, and blacks. On these walks, Booth also encountered “a hotbed of thieves, ... thieves, prostitutes, hobbirs, mess in street windows, bird cages and flower pots on window ledges, dirty ragged children, hatless, but all with boots [and] shoes though holey ones.”<sup>161</sup> Despite his initial assessment that Bethnal Green was better than it had been shown, he consistently found examples where it was worse. When comparing his duties with those of policemen in the west end of London, French claimed the main difference “was that here [in Bethnal Green] they had to deal with a rough class [and] little property or traffic.”<sup>162</sup> French walked the mid-west area of Bethnal Green, in the inner area.



Fig. 9: Charles Booth Poverty Map 1898<sup>163</sup>

<sup>160</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 351 (22 March, 1898), 177.

<sup>161</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 351 (24 March, 1898), 185.

<sup>162</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 351 (24 March 1898), 199.

<sup>163</sup> “Poverty Maps,” *Charles Booth Online Archives* [http://booth.lse.ac.uk/cgi-bin/do.pl?sub=view\\_booth\\_and\\_barth&args=531000,180400,6,large,5](http://booth.lse.ac.uk/cgi-bin/do.pl?sub=view_booth_and_barth&args=531000,180400,6,large,5)

French's immediate superior, Inspector Barker, patrolled the north-west corner of Bethnal Green, particularly the borders with Shoreditch and Whitechapel, in the Brick Lane area. He had been in Bethnal Green Road sub-District four years when he went walking with Charles Booth in March and early April 1898. Booth describes him as a "middle-sized man, small moustache, very quiet, never speak[ing] except when spoken to."<sup>164</sup> Nevertheless, Barker's comments revealed his harsh judgment of the people he watched over. . Here, Barker said, there were "no complaints of out of work, but that with a bad year [any] of the streets would fall below the line of poverty ... The people do not save, they spend it all on drink!"<sup>165</sup> The area he patrolled, long an area of artisan weavers, had given over to overwhelming crowding and poverty. The weavers' homes had been converted, "one story having been added to the old houses, which had weaver's windows on their former top story."<sup>166</sup> The houses would have appeared as sandwiches, with a first and third floor with few windows, and a second story almost entirely windows. The area was below moral standards, "the case of the district [being] drink ... one sex drinks as much as the other here. When the husband drinks the wife generally drinks too!" In addition, there was "much immoral intercourse [and] living together unmarried."<sup>167</sup> Gambling occurred in the street. At the north end of one road on their walk, Booth and Barker encountered "two bookmakers apparently taking down bets from a respectably dressed middle aged woman who moved away as [they] came up."<sup>168</sup> There were a "great many juvenile thieves in the neighborhood, especially young Jews; they are more cunning than the English: but [Barker] said

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<sup>164</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 351 (Inspector Barker, 29 March 1898), 213.

<sup>165</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 351 (28 March 1898), 221.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid*, 219.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid*, 225.

<sup>168</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 351 (29 March, 1898), 241.

[that] very seldom [did you see] an old Jew as a thief. With the English, once a thief, always a thief.”<sup>169</sup> Neighbors often deliberately tampered with police investigation:

The landlady and other tenants protected a third-floor lodger in a Bethnal Green house, a dealer in stolen goods. The kept the police, who had come to search the room, ‘parleying at the door’, while some of them went up to the room, ‘found the stolen goods, and hid them in the copper’. After the police had gone, however, the landlady asked the dishonest tenant to clear out.<sup>170</sup>

The landlady had acted to protect the street’s reputation, not her lodger. Barker said that the Bethnal Green Police Station subdivision “was remarkable for the number of suicides [and] sudden deaths they had to inquire into. The first among adults, the second among children. Suicides follow on drinking bouts [and] quarrels between husbands [and] wives. Sudden death [is] from improper feeding. The amount of drunkenness is still a sure sign of the amount of work in Bethnal Green so that we are busiest when the people are most problems!”<sup>171</sup> A heady mix of crime and poverty created an interesting area.

Despite Barker’s perception of the dirty, poor, and thievery of the area, Booth concluded that “this district is now less poor than the map would warrant: due probably to the good trade of the last few years.”<sup>172</sup> The overall area was improving, with the flow of employment into the neighborhood. The houses were improving, but slowly. With the number of house proud people rising in the area, the area was fast becoming “a picture in summer, you’d be surprised,” according to Barker.<sup>173</sup> For some, “it was impossible to find a nicer house, a better copper than here or a pleasanter place to live in than” the area.<sup>174</sup> Rents could be as little as 5s for a two-bedroom apartment with access to a washhouse. Other signs of improvement included the

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<sup>169</sup> *Ibid*, 247.

<sup>170</sup> Ross, “Survival Networks”, 17.

<sup>171</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* (31 March, 1898), 15.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid*, 3.



children appearing more well-fed, though no better clothed.<sup>175</sup> In finishing their walks around Bethnal Green in January, Booth “note[s] effect of clearances on the neighboring streets. The betterment of Goldsmith Row [and] the worsenment of Teale, Gloucester [and] Gillman Streets.”<sup>176</sup>



Fig. 10: Charles Booth Poverty Map 1899<sup>177</sup>

Booth also walked about with Sub-division Inspector Miller, a “tall, grave, gray, portly man, [who] wears spectacles, [with a] very pleasant manner [and] voice.”<sup>178</sup> He had also been in Bethnal Green for four years, walking the south-west corner of Bethnal Green, which met up with Whitechapel. He and Barker patrolled the area where Old Nichol had stood, and both expressed their opinion of the work that had been done due to slum clearance. Miller was there for some of the clearance, and explained the eviction process: “[they] were told they must turn

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<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>176</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 350 (4 January, 1898), 27. Goldsmith Row was developed as part of London County Council’s rehousing of Old Nichols’ residents.

<sup>177</sup> “Poverty Maps,” *Charles Booth Online Archives* [http://booth.lse.ac.uk/cgi-bin/do.pl?sub=view\\_booth\\_and\\_barth&args=531000,180400,6,large,5](http://booth.lse.ac.uk/cgi-bin/do.pl?sub=view_booth_and_barth&args=531000,180400,6,large,5)

<sup>178</sup> Booth, *Notebook* 355 (Inspector Miller, 3 November 1898), 167.

out within a certain time. They stayed on and took no notice, they were warned again, still they heeded not, finally they had to be turned out.”<sup>179</sup> These evictees,

the poor [and] very poor . . . move about freely within a circumscribed area [and] are continually changing from one house to another but not from one district to another. When they were turned out of the Nichol, their first instinct was to get in somewhere else ‘as nearby as possible.’ If there is room in any of the neighboring streets, in they go. They quickly reduce the whole street to their own level. If there is no room, they choose one that is most favorable to their businesses: while if they have no occupation they flock into the nearest area with a similar character to the one they have to leave.<sup>180</sup>

Miller also noted that the slum clearance and rebuilding was not a signal success as it has been trumpeted. Rather, “the change has not been altogether for the better.”<sup>181</sup> The occupants evidently distrusted the police, with one woman hollering at Barker “let us be guvna, don’t pull the house down [and] turns us out.”<sup>182</sup>

Miller, who described Old Nichol as “the worst of the lot,” was particularly concerned with the drinking habits of the west end inhabitants of Bethnal Green.<sup>183</sup> The typical pub night of Saturday for Dad and Monday for Mom did not apply to drunkards. From his own observations, Miller remarked that “it is very rare that any male becomes a confirmed drunkard under 25 years of age.”<sup>184</sup> For women, it was more complicated. “Drinking [was] rare before 20 years of age. Their first introduction to it is when they are courted[,] taken to music halls [and] public houses by their young man. But they don’t drink among themselves until they are of age: women never drink alone, always in twos [and] threes at most, more often gin than beer. They do not become regular soakers [drunkards] before they are thirty.”<sup>185</sup> Men, in his view, turned to the bottle for many reasons, and marriage status and employment status mattered little when it

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<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 167-169.

<sup>181</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 355 (3 November 1898), 167.

<sup>182</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 351 (Inspector Barker, 29 March, 1898), 245.

<sup>183</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 355 (Inspector Miller, 3 November 1898), 167.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 175-177.



came to being a drunkard. On the subject of women, however, Miller had “never known a woman drunkard who was not also a mother,” and he thought “that home troubles [and] want of food had more to do with their taking to drink than the effect [and] exhaustion consequent on childbirth.”<sup>186</sup> For both sexes, he remarked “when you are poor [and] a drinker, the first relief is to be found in drunkenness!”<sup>187</sup>

Miller also commented on the methods employed by thieves and housebreakers, both of which abounded in the area. The “burglar knocks to see if anyone comes, no one does. [They] open [the] window, take what they want [and] go. If they are afraid of the noise of breaking glass they cover a paper with thick black treacle, stick it on the pane, then break it. The broken pieces stick to the treacle.”<sup>188</sup> A burglar is well-prepared, usually: “where it is necessary to pick a lock, picklocks are used which work by breaking the guard locks [and] not by holding back the spring.”<sup>189</sup> Those who returned home to find their homes burgled also had a broken lock. Most, however, did not lock their homes, nor worry about burglars. There were too few physical possessions for one to care unnecessarily over.

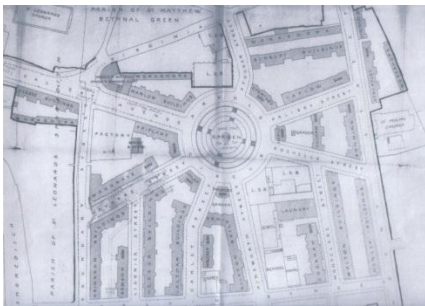


Fig. 11: Boundary Estate 1900<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> *Ibid*, 177.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>188</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* 355 (3 November 1898), 183.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>190</sup> “Boundary Estate 1 – A Brief History”, from <http://boundarylaundrette.wordpress.com/boundary-estate-a-history/>, (accessed May 5, 2014).

The seemingly benevolent act of removing the unsightly buildings, notorious for inadequate living space and poor hygiene, actually created a strain on Bethnal Green. While the clearance of slums such as Old Nichols, described by Charles Booth as “an awful place, the worst in the division,” was intended to be beneficial, in the short term, it created a crisis.<sup>191</sup> Between 1891, the year the scheme was approved, and 1911, the first census year after the Boundary Estate buildings in Bethnal Green were complete, overcrowding decreased by only 3 percent.<sup>192</sup> Arthur Morrison, in his third printing of *A Child of the Jago*, lamented the loss of the ‘Jago,’ not for sentimental reasons, but practical ones: “the Jago as mere brick and mortar is gone, but the Jago in flesh and blood still lives, and is crowding into neighborhoods already densely populated.”<sup>193</sup> The new estate was not built with any intention of housing the very poor or criminal.<sup>194</sup> Officials realized it was causing little difference, and slum clearances in that area of Bethnal Green “ground to a halt” in 1907.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> J.A. Yelling, *Slums and Slum Clearance in Victorian London* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 118.

<sup>192</sup> H. Llewellyn Smith, *The New Survey of London Life and Labour, Forty Years of Change 3* (London: P.S. King and Son Ltd., 1931) “Appendix I: Persons living two or more to a room” versus Census population figures show that 51 percent of the population in 1891 lived two or more to a room, with 95 percent of that population in tenements of less than five rooms. The same figures for 1901 show a 4 percent decline in overcrowding in Bethnal Green, compared with London’s 8 percent decrease. Neighboring Stepney increased in the same time period by 7 percent. 1901 saw the introduction of two new areas deemed under the control of London. Stoke Newington and Deptford were planned communities, intended to offer new and more accommodating places to the overcrowded in London. They were not linked with the central London transportation system, and the rent was the same as in most areas of London, with no allowance for the extra cost of transportation. They were not overwhelmingly successful, but they were effective at keeping overcrowding to a minimum. Bethnal Green saw an increase in overcrowding by 1 percent from 1901 to 1911, while London decreased by one percent. By 1921, 43 percent of Bethnal Green’s population was living in overcrowded conditions, down five percent over the preceding decade. Over the same time period, London decreased by 7 percent.

<sup>193</sup> Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*, 261.

<sup>194</sup> J.N. Tarn, *Five Per Cent Philanthropy: An Account of Housing in Urban Areas Between 1840 and 1914* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 112.

<sup>195</sup> Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*, 260.

Outside of Bethnal Green, however, the Boundary Street Estate was a roaring success of social thought and government. This dichotomy can be explained by rising literacy rates among the middle- and upper-lower-class. Photography was in its infancy, and pictures printed in newspapers tended to be blurry, printed in the stark black and white of print. The writers instead caught fire to their reader's imagination, investing thousands of words describing what people could not see. They were accurate accounts of the street, although few resisted an artistic flourish in their descriptions. No sooner would an article come out than appeals were made on the floor of the House. MPs from the Lords and Commons, even back-benchers, were assured of rousing applause at suggestions to help the poor. These articles would be read out, added to by personal accounts from Members who were connected to the area. Questions were raised, often of the nature of the people. These could only be answered by those who had been on the street in Bethnal Green. The spread of literacy had not affected the poor, and few if any rough costermongers would have felt comfortable appearing before a Member of Parliament. Parliament relied instead on the reports of the first outsiders on the ground in Bethnal Green, the philanthropic charities. They reported of the sparkling new buildings, the better class of occupants, and the general rise in that neighborhood, ignoring the back alleys and surrounding areas, and their decline. Slum clearances continued in other parts of London, before the ideas which gave rise to the practice became abhorrent in the Second World War.

## THE BOROUGH OF BETHNAL GREEN

The year 1900 saw the third reorganization of London government in fifty years. This was done in an effort to provide London County Council with more tools to complete the awesome tasks awaiting them. Twenty-six boroughs were created within the area defined in 1889 as London. Each of the twenty-six boroughs were given their own government board, which received devolved power from London County Council. At the same time, the dispersal of rates was flattened across London, resulting in poorer boroughs receiving substantially more money than previous years.<sup>196</sup> In Bethnal Green, the money provided can only have been a relief. Although mostly under the control of the London County Council, civic funds began to be used in earnest. Bethnal Green was one of only three of the newly created boroughs to create a town hall (opened in 1910). Population in Bethnal Green by Census count peaked in 1901 at 129,680. The ethnically homogenous Bethnal Green of 1881 was becoming more mixed, but the diversified population continued in the same manner as before.<sup>197</sup> The borders of Bethnal Green had been expanded, and now encompassed lands which had previously been part of Bow, Bromley, Mile End Old Town, Stepney, Spitalfields, and Hackney. They had an intermingled history with Bethnal Green, however, including several parish relief efforts.<sup>198</sup> Many of these

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<sup>196</sup> This was one of the main goals of the 1889 reorganization of London, and had been achieved to some effect. The 1900 plan was considerably more effective, however, and civic funds in places like Poplar, Stepney, and Bethnal Green more than tripled in comparison to earlier years. The powers granted Borough Boards differed from place to place, depending on the specific needs of the area. In Bethnal Green, powers were granted one at a time, perhaps as a result of the gross incompetence and neglect of the Vestry and Metropolitan Board of Works.

<sup>197</sup> The number of foreign born in Bethnal Green in 1881 was 889 people. In 1901, that same count was 4,634. The slum clearances enacted throughout the East End had blurred many of the lines between historical parishes, and the inter-borough movement reached its peak from 1881-1901.

<sup>198</sup> The clearance of Old Nichol had resulted in a building project just north of Hackney Road to house some of the residents. Although erected through public funds from Bethnal Green's purse, it was considered part of Hackney until 1900.

areas continued through local identification with their pre-1900 identities, but officially, they were now part of Bethnal Green. Overcrowding was beginning to expand, pushing further east and reaching as far as the center of Bethnal Green. 1901 marked the first year that the Census count included information relevant to social reformers: the number of people living in overcrowded conditions. It was also the first Census to recognize outworking as an occupation, and the results created a deceptive impression of greater employment in the area. Other statistics of the area were misleading as well.

While the 1901 Census recorded the highest population of Bethnal Green, it had reached over 130,000 as early as 1889. Slum clearance and rebuilding efforts had effectively moved many people out of the area, and death rates from 1890 to 1895 were almost double the surrounding years.<sup>199</sup> The natural change in population over the decade 1891-1900 was only 10,416, the lowest since 1851, and the lowest until after the Second World War. From 1901 until 1910, the population steadily increased, and the highest population recorded by George Bates, Medical Officer of Health, occurred in 1910.<sup>200</sup> The School Board controlled twenty Board schools, with enrollment of 25,083.<sup>201</sup> Two new secondary schools would be added, in 1910 and 1911.

The economic situation in Bethnal Green was improved by 1901, although the Census counts rendered the decade difference as more extreme than it actually was. T.A. Welton, a

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<sup>199</sup> Diphtheria, Scarlet Fever, Typhus, and other diseases had wreaked havoc on the population in the 1890s. Slum clearance may not have been as effective without the high death rates. In Old Nichols, for instance, death rates were double the rest of Bethnal Green.

<sup>200</sup> The population in 1910 was recorded as 131,579. While the 1911 Census population is approximately 3,000 less, with the continued efforts of slum clearance (both public and private) and inter-borough movement becoming easier with the advent of a public transportation system, Bates' thirty-five years as Medical Officer of Health for Bethnal Green, and intimate familiarity with the area, marks this number as accurate. It is rendered more accurate by accounts of overcrowding, discussed below.

<sup>201</sup> Baker, "Education", 242-260.

member in good standing of the Royal Statistical Society, undertook to examine the Census in detail, concentrating on London. From his information, an image of the employment in Bethnal Green can be seen, particularly the division of labor among ages and sexes. Of the 60,072 residents of Bethnal Green employed (46.3 percent of the total population), 65.5 percent were male. Of males age fifteen plus, a stunning 95 percent were employed. Male employment under age fifteen amounted to 1,342 people (3 percent of working males). Female employment was at an all-time high of 20,708. The relative economic situation of the area was vastly improved by employment, but wages were stagnant and rents at an all-time high. The pension funds of Bethnal Green were limited severely, and of the population age 65 and above (4,782), only 188 were described as “living on own means, retired, pensioners, or undescribed.”<sup>202</sup> Of these, the majority were female. Residents aged 25 to 65 described under the same situation totaled 17,950, but this was skewed to the females of that population.<sup>203</sup> For males, the highest employment was in “other manufactures.” For females, “textiles and allied manufactures” were the order of the day.<sup>204</sup> Unemployment among females was particularly high among wives.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> T.A. Welton, “A Study of Some Portions of the Census of London for 1901” in *The Journal of the Royal Statisticians Society* (Sept. 1902), 486.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid*, 485. See Table for more information. Women’s unemployment was commonly high in the era, particularly among wives. While efforts were concentrated on finding men employment, it was often assumed that married women were not interested in employment. In Bethnal Green, employed married women typically held homeworking jobs or part-time jobs, which provided money for extras and the children.

<sup>204</sup> Males employed in other manufacture: 10,195. Females employed in textiles and allied manufactures: 5,472.

<sup>205</sup> Welton, “A Study of Some Portions,” 485-6. Population information from *Visions of Britain*.

Table 2: Statistics of the Working Population, 1901

	Population	Employed	Unemployed
Male	63,380	39,364	24,016
Female	66,300	20,708	45,592
15+ Male	39,858	38,022	1,836
25-65 Male	35,106	34,594	512
25-65 Female	37,278	19,840	17,438
65 + Male	2,073	1,128	945
65 + Female	2,709	701	2,008

Table 3: Gender and Age Breakdowns, 1891

Year	1891		1901	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
Population (all)	129,132		129,680	
Population Under 15	24,313	24,581	23,522	23,554
Population, 15-64	37,083	38,407	37,785	40,037
Population, 65 +	1,912	2,836	2,073	2,709
Single, 15 +	14,603	13,320	15,364	14,786
Widowed, 15 +	2,006	5,296	2,230	5,369
Married, 15-65	21,263	21,825	21,229	21,973
Married, 65 +	1,123	808	3,965	661

The breakdown of gender and age in Bethnal Green in 1901 strongly emphasized the cultural traditions of the area: single women and married women tended to live closer to their families. Single men might live at home to contribute to the household income, but there was no social stigma attached to living independently. Women lived longer in Bethnal Green, and the breakdown of Census results showed a disproportionate number of widows to widowers. The proportion of single men and women had risen since 1891, although the women outstripped the men.<sup>206</sup>

### **Occupations, 1900-1914**

In 1901, the old class of artisanal jobs was dying for a variety of reasons. W.H. Beveridge and others began a Liberal plan in 1908 to advocate for a system of labour exchange, in which public listing of jobs available in other districts became commonplace.<sup>207</sup> There was an effort to alleviate the sufferings of unemployment, and some MPs took up the challenge. Beveridge was firm in his opinion that labour exchanges would not result in outsiders taking the best jobs, rather that “a Poplar employer [taking] on a Bethnal Green man who comes to him casually through the streets, and then [having] to pay rates to support the Poplar man in the workhouse.”<sup>208</sup> Mass-produced goods were cheaper, often with the same product as a result. In 1904, the vicar of St James-the-Less held an Industrial Exhibition, showcasing the various products that Bethnal Green, and the people within his parish specifically, had produced. A reporter came calling to see the exhibition, and stayed to talk to some local producers. The results of the exhibition were mixed, as were the reporters’ feelings having viewed the work going into the products. An

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<sup>206</sup> Welton, “A Study of Some Portions,” 490. Welton’s study is the only breakdown of employment and marital status related to Bethnal Green specifically between 1801 and the end of this survey, 1945.

<sup>207</sup> W.H. Beveridge, “Labour Exchanges and the Unemployed” from *The Economic Journal* 17, no 65 (Mar 1907), 68.

<sup>208</sup> Beveridge, “Labour Exchanges”, 76.



artificial flower maker worked “slowly, petal by petal, leaf by leaf, the gaudy creation assumes shape under the palsied fingers, gnarled and misshapen by a life of toil.” An old woman “of seventy-three makes the tin labels ... bent and wretched the poor old soul grapples with the oddments of tin, which she shears to the correct size, stamps with a number and finally punches with a hole in which the skewer may be inserted. At this she earns sixpence a day.” The wretched poverty of these outworkers was nothing, however, “when compared with the lot of the man who makes mousetraps ... the maker has to buy the wood, cut the shape, and nail together, buy, and then cut the wire into lengths, and make the spring. Having completed one, he has to make 143 more exactly like it, and then he is ready to go out and seek a purchaser. If he is in luck he gets 4s. 6d. for the gross.” Other craft jobs are just as ill-paying, although not for near as much product:

For wooden horses, ten shillings high, 1s. 8d. per dozen is paid, while a miller’s horse and cart, with four sacks of real sawdust, fetches sixpence-halfpenny. Paper bags, which have to go through nine processes, are paid for at the rate of sixpence per thousand, the maker finding his own parts. The silk pom-pom, which baby delights to pull off his shoes[,] are made for sixpence per gross, the maker finding all his or her own materials.

The separation between customers and laborers was very real, and very physical, but may have been mental as well. “The seamstress is the most sweated of all east-end workers. I wonder whether the ladies who shop in the west end are aware that the filmy blouses for which they pay from seven to ten shillings are sewn together by some poor soul in an east end garret for twopence farthing, or that there are those who sit until the small hours making men’s coats for sixpence each.” Even the sideline of sweated laborers was not productive: “twopence half-penny for a gross, and I can do seven gross in a day. But that takes me from two o’clock until midnight!” The reporter expressed a conscious disbelief in the prices being paid the laborers which they themselves didn’t seem to recognize. More though, the reporter was concerned with

the home as much as the labor: “Two hundred and eighty-eight separate articles for one and fivepence-halfpenny. Nor was the pathos of the subject lightened by the knowledge that before the summer ended another little stranger would have arrived for the urchin on the doorstep to live and cherish and to claim a share in the earnings of the matchbox maker.”<sup>209</sup>

Traditional job choices in Bethnal Green had been artisanal. With the onset of mechanized labor, artisanal workers were being displaced, out-priced, and generally becoming out of fashion. With the greater flow of movement of people between London and Bethnal Green, opportunities were present for the new class of people searching for employment in Bethnal Green. They were the first generation of fully literate people in Bethnal Green. Functional literacy was the most common type of literacy, and they found that it only benefitted manufacturing jobs. Others, however, had gone beyond that level of literacy. They quickly found jobs in Bethnal Green to be scarce for them, and a number began to search for employment in the City or other places outside of Bethnal Green. The growth of secondary schools meant that the next generation of Bethnal Green residents would be even more literate than their parents.

The Natural Food Company on Cambridge Heath Road was booming, producing eleven million loaves of bread per year by 1911.<sup>210</sup> The London Small Arms Factory, located on Old Ford Road, also increased during the First World War. It had a small wharf, known as the Gunman’s Wharf, on Regent’s Canal which enabled it to move merchandise quickly and easily.<sup>211</sup> Jack Cohen began selling fish paste and other wares from a Brick Lane market spot

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<sup>209</sup> “Slavery in London Slums Hard Work, Little Wages: Visit of *Daily News* Reporter to the East End of the Great Metropolis” from *St John Daily Sun* (June 4, 1904), 1.

<sup>210</sup> Gordon, *Little Book of the East End*, 55.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid*, 56.

after the Great War. He would go on to establish Tesco.<sup>212</sup> Other workplaces in Bethnal Green would not be as sweet-smelling as these, however. In particular, there was a manure processing plant on Charles Street, a bladder-drying factory on Three Colts Lane, and a tripe boiler on Boundary Street.<sup>213</sup> The factories began to move into Bethnal Green after the war, displacing artisanal workers even more.

### **Workhouses, 1900-1914**

The 1901 Census report for the Waterloo Road Workhouse, under the ecclesiastical parish of St. John's, belies significant information about the workhouse situation in Bethnal Green. There were approximately 1,160 people living in the workhouse, of whom 520 were female. Of the female population, 68 percent were between 61 and 87 years of age. Their former occupations were silk-weaving, laundering, and sewing clothes.<sup>214</sup> By 1911, there were approximately 1,140 people living in Waterloo Road Workhouse, of whom 29 were in the receiving wards. There were 170 rooms, of which 135 were general rooms. They housed the majority of the people in the workhouse, 1,110 people. The gender ratio had altered slightly, from 45 percent to 40 percent female, with only 447 women, of whom five were in the maternity block and forty-five in the infirm block. The local Potter's Union had put up a small sum to be given to the Waterloo Road Workhouse, resulting in the creation of the Potter's Lodge, a five-room suite reserved for union members, wherein four people resided in 1911. Richard and Helen Bushell, who were 38 and 39 respectively in 1901, were the master and matron of the Waterloo

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<sup>212</sup> Gordon, *Little Book of the East End*, 57.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid*, 52.

<sup>214</sup> 1901 Census, Bethnal Green Workhouse

Road Workhouse for both of these Census counts. There were thirty-one workers in 1901, and thirty-four in 1911.<sup>215</sup>

The bread, cheese, and gruel of Dickens' poorhouses was not an exaggeration of workhouse fare in the nineteenth century. Well Street Workhouse had achieved notoriety in 1897, when an inmate died, allegedly from overeating. In the course of investigating the charge, officials found that Well Street had been experimenting with their rationing: they provided half the bread allowance at the beginning of the meal, and inmates could request the other half. They found great savings by this institution, as well as substituting Irish stew, made of small amounts of meat, potatoes, and vegetables, for pea soup.<sup>216</sup> With the changing demographic of workhouses the Poor Law Unions sought to change the nutritional allowance. In 1900, they gathered recipes for fifty easy to make dishes which had more flavor and substance, but could still be produced cheaply. They turned the recipes over to the National Training School of Cookery, who produced bulk recipes for them.<sup>217</sup> Workhouses continued in a slow decline until the closing of the Waterloo Road Workhouse in 1922, leaving only Leytonstone School and the Infirmary in the charge of the Bethnal Green Poor Law Union. London County Council would assume all duties upon dissolution of the Poor Law Unions in 1925.

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<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>216</sup> Peter Higginbotham, *Bethnal Green, (Parish of St. Matthews), Middlesex, London* updated 2014, accessed May 2, 2014.

<sup>217</sup> Peter Higginbotham, *The Workhouse Cookbook* (Gloucestershire, UK: The History Press, 2008), ii-xi.

Table 4: Population in Private and Public Housing, 1891, 1901, 1911

Year	1891	1901	1911
Population	129,132	129,680	128,183
Private Population	125,230	125,800	124,062
Non-Private Population	3,902	3,880	4,121

### Housing Crisis, 1900-1914

The population peaked in Bethnal Green in 1910 at 131,579.<sup>218</sup> Housing was in flux from 1891 until 1901, and the population had declined by 6.1 percent, but accommodations were in short supply in 1901.<sup>219</sup> MP Bhowangree for Bethnal Green stood before the House of Commons in 1900, and told them that “skilled and sober workmen in good employment and earning high wages [were] absolutely unable to find accommodation.”<sup>220</sup> Overcrowding had shown a slight decrease, with 6 percent fewer people living two or more to a room in tenements of less than five rooms. Larger tenements decreased overcrowding by 7 percent.<sup>221</sup> With just 14,005 houses in Bethnal Green in that year, the average number of people per household was 9.3. As housing projects by the East End Dwelling Company and other charities continued, the London County Council also began construction. The highest number of house in the first quarter of the century was in 1903, with 16,374 houses in that year. The peak in housing did not correlate to a drop in overcrowding, however. Bethnal Green came in third overall for 1902 in overcrowding in London, with 44.6 percent of the population living in poverty.<sup>222</sup> It was second

<sup>218</sup> Bethnal Green Medical Officer of Health Report, 1912.

<sup>219</sup> Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*, 301.

<sup>220</sup> Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*, 300.

<sup>221</sup> H. Llewellyn Smith, *The New Survey of London Life and Labour: Forty Years of Change 1* (London, P.S. King & Son, ltd), 165.

<sup>222</sup> Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*, 312.

in overcrowding in one-room tenements (those houses which had not been pulled down yet), and in four-room tenements (those houses already constructed which had rapidly filled up).<sup>223</sup>

Table 5: Population in Overcrowding, 1901, 1911, 1921

Year	1901	1911	1921
Population	129,680	128,183	117,238
Overcrowded Population	38,904	41,019	32,592

Fifteen hundred of the tenements would be torn down by 1904. John Foot, a Medical Officer of Health for Bethnal Green,

complained in 1905 that “poverty and inability to pay the rent is the cause of 98 percent of all the cases [of overcrowding] that came under our notice.”<sup>224</sup> In 1906, block dwellings of twenty rooms or more were plentiful in Bethnal Green. There were 4,625, the fourth most in London. The tenements ranged from single rooms to six or more, but in Bethnal Green, 44 percent of the tenements block dwellings had three rooms.<sup>225</sup> They housed approximately 18,000 people.

The County of London lost 45,000 working-class rooms between 1902 and 1913. During this time, overcrowding only increased by one to two percent.<sup>226</sup> There was an implied moral imperative to the rush to end overcrowding and improve the lives of the working class. C.J. Steward asserted that “[w]e have the slums and “unsanitary areas” bequeathed to us by our forefathers, and we have to deal with them as best we may.” This observation of 1901 continued: “[T]he amount of work which the London County Council and the other London authorities have accomplished in this direction is really enormous.”<sup>227</sup> There was a “complicated

<sup>223</sup> “The Housing of London” in *The British Medical Journal* 1, no.2149 (Mar. 8 1902), 613.

<sup>224</sup> Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*, 311.

<sup>225</sup> Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*, 368.

<sup>226</sup> Smith, *Forty Years of Change* 1, 165.

<sup>227</sup> C.J. Stewart, “The Housing Question in London” in *The Economic Journal* 11, no. 41 (Mar., 1901), 57.

system of equalization” in place to ensure that rent rates stayed down: tax rates were collected, of which 50 percent were to remain local. In most places in London, however, only 30 percent of the rates were returned locally, and the other 20 percent were levied over the whole county. By this measure, in 1901, Bethnal Green gained a little less than three shillings for every pound paid in taxes.<sup>228</sup> London County Council did not have many projects in Bethnal Green, however. In 1910, they provided no new accommodations in Bethnal Green.<sup>229</sup> In 1911, Foot described overcrowding as “a good hardy annual flourishing all the year round [that was] an economic question right through ... until the conditions of life producing it are entirely remodeled, no permanent improvement can in the main be hoped for.”<sup>230</sup> Of the twenty-two London County Council projects total in London paid for by this system, only five were not realizing a profit. The Boundary Street scheme was not one of those; “in 1913-1914, after rates, taxes, interest on sinking fund, maintenance costs and empty property had all been accounted for,” it showed a profit of £2,370.<sup>231</sup> There were very strict rules regarding living in Council housing, as public space had to remain free of any clutter or clothes hanging.

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<sup>228</sup> Robert Donald, *The London Manual* 5 (London: E. Lloyd Ltd, 1901), 13.

<sup>229</sup> Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*, 303.

<sup>230</sup> Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*, 311.

<sup>231</sup> Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*, 269.

## Charity from Within

In 1875 a down-on-his-luck street sweeper found himself in a workhouse in Shadwell. He had seen the apple costers sewing buttons and other shiny objects to their suits to attract attention to their wares, and it had given him an idea. He sewed buttons onto his trousers hems



Fig. 12: Pearly King of Tower Hamlets

and seams, the lapel of his coat, the cuffs. He put on this new suit and headed out into the East End with a bucket. As he walked along, he sang and called out to passersby. This was not an unusual thing in the area, so some paid little heed. Others noticed that he wasn't selling anything, merely taking donations. He donated the money to local orphans and widows. Henry Croft would spread this idea throughout his life. He recruited others, and by the Great War there were approximately twenty "Pearlies," so-called for the mother-of-pearl buttons they embroidered their clothing with. Men and women came out in their bedecked suits to troll the streets and alleys of London, collecting for charity. They were a hugely successful group, with Henry Croft personally collecting as much as £5,000 before his death in 1930. That solemn occasion was marked by one of the largest funerals in the East End, with over 4,000 attendees. Henry Croft had died penniless in the same workhouse that the idea for the Pearly Kings and Queens came from.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Benedict Le Vay, *Eccentric London: The Bradt Guide to Britain's Crazy and Curious Capital* (London: Brandt Travel Guides, 2007), 53.



There were twenty-eight Pearly Kings and Queens who attended Henry's funeral. Each represented a borough, hamlet, or landmark. The Queen of Victoria Park and the King of Bethnal Green each warranted their own adorned member. They gathered buttons, pearls, and sequins to bedaub their costumes, some from personal collections and others from donation. They sewed each one on by hand, to their suit, new buttons added with each subsequent generation. Each family had their own symbols they worked into their designs. Until recently, former Pearly members went to their grave with a pearly pall specially made for them by other members. Pearly members were technically elected by a popular vote or recommendation. It was more often handed down in the generations, and only passed out of the family when the last member passed away. Henry Croft's granddaughter is a Pearly Queen today.<sup>233</sup> The Pearlies walked in parades, distributed leaflets, showed up at funerals, and in general raised money for worthy charities, especially orphanages.<sup>234</sup> Pearly Kings and Queens were most known for their charity fundraising, for local projects.

It was not only orphanages that benefitted from the Pearly Kings and Queens. They could be counted on to provide a widows and orphans fund for those worthy, as well as collecting for funerals. Funerals were never a minor expense, but in the East End they took on the added expense of a 'proper face' to the world. A couple in Bethnal Green, having recently lost an infant, "Refus[ed] then, if uninsured, to accept the pauper burial, with its consequent political and social degradation of a perfectly respectable family, the parents tr[ied] to borrow the money needed. Up and down the street sums are collected in pence and sixpences, until the price of a child's funeral on the cheapest scale [was] secured. Funerals [were] not run on credit; but

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<sup>233</sup> "Pearly Kings and Queens' Official History" available online <http://www.pearlykingsandqueens.com/history/> last updated 2008 (accessed May 10, 2014)

<sup>234</sup> "Official History" from *Pearly Kings and Queens*

the neighbors, who may be absolute strangers, [would] contribute rather than suffer the degradation to pauperism of one of themselves.”<sup>235</sup> Beginning during the Great War, the Pearly Kings and Queens began to collect for “proper” burials as well.



Fig. 13: Pearly Royalty of the East End<sup>236</sup>

#### **Five-Percent Philanthropy (The Era of Model Dwellings)**

Since the 1870s, urban areas of the United Kingdom were the site of scores of philanthropic model dwelling construction. The most famous companies in London were the East End Dwelling Company, the Guinness Trust, Sutton Dwellings Trust, and the Peabody Trust. Each took a turn in Bethnal Green. In the period from 1900 to 1910, of fifteen development projects, thirteen were model dwellings, totaling forty blocks of construction. Of these, only two were not instigated by a philanthropic company.<sup>237</sup> The majority of work was carried out by the East End Dwelling Company, founded in 1882 by Samuel Barnett.<sup>238</sup> Beatrice Webb was involved in many of the projects as well. Like many of the philanthropic housing

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<sup>235</sup> Ross, “Respectability in Pre-World War I London”, 47.

<sup>236</sup> The granite and concrete in the foreground is the beginning of the Stairway to Heaven Memorial. When complete, the structure will have teak stairs fashioned upside down, with holes punched in the stairs to represent each of the victims of the Bethnal Green Tube Disaster. All told, the cost of production is £800 thousand.

<sup>237</sup> Baker, “Building and Social Conditions, 1876-1914,” 126-132. See Appendix II for more information.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.* See Appendix II.

charities, the aim was to provide high standards of housing, using the latest innovations in hygiene and building type. Ultimately, the companies sought to maintain residences which recognized a profit of approximately 5 percent. The focus was on providing accommodation for the working class, and strict moral and social strictures were placed on residents.

The accommodations were luxurious in comparison to the housing they replaced and the housing around them. As charitable institutions, these estates could hand select their tenants, and evict them with no notice or legal injunction (a power which the London County Council lacked). Tenants made a verbal contract to abide by certain rules: good living, defined broadly or narrowly; no drunkenness or debauchery (in the house only); and maintenance of their space. Many of the organizations were partially funded by local churches, so attendance at local churches was mandatory. In Peabody Trust estates, all residents had to comply with the Vaccination Act, pay rent promptly and up front, and pay for any damages to their room. They could not have dogs, beat their rugs after 10 am, hang their washing in a visible location, decorate the walls, or use any gas-fuelled lights after 11 pm.<sup>239</sup> Despite the strictures, these buildings quickly filled: the onus of the rules was not too much and the people in want of housing far outnumbered the spaces created. Unfortunately, the “model dwelling movement could not supply sufficient dwellings to make a dent in the housing problem.”<sup>240</sup> Fixed price leasing and other incentives promoted long-term tenancy. Some of the dwellings had indoor bathhouses and pools, amenities with which Bethnal Green was not familiar. The buildings were restricted. Each residence had a monitor; either a volunteer or paid staff member who lived in the residence, kept an eye on tenants, reported disturbances to the appropriate authorities, and authorized new tenants, as well as collecting rent. These monitors were often women, and they

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<sup>239</sup> Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*, 159-160.

<sup>240</sup> Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*, 172.

controlled the tenor of the building. They “could bring about rapid transformation in the households they superintended by evicting undesirable tenants and closely supervising the rest.”<sup>241</sup> Residents could pay rent monthly or weekly in advance. Most paid weekly. To the charities, long-term tenants would take more care in their surroundings. Flossy, who lived in one of these buildings, recalled that the birth of a child “created a stir. Hollers of ‘it’s a girl’ rang through the whole building, and our neighbors cheered.”<sup>242</sup> Tenants began to form neighbor kinship bonds within their buildings, taking care of the elderly and sharing child-rearing duties.

The Census of 1911 carried out in Bethnal Green showed a decline in population. The number of transfers out of the area finally overtook the natural population increase, and Bethnal Green was seeing some small relief in sheer numbers. This was not yet having any effect on overcrowding. George Bates’ population estimate for 1910 may provide some explanation: if his estimates are correct, 5,335 people moved out of the Borough between 1909 and 1911. The passage of the Town Planning Act in 1909 had an effect on Bethnal Green. Many buildings were condemned and scheduled for demolition, leaving them uninhabitable. Of 18,043 separate dwellings, only 13,882 were inhabited.<sup>243</sup> The number of occupied dwellings would significantly increase by 1921.

### **The Ableys, 1901-1914**

Thomas Abley, Benjamin’s father, had developed chronic rheumatism and applied for admittance to the Bethnal Green Workhouse on January 26<sup>th</sup> of 1901. He and Benjamin had lost touch, and he did not know his son’s address. House painting in the late 1800s was hard and dangerous work. No masks were used, and the painters would have inhaled a large amount of

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<sup>241</sup> Ross, “Respectability in Pre-World War I London”, 42.

<sup>242</sup> Floss and Edna Baker, “Oral Interview” conducted by author March 4, 2014.

<sup>243</sup> Baker, “Building and Social Conditions, 1876-1914,” 126-132.

paint over the years, while carrying heavy buckets of paint up and down ladders would have worn down the body.<sup>244</sup> Thomas had abandoned his home at Prince Regent Lane. He was still in the workhouse in June of 1901, listed on the census as a widower and former house decorator. He likely died there, and is buried in one of the numerous pauper's fields that dotted London. Benjamin may never have known the fate of his father.

By 1901, the household at 15 Wennington Road consisted of Mary Anne and Emily Elizabeth Castle, Benjamin, Sarah, Ben, Beatrice, Frederick, and John. Mary Anne was an infant shoe sewer of some standing. She was likely a strong and influential character in the family, perhaps similar to Doris Bailey's Gran, who was fiercely independent from the family, "carry[ing] in a tray [to share tea each weekday] with her own sugar, condensed milk, and bread and butter" but fondly remembered.<sup>245</sup> Sarah had learned her mother's trade at her knee, and was carrying on the family tradition. Emily was in the shoe trade as well, as a boot fitter. Like most in the shoe trade, Mary Anne and Sarah were outworkers, contributing pennies to the family earnings with their efforts, working day and night when the orders came in. The whole family was likely involved in the trade, the children using their small nimble fingers to turn out seams and shape toes. Although still at school, Beatrice was learning the trade, likely sewing the straight seams at the sides of shoes and fetching materials as needed. If an order for shoes came in uncut, the boys or their father would have cut it for their mother. Great skill and dexterity was needed to make the small infant shoes. They were for the wealthier clients, as most young

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<sup>244</sup> Patients regularly reported specific symptoms related to occupation, especially at "the Lunnon." Doctors and nurses who took down these complaints developed a shorthand to save time: painter's complaint was most often of black lung, thick lung, colored sputum (colors of paint, specifically), and small lung. The last was related to the physical side of the work: painters spent years hunched over buckets, etc., and lungs developed accordingly. Some painters had one small lung and one large lung, from leaning to the right or left off a ladder (depending on which hand they used most frequently).

<sup>245</sup> Bailey, *Children of the Green*, 33.

children at the time went barefoot. Shoe making had not industrialized yet, although it was rapidly developing specialized trades in that direction.

In 1904, a *Daily News* reporter visited a number of families in Bethnal Green. His description of a typical shoemaker workshop tells us much about the life of the Abley women:

In an attic overlooking one of the most malodorous sections of the Regent's canal a woman has been living for years, earning her own living and that of her three girls by stitching boot uppers. She is supplied with the leather already cut to shape, with the exception of the scalloping, as in a lady's boot, which she has to do by hand. She sews and faces, stitches and turns back, makes and stitches twelve buttonholes, and sews on twelve buttons. If the boot is to have an ornamental toe she must perforate the leather with tools bought by herself. Having completed, ready for wear, all that portion of the boot above the sole she is remunerated with the sum of three-half-pence, or threepence on the completion of a pair. This boot, I am told, is sold in the west end for as much as eight shillings. Infants' shoes she makes outright for ninepence a dozen.<sup>246</sup>

From 1900 on, the Ableys also benefited from Ben's income. Likely a good student at school, Ben began at the post office in 1900 as an office boy. By 1902, he was nominated for the position of boy messenger, and by 1910 for letter-sorter. This position required good reading skills, as well as keen eyes to read the addresses. He worked in the sorting room, a large hall full of the hum of industriousness. Like many adapting to the newly mechanized world, he had to be quick and efficient at his job or risk being replaced. The walls of the sorting room would contain maps, showing the various locations letters would be posted to and from. These were post office maps, showing grid divisions of the world. Each of these grids represented a bin. Mail was received in bulky bags, poured out onto table, for the sorting to begin. First they were sorted for country, then for county, then for city or town. Local mail was sorted by neighborhood. Bins were trundled away as they grew full, to be sorted again for the mail bags, and then again for street and address. The job began early in the morning, so as many could be delivered on the day after they were received as possible. It was an ongoing process, more letters being tipped onto

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<sup>246</sup> "Slavery in London Slums" in *St John Daily Sun* (June 4, 1904), 1.

the table as they arrived. Local mail had a one-to-two day turnaround. Mail outside of London, but within the British Isles took two-to-three days. Mail to the continent took upwards of a week, and mail to America one-and-a-half-to-two weeks. Ben would have helped with the General Post Office's relocation, ongoing from 1909 to 1912, to a new, purpose-built building called Kings Corner. It was the first free-standing post office in London, as well as the first purpose-built post office in the United Kingdom. Located in the east of London, it was part of the rapidly expanding commercial sector.<sup>247</sup> Ben would have contributed to his family's household income, as was common at the time.<sup>248</sup>

Benjamin continued to work as a painter, another early starting job. Builders arrived on the construction yard as early as six in the morning, to make the best use of light. In the winter months, if they continued building, workers would be expected as early as light would dawn. Building and exterior painting were oftentimes seasonal work. Interior painting usually took place after the building was completed. Buildings in the up-scale part of London would be completed with electrical wiring and indoor plumbing before the walls were poured. Joists would go up, then wiring, pipes, and fitting. Two great pieces of wood would be screwed to the joist, allowing for half an inch to an inch of plaster on the outside. Plaster would then be poured in, creating a thick insulated wall, sound-dampening if not soundproof. Benjamin and his crew would arrive, carting their own tools to work every day. Building sites were not well-secured at night, and few workmen left their tools behind. Out would come the canvas, unrolled to prevent drips damaging the already-laid floor. The paint would come next, provided by the builder to his specifications. It would be mixed, thinned, or thickened by Benjamin, then poured into

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<sup>247</sup> Geoff Brandwood, *Living, Leisure and Law: Eight Building Types in England, 1800-1914* (London: Spire Books, 2010), 154.

<sup>248</sup> Ross, "Survival Networks", 11.

containers for application to the brush. Horsehair brushes were the most common of the age, although some experimentation with other materials had been done. Painters had to take care, as drips, wet plaster, improper application, and poor mixing caused a delay in the building. Once the paint was dry, fixtures such as lights and baseboards would go in. Builders usually had multiple projects ongoing, so Benjamin would likely not see the finished project unless called back to fix paint.

Both Ben and Benjamin would have risen early in the morning, long before the sun. They would have dressed in the dark, had a morning shave, and sat down at the breakfast table. Sarah would have risen at the same time as her husband. It was her responsibility to have food on the table for the men. Coffee, eggs, bread, and small meats might be on the table, doled out in large portions to the men. Weak beer or tea might also have made an appearance, although the popularity of beer for breakfast was dying down (largely as a response to the temperance movement). Tea was usually reserved for the women and children. The children would likely get crusts of bread to eat, along with tea with a spot of canned milk or cow's milk if it was available. The bread "was mainly eaten in thick slices known as 'doorsteps', smeared thickly with cheap jam, treacle, margarine, butter (if times were good), or dripping."<sup>249</sup> Food prices declined significantly in the 1870s, but the purchasing power of the pound decreased even more sharply by 1912.<sup>250</sup> "A unanimous breakfast' was out of the question [for most households], because 'some go to work at 5 a.m., and others may not be due till 9 a.m.'"<sup>251</sup> Dinner was another affair: most often it was a meal for the children, another for the father and any other working males. It was difficult to seat large families around one small table. Instead, "the hard-

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<sup>249</sup> Davin, "Loaves and Fishes", 168.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid*, 167.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid*, 168.



worked saucepan and frying-pan' would be used to prepare potatoes ... and when finances allowed, a bit of fish or meat."<sup>252</sup> Women would also buy things like offal, sheep's head, and "other parts rejected by the better-off," in an effort to stretch their food budget.<sup>253</sup> The morning newspaper was a shared activity among the males of the household. One was purchased at the corner every morning, and occasionally at night as well.

Once the morning paper was read, and their food consumed, the men pushed their chairs back and prepared to leave for the day. The children, who ate later, finished their breakfast in preparation for attending a day of classes. Once completed, they would head out the door, there to be greeted by the halloos of their fellow classmates as they trudged down the street to the local parish school. The three 'R's of education were no small matter to the families of Bethnal Green. In 1876, Benjamin Abley had attended the Atley Road School, founded in 1873. Sarah was listed as a scholar in the 1881 Census. Ben and Beatrice's generation were the first of the Abley family to attend school under the Reform Act passed in 1880, however, which included mandatory education for all children age five to ten. Public education was continuing to reform in the early 1900s, beginning with a series of reform acts which culminated in the 1902 Education Reform Act for secondary education. All children in England would be educated in reading, writing, and arithmetic (although in the East End, it was more commonly referred to as reading, lettering, and sums) from age five to fourteen. Once this principal education was completed, girls and boys could earn scholarship to other schools to finish up their education (although not many from Bethnal Green did – in 1908, two children in a secondary school out of a total pool of seven hundred some odd students were from Bethnal Green, and both were

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<sup>252</sup> Davin, "Loaves and Fishes," 169.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid*, 171.

earmarked scholarship students).<sup>254</sup> More likely, however, was that they would be put to work, contributing to the family income.

Beatrice, who turned fourteen in 1905, was an infant shoe sewer, the fourth successive generation of her family to take up this rapidly dying trade. She and John Shine married at Rochford in 1910, with two friends listed as witnesses. Although married, in 1911 Beatrice continued to live at home on Wennington Road with her parents. She had no children with her husband yet, and was unlikely to do so in 1911, as her husband was in Essex. John Shine was a civil servant, and would retire as a civil servant. Beatrice left the Wennington Road home before 1914, moving to nearby Islington and presumably joining John. Beatrice and John remained childless, however. She passed away in 1953.

Benjamin and Sarah Abley had two more daughters: Mary Ellen, born in July of 1902, and Maud Elsie, born in July of 1905, both at Wennington Road. These little ones probably played with the children of Thomas and Emma Syrett, who moved to 17 Wennington Road, next door to the Abley's, in 1905. The Brinds, a family of four, lived there already. They had lived on the second floor for some years, not renting enough of the property to qualify to vote. The Syrett's had three children, with a fourth born in 1905. By 1911, their family was complete, with the addition of Evelyn in 1907, and the twins, May Kate and John, born in 1909. The Syretts remained at 17 Wennington Road until the end of the Second World War.

With children of the same age, and front doors less than a foot apart, the Syretts and the Ableys probably interacted frequently. The girls of the Abley household may have helped out, babysitting the youngest children when Emma stepped out to the market. It was common in Bethnal Green for child-rearing to follow the "it takes a village" ideology. Elder residents

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<sup>254</sup> Bethnal Green Medical Officer of Health Report of 1909

earned extra money by minding the baby. Older children were expected to watch out for the younger. Walking to the store, the fish and chip shop, the church, or wherever else they were allowed, would be accomplished in groups. Neighborhoods had their own skipping songs. Children swung the jumping ropes in a rhythm, chanting “Old mother Mason broke her basin, how much did it cost.” They changed the rhythm, counting “onepence, tuppence, threepence” for each successful skip.<sup>255</sup> Hopscotch patterns were drawn on the street with sticks placed in the fire until the end was black. Children who minded the blackboard at school might cadge a piece of chalk to trace the outlines. Balls and hoops were common play toys for the lower classes. Children may have been given them at church or in handouts at various charity events. The hoops were chased down the street, beat along with a stick. The boys would line up and toss the ball back and forth, kick it around the street, or set up impromptu kickball games. Girls collected pins and chocolate foils, called picks, carefully pressing each one between the pages of a book. They were freely exchanged by children, who worked their own system of bartering and show-and-tell to obtain them. Hollers of “pin for a look and a jolly good look” and “pin for a pick and a jolly good pick” could be heard shrilly up and down the street.<sup>256</sup> Various definitions and boundaries were held in common. The children would agree on a goal, sometimes created by whatever objects could be found in their pockets or on the street. Everyone knew the fouls and free kicks. Wennington Road was well-suited to street playing. A small neighborhood with no outlet, traffic would have been light. Deliveries may have come, but in this street of lower class families, it would have been more common and frugal to pick it up for yourself. An exception was fresh milk, which was delivered too early to interfere with the children’s play and was rare on the street.

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<sup>255</sup> Bailey, *Children of the Green*, 92.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid*, 93.

The Abley's, however, did not just have children living at home. Ben was twenty four years old at the time of the 1911 Census. This was the common age for people to marry in Bethnal Green. In April of 1914, he would do so. Florence Maud Gaskin, the daughter of Samuel, a car man for a confectioner, was born in 1886. She was a chocolate packer, probably for the same confectioner her father worked for. They lived on Victoria Park Road, on the north side of the park. Hackney, where they lived, was a relatively affluent area at the time. Ben and Florence were married at St Barnabas. The wedding party, including Florence's mother, who witnessed the wedding, went down to Wennington Road, a stone's throw from the church, and feasted. Ben gathered his belongings, and he and his wife set off to settle into their married life at her father's house in Hackney.

### **Abley Boys at War**

Bethnal Green had the highest rate of voluntary enlistment of any borough in London at the outbreak of the Great War. From 1914 onwards, an estimated average of 10,000 men per year marched off to war from Bethnal Green.<sup>257</sup> The war came quickly home in Bethnal Green, for Belgian refugees arrived in October, and 384 of them were housed in the Waterloo Road Workhouse and Leytonstone School. In 1915, it was turned over for use by the military.<sup>258</sup> It is in Hackney that Ben joined the Rifle Brigade after the outbreak of war. He served in action through the rest of 1914 and throughout 1915. He was awarded the Victoria, British, and Star

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<sup>257</sup> Statistics for the number of men who could claim residency in Bethnal Green are only available from the Bethnal Green Medical Officer of Health Report of 1922, and only cover the years 1916 to 1919. The average of these was 9883.5 men per year away at war. Using the rate of 1916, 10,171, as the rates for 1914 and 1915 gives an average of 9979. Excluding the year 1919, when Armistice was called and only a third of Bethnal Green men were at war, produces an average of 11,057. The average of these three numbers is 10,306.5. In the first year of war, many Bethnal Green men were declared unfit for duty due to stature and nutrition. As the war progressed, more people were accepted at lower standards.

<sup>258</sup> W. Eickhoff, *Report of Waterloo House Committee* (22 Oct 1914)

Medals, known after the war as the “Pip, Squeak, and Wilfred” medals after a popular comic strip. In March 1916, he was peremptorily summoned home on compassionate leave because his father, Benjamin, had passed away. Benjamin’s will was probated on the 3rd of June, leaving Ben as the executor of an estate valued at £243.<sup>259</sup> Ben was probably billeted out, citing family necessity. He was certainly at home in January of 1917. His wife gave birth to their first and only child together, Benjamin Matthews, in September of that year.

Benjamin and Sarah’s younger son Frederic also quickly joined the army after the outbreak of war. He joined the 10<sup>th</sup> London Regiment, which was stationed at the Grove in Hackney until the end of August of 1914. In April of 1915, marching orders were given. His regiment shipped off in July of 1915 from Plymouth to Gallipoli. They landed at Suvia Bay on the 11<sup>th</sup> of August 1915. They were one of the first troops evacuated out of the disaster that was the Gallipoli campaign, leaving in December of 1915. They were placed in Egypt, where they spent the rest of the war. Frederic was awarded the “Pip, Squeak, and Wilfred” as well. He would not have been granted compassionate leave to come home after the death of his family, as he was not the head of household.

The youngest of Benjamin and Sarah’s boys, John Thomas, was eager to join in the war as well. Perhaps stirred by his brothers’ fervor, or the political speakers at nearby Victoria Park, or bored, having left school in 1914, he enlisted in the army. On May 18<sup>th</sup> of 1915, he walked from his home on Wennington Road to Shoreditch, a distance of nearly a mile. There, he entered

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<sup>259</sup> A surprising amount for the time. While most of it was likely in property and furnishings, some would have been cash. It was common in Bethnal Green to divide the estate, with the bulk going towards the widow, especially furnishings and property. Eldest sons would typically receive some cash, as well as work supplies to use or sell. Girls might receive a small amount, a bob or two, which was expected to go towards their marriage. Unless, specified otherwise, younger sons would have received nothing. Rather, they were expected to benefit from the household inheritance.

the West Ham recruiting office, ready to commit himself to “short service” in the army.<sup>260</sup> Short service was intended to be for three years or the duration of the war. John Thomas lied about his age and occupation, claiming to be a 19 year old sawyer. Perhaps he used the trick of boot-blackening to darken his whiskers. His short stature presented no problem, as the regiment he was joining was most commonly known as the “Bantams”: the majority of their members were under five feet, three inches tall. His recruiting officer may have been none-the-wiser to his real age. Shoreditch and Bethnal Green were neighbors, but hundreds of streets crammed that space. In an attempt to hide his true age, John had put down his address as 15 Wellington Road, Grove Road, Bow. No such address existed, although there was a Wellington Way and Court in Bethnal Green. Neither was off a Grove Road, however. His recruiting office may not have been a local, or familiar with Bethnal Green, or he may not have cared to check the address.

John’s regiment did not see immediate action in any case. They were sent off for training maneuvers, perhaps the first inkling that Sarah got of what was going on. His company was dismantled in January of 1916. John then joined the British Expeditionary Force Royal Sussex Regiment.<sup>261</sup> It was with them that he would see action, travelling to France in 1916. His battalion was at the Battle of the Somme, where he may have seen the first tank used in action.<sup>262</sup> It is certain that he saw trench-foot and trench-mouth, miles of unsanitary trenches, and hundreds of deaths. It was cold, wet, and miserable in the trenches, and the battle of attrition was wearing on nerves and patriotism. The constant bombardment, from both sides, would have rendered

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<sup>260</sup> Short service was defined as three years, or the duration of the war. It was at the discretion of recruiting officers and regimental officers to extend service time.

<sup>261</sup> The county of Middlesex (Middle or Medeal Saxon) was created from Essex (East Saxon) and Sussex (South Saxon).

<sup>262</sup> The first battle of the Somme, fought from July to November, 1916, was one of the costliest engagements in World War I. The second battle of the Somme was fought in 1918, resulting in an Allied victory.

most of the troops slightly deaf. Time was passed in the trenches by standing post, playing cards, sleeping where you could find the space, and reading and writing letters. Close bonds were formed with fellow soldiers, who not only knew every intimate detail of your day-to-day life in the trench, but likely knew the names of all your family members, your fears and dislikes, your favorite color, and the size of your shoe. The Somme was a particularly bloody affair, and John was lucky to survive. Camaraderie was an integral defense mechanism against the horrors of war.<sup>263</sup>

From the Somme, his battalion would move to Arras in 1918. Here, two battle plans would clash. The British has spent considerable time and effort digging trenches in the Arras, a critical point in Germany's line. The effort expended there was intended to make gains on German territory, but also to distract from the Somme, enabling the troops to restock, rebuild, and regroup. Twenty-four thousand men and supplies could be accommodated in the tunnels at Arras. Aside from the Expeditionary Forces, three additional British troops had been called over, as had one French troop. The Germans had no intention of giving up Arras so easily. The British began bombardment in March. Over 2 million shells were expended in an attempt to "soften the target." On April 9<sup>th</sup>, the infantry began to creep across Dead Man's Land. Within six days, the troops had pushed forward and claimed two "impregnable" points of the German defense. Fighting began to die down. Tensions eased in the trenches, and soldiers joked and laughed, enjoying a brief respite from the constant noise and fighting. Perhaps John wrote letters home to his mother, or joined in a card game or two. The respite would not last long. On April

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<sup>263</sup> Two troops took the brunt of fighting in the first offensive at the Somme: the Territorial Force and Kitchener's Army, also known as the Pals Battalion. Many people of similar occupation, neighborhood, church, or other social connections joined the military together. The Somme was devastating in terms of casualty numbers, but even more so when entire neighborhoods or businesses were wiped out. While many of the Pals Battalions were connected before the war, some new faces were added into the mix.

23<sup>rd</sup>, fighting would resume in earnest. The British were overwhelmed. Fighting intensified throughout the end of April and into May, with the Germans coming out on top. By the 14<sup>th</sup>, John's unit was battle-weary. His death, on that day in 1918, was one of 158,000 at the Battle of Arras.

### **The Abley Family at Wennington Road During the War**

Back home, Sarah was holding the family together. The death of her husband in 1916 and the death of her son on the battlefields of France was a double blow. His body never came home. John was buried at Ribemont-sur-Ainre, an extension of the Ribemont Cemetery, under a simple stone inscribed with his name, rank, regiment, birthplace of Bethnal Green, and his parent's name. She still had two children at home, both of whom had left school by the end of the war. Home-life had not been easy in Bethnal Green during the war. Germany was quick to utilize the new technology, aviation. Gotha G.V.'s, small biplanes, were sent into England to begin bombing London. They were not capable of carrying much, but the drone of the airplane, not a commonly heard sound, was punctuated by the pop and bangs of explosions. The pilots tossed bombs out of the top of the plane. No aiming was necessary. The bombs were not intended to do damage to physical structures, although they did. Rather, they were intended to depress citizen morale. There were over fifty bombs dropped in Bethnal Green or within a street of the Borough.<sup>264</sup> Only five of these would hit in the area Bethnal Green east of Regent's Canal. The bombing had killed people, and stories were sensationalized as they passed along by word-of-mouth. For residents of London, simply looking in the sky was enough, but some chose not to do so, for "I could have seen the Zeppelins, but I thought, 'If I do I shall always see them

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<sup>264</sup> Peter Chasseaud, *Mapping the First World War: The Great War Through Maps from 1914-1918* (London: Imperial War Museum, 2013), 212.



when I look up into the sky.”<sup>265</sup> The attacks outraged the people of London, and were treated as murders, rather than civilian casualties of war. They engendered strong anti-German sentiment.<sup>266</sup>

The city of London in the Great War was a bleak and dismal place. Hundreds of thousands of men from the city had joined the ranks, leaving behind their families and jobs to “fight for freedom.” Britain rapidly industrialized the war machine, creating thousands of jobs in the factories of London. Women flocked to these jobs, abjured to “do their part” in the war effort. Assembly line production of ammunition, clothing, shoes, and tinned food to be sent overseas commenced in earnest. Sarah, Emily, and Mary may have taken these positions, in an effort to make up for lost income from Benjamin’s death. They, like all British people, were subjected to rationing of food and cloth items. Sarah’s skill as a shoe-maker would have come in handy, as would have the skills of neighbors who had also been engaged in the finer arts of tailoring. Neighborhood exchange was commonplace before the war, and the rationing of home goods and clothing would have only increased the need for it, despite raising the standards of nutrition in the Borough. Clothes might be sent to 14 Wennington Road, where the lady of the house had been a seamstress in 1911. They could be exchanged for the repair or creation of shoes. Leather and the like for soles would have been hard to come by, but needs must, and creativity was strong. Old clothes would be pressed into a pile, then stitched together in layers to create a sole. The bottom layer would consist of a piece of canvas, painted with home treatments, or for a small expense at a local shop, treated to be waterproof. Fabric would be used

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<sup>265</sup> Susan R. Grayzel, *At Home and Under Fire: Air Raids and Culture in Britain from the Great War to the Blitz* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 44.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid*, 47-55.

for the uppers as well, usually also from old clothes.<sup>267</sup> Hand-me-downs were considerably more frequent than new clothes, but a clever and nimble hand could stitch them to create a new look.<sup>268</sup> Trimmings could be salvaged from clothes beyond repair, for they were expensive on the black market.

The local open air market became less frequent over the course of the war. It mostly functioned as the black market, and as the war continued this became an increasingly home-based business. At times, markets were halted or outlawed, owing to concerns over the increasingly frequent daylight raids. By 1916, the Germans had begun to use Zeppelins, and bombing was intended to do large amounts of physical damage.<sup>269</sup> Direct hits had been scored on a bus on nearby Norton Folgate Road, and regardless of information suppression, most of Bethnal Green would have known about the bombings. The sight of the huge Zeppelins in the sky over London must have been terrifying. Doris can remember, although she was only two, sitting on her “mother’s lap during an air raid ... listening to pinging noises interspersed with bangs. Eva [Doris’s sister] was crouched by [Mum’s] side, trembling and hiding her face in Mum’s skirt. ‘It’s alright, it’s only shrapnel on the tin roof opposite,’ comforted Mum, but I sensed her fear and cried bitterly.”<sup>270</sup> People must have wondered if it was their turn, if the bomb was going to land near them this time. The market the Abley family probably frequented, at the head of Roman Road, was the site of one such bombing, in March of 1915. No one was

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<sup>267</sup> The idea for this first appeared in print in the 1920s, but it was attributed to innovations taken during the Great War. It would be revived in World War II, when the popular pamphlet “Make Do and Mend” was widely circulated by the War Office. It contained many tips for reusing and recycling clothing past its first usage.

<sup>268</sup> Hand-me-downs were common in the area prior to the war. As children outgrew their clothing, it would be taken down, taken out, or passed down to the next in line. By the time the youngest in the family received it, it might have been repaired and tailored so many times that the original shape would be indistinguishable.

<sup>269</sup> Chausseaud, *Mapping London*, 212.

<sup>270</sup> Bailey, *Children of the Green*, 13.

killed, but the effect was terrifying. Rumors and stories of air raids caught London's ears afire with gossip, and it quickly became disproportionately false. Little information was given to the press, for fear it would damage the morale of citizens.<sup>271</sup>

Bethnal Green showed a precipitous drop in births during the Great War. From 4,008 live births recorded in 1913, they slid to 2,220 births in 1918. Deaths among the civilian population were stable for the beginning of the war, down from an average of 2,250 per year for the decade prior. In 1917 and 1918, deaths would drop to 1,764 and 1,675 respectively. The anomalous year is 1919, when 2,488 deaths were recorded in Bethnal Green. In addition to bombings and the stripping of life's finery, by 1918 London was the British epicenter of the Spanish Flu. Numerous strains of the incredibly infectious virus influenza had swept through London year after year during the war. In the spring of 1918, "the Grippe" began as a complaint among soldiers at the front in France. It was a three day affair, consisting of a headache and sore throat, occasional vomiting, and a fever. It was transmitted easily, through water, touch, the air, and throughout the trenches across Europe. It passed quickly to the mainland, as soldiers were billeted home for injuries, reaching London by June of 1918. It was a global pandemic by the end of the year. Information on it was suppressed in the media, also for morale reasons. Reporters were free to discuss Spain's influenza epidemic, however, giving rise to the nickname "Spanish Flu."<sup>272</sup> Records were never made public of who did and did not die from it, as the numbers were staggering. Many who passed away from the flu were treated at home, reducing the number of doctors who saw the disease. Many dead from the flu were buried quickly, to help

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<sup>271</sup> It may have been intended to boost morale, but in the East End, it served to further divide many, who felt that their deaths were not important enough to be noticed by the government or noted by newspapers.

<sup>272</sup> The influenza epidemic in allies could potentially have damaged morale. Spain, which had declared itself neutral, was fair game for newspapers.

prevent the spread of the infection to other family members. While little to no information came through official channels, the people of London knew of the killer flu. There was a popular rhyme in London for it:

I had a little bird  
Its name was Enza  
I opened the window  
And In-flu-enza

Unlike other epidemics, it struck mostly at the young, between the ages of five and thirty-five. Florence Maud, Ben's wife, was just thirty-two years old when she died in December of 1918. There were 1,263 deaths in London that month from the flu. By the end of the epidemic, there were a total of 16,520 deaths in London.<sup>273</sup> Florence left behind her barely one year old son Benjamin, and her husband. Ben may have relied on Sarah to help mind Benjamin, as he was back at work at the post office. Mary Anne and Emily still lived at 15 Wennington Road as well. Perhaps little Benjamin was a comfort to his grandmother, who had lost her son and husband.

At the end of the war, the family returned to their respective places. Ben remarried on the 17<sup>th</sup> of October, 1921. Alice May Morton was an Islington girl. They married in a civil ceremony in Bethnal Green, then a church service at St Matthias in Islington. Alice was five years Ben's junior. He had a young son in tow, who would have no memory of his mother. They set up in Islington, living for a short time with her family before moving into their own place. Constance was born to them in 1923.

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<sup>273</sup> Jay Winter, Jean-Louis Robert, *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin, 1914-1919* Vol I (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 481.

### **Love Shall Tread Out the Baleful Fires of Anger & in its Ashes Plant the Tree of Peace**

Thus reads the inscription for a memorial dedicated to the men of Mace Street and Tagg Street, in the north-east area of Bethnal Green, lost in the Great War. It was one of many. They decorated the inside and outside of churches, cast shadows on sidewalks from the side of a building, appeared in front of civic buildings, etched into the sides of other buildings. In all, some thirty-odd memorials were created for the Great War dead. Estimates of casualties for Bethnal Green natives during the time of the Great War place deaths of men, women, and children at 11,000. This included casualties of the Zeppelin bombings and military.<sup>274</sup> The Public Library at Barmy Park introduced a scroll at its opening for Great War military dead from Bethnal Green. Three memorial windows were dedicated in honor of the fallen of World War I, entitled Motherhood, Manhood, and Peace. “Peace hath her victories, no less renowned than war,” read the inscription at the base of the cross in the Memorial Garden out front of the library. This is the only place in Bethnal Green that still holds a memory of John Thomas, and sadly, his name is spelled wrong, his rank eradicated, and only his regiment mentioned. His church, St Barnabas, lost so many young men in the Great War that it opted for a generic inscription.

The library list is the most complete list of names of military casualties for Bethnal Green, but no true list is complete. A number of memorials were destroyed or lost as a result of World War II, while a fair number have been relocated to safer or still-existing locations. Only fourteen names are listed on the Library scroll from Wennington Road, Grove Road, and Ashwell Road. Perhaps they were the lucky ones, and they did not lose as many men as other areas. Places like Cyprus Street, Mace Street, and Tagg Street had lost so many that their named

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<sup>274</sup> Bethnal Green Medical Officer of Health Report, 1919.

dead on the scroll represented almost one quarter of the total 1,300 names.<sup>275</sup> Of the names on the list, all but seventy-two were for years between 1914 and 1919, totaling 1,264. In 1920, sixteen more men died. In 1921, only six. In 1922, five died. The remaining forty-five honored on the roll have their death dates left blank. It is the common assumption that they represent World War II dead, and that it is not a complete list. Applications were made by surviving family, of which there might not be any.<sup>276</sup>

The money for Bethnal Green memorials was most often raised by public subscription. The hat came out at the pub for ‘dear old Johnny down the way,’ whose poor old mum could not afford the fees. There were folk-songs sung about the heroes from Bethnal Green. Children sold tickets door-to-door in an effort to procure as much funding as possible.<sup>277</sup> Widows and family had their Dead Man’s Penny, their son’s or husbands medals, often awarded posthumously. It was a war to be remembered, commemorated, and never repeated. Cyprus Street commemorated

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<sup>275</sup> Information recorded from Cyprus, Tagg, Mace Street, as well as the Bethnal Green Public Library Honor Rolls can be found online at <http://www.bethnalgreenwarmemorials.com>, an amateur project attempting to gain as much information about Bethnal Green War Memorials as possible. The Mace and Tagg Street memorials were combined and remounted at the corner of Bonner and Hartley Roads after a London Blitz bomb destroyed parts of the street and it was redesigned in 1950s efforts to renovate war damage. The Bethnal Green Public Library Honor Roll was created at the behest of librarians, who drew up the initial list of Great War dead from official records. They accepted petitions from family members for people born in Bethnal Green who had died overseas, but were not residents of Bethnal Green, a total of 29 people. The names represent 11,336 total including as many recorded military deaths of Bethnal Green residents from 1914 to 1946.

The unusual number of war memorials in areas set up as model dwellings (in comparison to Boundary Estates, which had none, or other areas of private interest) attests to the close kinship networks that these buildings shared, as well as the concentration of population into philanthropic model dwellings.

<sup>276</sup> Delores Peters, Bethnal Green librarian, historian, “Bethnal Green Public Library History,” oral interview conducted by author on March 6, 2014.

<sup>277</sup> Dorothea Roberts, “Collecting History: London in the First World War” by *BBC Productions* Imperial War Museum Sound Archive.

the brave souls to “marching with their comrades somewhere on the road ahead,” a road that all must walk one day.

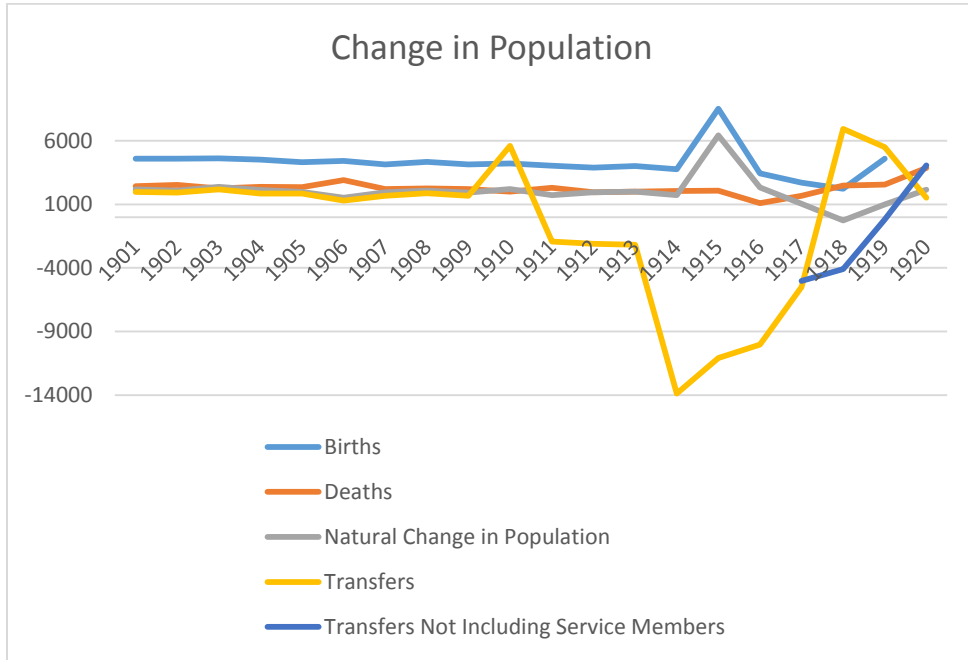


Fig. 14: Change in Population, 1901-1921

## THE INTERWAR PERIOD AND AFTER

Britain began an economic slump in the early 1920s. Men returning home from war found it difficult to obtain jobs. The wartime economy of production was over, closing down many businesses. England owed great sums of money to the Americans, who had financed much of England's war. As economic conditions worsened, jobs became scarcer. Bethnal Green had a long tradition of father-son and mother-daughter occupational continuity, which changed after the Great War. Only 26.2 percent of sons followed their father into occupations in interwar Bethnal Green.<sup>278</sup> Many found jobs in factories producing new products.

After the Great War, more population movement in the East End made for a more diverse crowd in Bethnal Green. Bethnal Green first began to claim a native son then, Walter Tull (born in the Bonner Road orphanage), the first black outfield pro-footballer. He fought in the Great War, becoming the first British-born black man to do so. He died at the Second Battle of Somme in 1918.<sup>279</sup> A kosher restaurant, Bloom's, opened in Brick Lane in 1920.<sup>280</sup> The first Asian grocery store, Taj, was opened in Brick Lane in 1930.<sup>281</sup> The 1920s also saw an upswing in birth rates, beginning with the post-war-inflated 3,855 live births in 1920. It saw a slow drift of people away from Bethnal Green towards other East End locations, such as Hackney and Islington. Both were considered "better" than Bethnal Green, for neither had ever had the problems of overcrowding and poverty that Bethnal Green had. Hackney particularly was considered the nicest part of the East End. It was located just across Victoria Park, providing continuing access to that social venue. The rent rate was the same as in Bethnal Green. Other

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<sup>278</sup> Dudley Baines and Paul Johnson, "In Search of the 'Traditional' Working Class: Social Mobility and Occupational Continuity in Interwar London" from *The Economic History Review* 52, no 4 (Nov 1999), 709.

<sup>279</sup> Gordon, *Little Book of the East End*, 39.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid*, 62.



parts of the East End and central London were easily accessible through new transit lines. Those who could maintain easy travel routes to work moved if able.

Other things had not changed. The Museum, still ailing, closed for the duration of the war. The gifts to royalty which still cluttered its space were too valuable to put at risk. Every man was needed, and none could be spared to provide proper security.<sup>282</sup> When it reopened, the same dusty, dreary exhibits greeted the people. It was only in 1922 that new exhibitions came in which would forecast the future of the Museum. Arthur Sabin was appointed the curator, and he brought enthusiasm to the task. Sabin saw that the principal occupants of the space were “bored, noisy children” and sought to bring them into the Museum. He planned special exhibitions for them, and began to clear out the clutter.<sup>283</sup> Perhaps he worked hand-in-hand with the energetic librarians less than a block away. George Vale, the children’s librarian, would likely have some suggestions on children’s exhibits.

### **George Vale: East Ender Done Well**

George Frederick Vale was born in Bethnal Green around 1891. His entire family, including his mother, father, siblings, and grandparents, were born in Bethnal Green. His family moved to Hackney in the 1890s, probably following the brass molding jobs which his father held. Thomas, the father, had started in brass foundry, but following the press of manufacturing, he also followed the factories out of Bethnal Green. In 1901, he, his wife, and his daughter were living in Hackney. The sons were all away from the house, probably living with kin in Bethnal Green, completing their education or pursuing their jobs. After Thomas Vale died in 1907, however, the boys came back home to support the household.

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<sup>282</sup> *Victoria and Albert Museum of Childhood Official History*, 1.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*

George Vale's two older brothers followed their father into rough work, in rubber manufacturing and mining, but George decided instead to begin his career as a librarian. At only twelve years old, in 1903, Vale enrolled in a course at St. Bride Institute. He began work in the Stepney Library in 1905 and was soon delivering lectures on the subject of Juvenile Libraries at the Institute. In 1906, at fifteen years old, he was elected the third Assistant Librarian at Whitechapel, having been a noted Junior Assistant at St George Stepney previously. He was clearly intelligent and far-reaching: in 1907, he presented a paper to the Assistant Librarian Association Meeting. By 1911, Vale was a library assistant, employed by the Borough Council, and living with his mother and siblings in Homerton, a section of London further east than Bethnal Green.

Then in 1919 Vale was elected as sub-librarian to the Bethnal Green Library starter location at 1 Old Ford Road.<sup>284</sup> By 1919, the London County Council and School Board of London maintained twenty-four schools in Bethnal Green, with an enrollment of 24,949. There were seven parochial schools as well, all but one Anglican, with 2,985 children enrolled.<sup>285</sup> Three secondary schools existed, and a plethora of technical schools had opened. Bethnal Green Free Library was still in existence in London Street. Educational opportunities in the Borough would reach their peak in the following decade. George, in the meantime, soon became children's librarian and, in 1934 Chief Librarian. Bethnal Green Free Library closed in 1934, but the location and inventory were taken over by the Borough library, ending the long-term struggle between space and usefulness. Bethnal Green had four branch locations in 1934, including London Street, over which George presided. In addition to assuming control of the Free Library,

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<sup>284</sup> Stanley Snaith, "George F. Vale and the A.A.L." in *The Assistant Librarian* 54, no. 4 (April 1961), 83.

<sup>285</sup> The exception was a Roman Catholic school opened in 1871.

Bethnal Green reorganized its educational charities in 1933, lumping together all the educational portions with the parochial schools.<sup>286</sup> Derek Houghton attended St Peter's school, a former farmhouse at the end of St Peter's Close. Mr. Loft, the caretaker of the boys' school, would ring his bell every morning, to mark the first call to classes. Children came from all surrounding neighborhoods. There was no long commute from one school to another, as each Anglican school was required to adhere to specific standards. St Peter's school had experienced some hardship at the beginning of the century, spending more money than it had to be brought up to the educational standards of the London County Council. "Boys and girls were in separate classrooms, girls downstairs, boys at the top, and in 1908, the school was known to have 500 scholars."<sup>287</sup> Education had advanced significantly by the time that Derek entered school. He would have been only the second generation in his family to read, but the children turned out of schoolyards in Bethnal Green read in droves. Parochial schools operated on a slightly different schedule than civic schools; there children entered at three and left at twelve years of age.<sup>288</sup> They had summers and Church feast days off, and the end of long holidays were greeted with special delight by caretakers. Derek's Gran "put [her] hands together the day [they went] back" to school. It was a relief for the parents to send their children to school, for it freed up time in the day to work or perform necessary chores. Schooling combined with access to institutions of higher learning, including the public library, to provide something beyond what Derek's parents' generation had gained. Derek vividly recalled walks to the library, "along Bethnal Green Road

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<sup>286</sup> Six charities were combined in this scheme, which essentially pooled funds to maintain the parochial schools.

<sup>287</sup> Anonymous, *The Story of St Peter's Church in Bethnal Green* (London: St. Peter's Publications, 1957), 3.

<sup>288</sup> Houghton, *A Bethnal Green Memoir*, 72.

via the Salmon and Ball public house.”<sup>289</sup> His grandmother, by contrast, remembered “she used to see the inmates in the grounds [of Barmy Park], making faces behind the wire fencing at whoever looked in.”<sup>290</sup> Many of the older generation were enamored of this new project.

Burly and brusque, George Vale was a bluff Cockney and a great enthusiast for Bethnal Green’s library. He wrote extensively on the subject of librarianship. His writing is that of an erstwhile suitor of the library, and it is worth noting that he never married. Stanley Snaith, a longtime friend and one of Vale’s assistant librarians, wrote in Vale’s obituary that “librarianship [for him] was not merely a living, but a way of living.”<sup>291</sup> In 1934, Vale also published *Old Bethnal Green, etc.* An “attractive little volume,” it was well-received in the library world.<sup>292</sup>

The library that Vale loved was the result of a long-delayed prewar project. In 1912, the Bethnal Green Borough Council had approved a public library scheme, but its implementation was interrupted by the Great War. In 1919, however, the Council leased two buildings on Old Ford Road as temporary housing and bought the property on the corner of Cambridge-Heath Road and Roman Road, and renovations began for the first of its kind library, a model project for other Boroughs to follow. George became the children’s librarian at Bethnal Green’s new and grandly ambitious project. It succeeded beyond anyone’s expectation. Connected to the British Library, it was the first fully funded public library in London. Until this point, there was no national library system of any kind, no borrowing or lending to other institutions, no overseeing Council in London. Bethnal Green Public Library thus set an important national precedent.

The house in which the Bethnal Green Public Library was situated had a long history with the people of Bethnal Green. A private mental institution that opened in 1727, Kirby’s

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<sup>289</sup> *Ibid*, 80.

<sup>290</sup> Houghton, *A Bethnal Green Memoir*, 80.

<sup>291</sup> George F. Vale, “Editorial” in *The Library World* 36 (July 1933-June 1934), 225.

<sup>292</sup> “Notes” in *The Library World* 36 (July 1933-June 1934), 246.

Castle possessed extensive grounds, including “Barmy Park,” and the whole block behind it. Locals recalled pressing their faces to the wrought iron fence surrounding it, hoping to catch a glimpse of the insane inhabitants.<sup>293</sup> Bit by bit, the asylum began to sell land surrounding it. It relocated outside of Bethnal Green in 1922, after the development of estates behind it by the Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green Board threatened the privacy of the patients. (Bednall House, the main building, was used to house German prisoners during the Great War.<sup>294</sup>) When it purchased three wings of Kirby Castle for the library, the Bethnal Green Borough Council also purchased Barmy Park and promised to preserve the landscaping and walks. The grounds were beautiful, with tall, old oaks gracefully bowing over the neatly clipped hedges, graveled paths, and flower beds. The library opened in 1922, and featured the dedication of a memorial cross. The three wings had been transformed into a west-facing, brick-fronted façade of respectability. The opening was arched with stained-glass windows. (Blown out in the Blitz, the windows now serve as memorials for the dead in both wars.) Once inside, there was a small lobby. Doors led off it in every direction, two to the main reading room (one former wing), and to the two other wings on each side. Each was a reading room, one featuring London newspapers, with deep plush chairs to accommodate readers. The other featured the children’s wing. The front and side of the buildings comprised large panes of glass, allowing a great deal of natural light in.

By the time the library opened, Bethnal Green’s first generation of children with a consistent and relatively high rate of literacy was about twenty five years old, while the first generation to achieve high ratings in school attendance was about fifteen. The use of books in

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<sup>293</sup> One of whom, subject to fits, was tied into a pigsty until she calmed down. Once she was calmed, her ankles were banded together, allowing her to walk in a shuffling gait across the walkways.

<sup>294</sup> Gordon, *Little Book of the East End*, 88.

the library between 1922 and 1948 totaled more than 11 million checkouts.<sup>295</sup> The purpose of the children's library was lending, so dawdling was not necessarily encouraged. Despite this, visiting the library was a real treat for children. It was warm and inviting, possibly because of the hardworking energy of George Vale.

Vale published three books before 1939, in addition to building the main library up to 60,000 volumes. His publication record betrays his passion for Bethnal Green and its children, as well as his library. His works included *The Legend of the Blind Beggar's Daughter of Bethnal Green* (1933), *Old Bethnal Green, etc.* (1934, republished by Bethnal Green Borough Council in 1949), and *London Fairy Tales* (1937). He had been the Borough librarian for three years, but his past as a children's librarian still showed in his writing. It showed again in an article he wrote in 1939 for *Library Association Record*, on the selection of materials for a children's department.

### **Interwar Housing**

London County Council resumed its schedule of building and rebuilding after the war, enabled by housing acts passed in 1925, 1930, and 1935. The 1921 Census showed a decline of 10,000 people, but despite that, Bethnal Green was still overcrowded.<sup>296</sup> Housing units were falling into disrepair, and the old slums had still not been routed. Slum clearance was less abrupt than before. London County Council now bought the land, moved tenants to other housing units which would be reconstructed later, and tore down the eyesores. The shuffling of residents was offset by the newly developed places.<sup>297</sup> Private companies followed through with a number of

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<sup>295</sup> George F. Vale, *Old Bethnal Green* (London: Blythenhaele Press, 1934), 42.

<sup>296</sup> Change in population, including natural change and transfers, amounted to more than 25,000 people. High birthrates at the beginning and end of the war offset this.

<sup>297</sup> Particularly evident in the Brady Street scheme. The Borough was ordered to comply with the 1890 Housing Act in 1913, regarding the Brady Street area. Development was delayed

private building projects in the area as well. In these circumstances, families “could move when and where [they] liked. [They] just popped [their] things on a wheelbarrow and went off to another house around the corner.”<sup>298</sup> Council projects were named after famous locals, in homage to great literary giants, and for political movements.<sup>299</sup> One block of flats was named after a Bethnal Green resident who was a recipient of the Victoria Cross. A Bethnal Green Borough Council project completed in 1927 was named the “Lenin Estate,” for the late Soviet leader.<sup>300</sup> There were 1,600 applicants for thirty-two flats, at between 18 and 21 shillings per week. It is interesting to note that the rent rate of these flats was the same marker which Charles Booth had defined as “just barely sufficient for decent independent life” in 1891, and the condition of more than 80 percent of Bethnal Green residents then.<sup>301</sup> The rent rate across Bethnal Green began to stabilize, as more philanthropic companies pushed for consistent rates. The London County Council agreed, and forced other government subsidiaries to comply as well. Housing in Bethnal Green was the most stable in the interwar period during the early 1920s, when the money was scarce to work on vast new projects. By 1930, Bethnal Green Borough Council and London County Council had enacted six out of the eight projects over the previous decade.

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by the war. The decision to tear down all north-facing buildings, and move residents to south-facing buildings when possible, was ridiculed by locals.

<sup>298</sup> Anthea Holme, *Housing and Young Families in East London* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 20.

<sup>299</sup> Burns, Milton, Moore, Morris, Shelley, Swinburne, and Whitman Houses opened east of Bethnal Green Public Library were built 1922-24. After the war, Bethnal Green Borough Council would add Keats, Hughes, Dawson, and Rogers Houses.

<sup>300</sup> “London ‘Reds’ Open Fine Apartments: ‘Lenin Estate,’ Bethnal Green, Built by Borough Council in Slums” in *The Montreal Gazette* (Aug 29, 1927). The estate was renamed Cambridge-Heath Estate the following year, when the Communist-Socialist Party lost control of the Borough Council.

<sup>301</sup> Ross, *Slum Travelers*, 284.



Fig. 15: Smith Poverty Map 1928<sup>302</sup>

H. Llewellyn Smith, a student and confidant of Charles Booth, attempted to recreate Booth's data beginning in 1928. Smith had worked on the original project with Charles Booth. From his multi-volume set, a clear picture of interwar Bethnal Green emerges. It was a sea of blues and pinks, with purple smudges and spots of black, much like in Booth's map. However, pink was the dominant color, and blues, purples, and blacks had grown smaller with the passing years. The area west of Cambridge-Heath Road was now the most impoverished and crime-ridden. The people were predominantly in the business of furniture, and outworking was largely a tailoring trade now.<sup>303</sup> Bethnal Green was still third in poverty standings of London Boroughs, but at only 18 percent of the population in 1928, it was a far cry from the 44 percent recorded by

<sup>302</sup> H. Llewellyn Smith, *The New Survey of London Life and Labour, Forty Years of Change* 1, no. 3 (London: P.S.King and Son Ltd., 1931), Appendix.

<sup>303</sup> H. Llewellyn Smith, *The New Survey of London Life and Labour, Forty Years of Change* 1, no. 1 (London: P.S.King and Son Ltd., 1931), 340.



Booth forty years before.<sup>304</sup> The number of people in unstable to stable circumstance, the first level above poverty, rose from 51 percent to 80 percent.<sup>305</sup> With the introduction of old-age pension acts beginning in 1908 and carrying through to 1924, the disposition of the elderly was much improved.<sup>306</sup> The School Board had thirty-one schools, with an average of 750 students per school. They also had 164 public houses, “one to 660 of the population.”<sup>307</sup> Overcrowding had spread evenly throughout the Borough. The largest group of impoverished still lived in the north-west corner of Bethnal Green, between Bethnal Green Road and Hackney Road. The majority of north-east residents lived with one to one-and-a-quarter people per room (25,728), and the south-west at 30,333 in the same category. The average number of people per room in north-east Bethnal Green was 1.28 per room, and 1.4 in the south-west.<sup>308</sup> Even in 1930, the effects of slum clearance could be felt, as “some of the smaller patches of poverty and degradation on the present maps are the direct outcome of the dispersion of larger slum areas which have been cleared and rebuilt by public authorities. Many of the displaced inhabitants of the slum have dispersed to form new but smaller and usually less marked and less persistent nuclei of poverty.”<sup>309</sup> Overall, as with most of London, conditions in Bethnal Green for the majority of residents showed a marked improvement over conditions in 1891.

The 1930s brought a wave of suburban building, especially in Dagenham and Becontree.<sup>310</sup> The outward push from Bethnal Green continued unabated. Between 1931 and

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<sup>304</sup> Smith, *The New Survey*, 345.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid*, 151.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid*, 214. Pensions had long existed in the area, but were largely tied to specific employment, and affected only a small number of people.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid*, 345.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid*, 236.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid*, 140.

<sup>310</sup> Ruth Glass, *London: Aspects of Change* (London: Centre for Urban Studies, 1964), 78.

1955, more than 40,000 Bethnal Green residents were relocated to these suburban housing estates.<sup>311</sup> It was overcrowded, although less so than in the early 1900s. It still “ranked as the third worst Borough in London in regards to density of population per acre and per room, and also for overcrowding.”<sup>312</sup> There were 78,466 rooms available in Bethnal Green according to the 1931 Census. It averaged to four rooms per dwelling in Bethnal Green. The north and east end of Bethnal Green, long the least overcrowded part, now contained 55 percent of the rooms in the Borough. The east end also now included Booth’s lowest category, ‘degraded and semi-criminal,’ showing the “deterioration in the east.”<sup>313</sup> Of the total population in 1928, 59 percent lived in purple, blue, or a mixture of the two. There were small patches of black located along Cambridge-Heath Road and in the northern area of Bethnal Green. The rest of the area was pink. Of the 224 total independent houses, only five were privately owned.<sup>314</sup> The Medical Officer of Health in 1931 noted that “at the same rate of progress, it will be another 80 years before overcrowding is abolished.”<sup>315</sup> Robert Sinclair wrote of Bethnal Green in 1937: “for one new block of flats in Bethnal Green 225 families applied; their 1214 members were living in 361 rooms, an average of 3.3 per room irrespective of age or sex.”<sup>316</sup> Dagenham and Becontree were quickly being linked to London by transit lines as well. Of these developments, it was noted that “loss of time and cost of traveling still harass workers there; they are kept poor from this and other causes, and new slums develop.”<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> Baines and Johnson, “In Search of the ‘Traditional’ Working Class”, 710.

<sup>312</sup> Smith, *The New Survey*, 136.

<sup>313</sup> T.F.T. Baker, “Bethnal Green and Social Conditions from 1915 to 1945” in *A History of the County of Middlesex 11, Stepney, Bethnal Green* (London: 1998), 132.

<sup>314</sup> Smith, *The New Survey III*, 347.

<sup>315</sup> Vynne Borland, “Report of the Bethnal Green Medical Officer of Health, 1932”, 112

<sup>316</sup> S. Vere Pearson, *London’s Overgrowth and the Causes of Swollen Towns* (London: The C.W. Daniel Company Ltd, 1939), 105.

<sup>317</sup> Pearson, *London’s Overgrowth*, 79.

There were eight slum clearances in Bethnal Green from 1930 to 1940, all enacted by the London County Council. Twenty-five more model dwellings would be added over the decade, most enacted by the Borough Council. The population of Bethnal Green was thinning out, slowly but surely. The addition of suburban housing by London County Council enabled them to clear the slum residents out of Bethnal Green. While great progress had been made, it was not enough. New plans were placed on hold in 1938, and previously enacted plans stopped in 1939. One such plan, the London County Council's attempt to fix the corner of Cambridge-Heath Road and Hackney Road, was placed on hold for the duration of the war. Of the 2,170 flats planned, 1,830 had been built.

Factories were moving out of Bethnal Green, however. They moved “for up-to-date factory buildings, with ample floor space on one level ... [which] have often ... been the chief attraction of the outer suburbs.”<sup>318</sup> Jobs in Bethnal Green after the war were portable, and the “work in Bethnal Green, live in Bethnal Green” of the early 1900s was gone. In 1921, one third of all workers in Bethnal Green “left the borough daily to work elsewhere.”<sup>319</sup> The suburban dwelling moved residents to a new area, and fundamentally changed their social outlook: “the friendliness of Bethnal Green [was] replaced by a new standoffishness, the window-to-window relationship of suburbia and its exclusiveness.”<sup>320</sup>

Food, perhaps the most important of resources to families in Bethnal Green, was becoming more abundant. Despite the loss of some backyard supplements, the children of Bethnal Green were eating better than their parents had at the same age. In 1932, the Medical

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<sup>318</sup> Pearson, *London's Overgrowth*, 38.

<sup>319</sup> Smith, *The New Survey III*, 346.

<sup>320</sup> C. Fraser Brockington, “Bethnal Green to Greenleigh: a review of *Family and Kinship in East London* by Michael Young: Peter Wilmott” from *The British Medical Journal* 2, no 5046 (Sep 21, 1957), 687.

Officer of Health for Bethnal Green reported that “a large proportion of the population are living at an extremely low level” of nutrition which affected their health.<sup>321</sup> Leonard Findlay, a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, published a dissenting report in 1937. He had tested the blood of 290 patients admitted at Queen Elizabeth of York Hospital in the past two years, all children under the age of 14 of lower class laborers. He used both healthy and unhealthy children for his study. What he found was that no cases of exceptional anemia or irregular blood counts, hallmarks of malnutrition, were present in the blood samples.<sup>322</sup> Food was coming ready-made now, for women often did not have the time to cook. Kelly’s opened its first pie and mash shop in Bethnal Green Road in 1915, and another was opened in 1930 on the same road.<sup>323</sup>

The children of Bethnal Green were growing taller than prior generations as well. Bethnal Green was often used as a type of laboratory, measuring the health effects of programs implemented in the East End. It had two teaching hospitals, a Nursing School, and a number of other institutions offering reduced rate health care in exchange for use as subject of examinations. In August of 1929, Queen’s Hospital for Children in Bethnal Green offered all-day courses in diseases, promising “operations, demonstrations, and lectures” with the residents of Bethnal Green on display.<sup>324</sup> Derek Houghton, for example, recalled that after his sister caught scabies, and it spread rapidly throughout the family, his aunt May took them to St Bartholomew’s Hospital in Smithfield, an educational institute similar to those of Bethnal Green. There, they

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<sup>321</sup> S. Leff, “Nutrition” from *The British Medical Journal* 1, no 3830 (Jun 2, 1934), 1006-7

<sup>322</sup> Leonard Finlay, “Nutritional Anaemia in the East End of London” from *The British Medical Journal* 1, no 3965 (Jan 2, 1937), 13.

<sup>323</sup> Gordon, *Little Book of the East End*, 47.

<sup>324</sup> “Medical News” from *The British Medical Journal* 2, no 3578 (Aug 3, 1929), 228.

were paraded before a whole class of medical students. The next thing we knew, we were all undressed and led into a lecture hall, totally starkers on a platform, staring out at forty to fifty students, while the lecturing doctor pointed with his stick at the sores on our bodies! I felt very uncomfortable and embarrassed.<sup>325</sup>

Upkeep on old projects was becoming expensive. Bethnal Green had received gas in the 1870s, but it was only on major streets, and it was not connected to many houses. Small gas lines began to be developed in the nicer areas, but still many houses remained unconnected to it. In 1923, a gas pipe in Bethnal Green broke. It was the subject of a series of articles and an inquest. Three people in Gales Gardens [just west of Cambridge-Heath Road] were found dead in their beds from coal gas poisoning. It was an unusual case, for “those poor people were dead in their beds, [whereas] there was no gas laid on to the particular house they occupied.”<sup>326</sup> The questions which occupied the large crowd waiting for the results of the inquest were numerous, but perhaps most pressing was, why had the pipe broken? It was uncertain whether the pipes laid would need to be dug up right away, before more such calamities occurred. The company which maintained the line said that the cause was the settling of the dirt around the pipe, and that the pipe had been sound. The race now was to modernize the area, providing gas and running water to all residents. This required more renovation than it did new building, and it was mostly at public expense. Percy Harris, the MP from Bethnal Green, had roused the call to action for the gas leak in 1923, because as he saw it: “the tragedy happened in a very poor street in a very poor borough, probably one of the poorest streets in London. If it had been a wealthy neighbourhood and the people had been well-to-do probably there would have been powerful organisations putting their point of view forward.”<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> Derek Houghton, *A Bethnal Green Memoir: Recollections of Life in the 1930s-1950s* (Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2009), 76.

<sup>326</sup> “Bethnal Green Gas Tragedy: Inquest Proceedings: Escape Due to Fractured Main Pipe” from *The Glasgow Herald* (Jan 4, 1923), 9.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*

## Catching up with the Ableys

In 1919 Frederick took over as the head of household at 15 Wennington Road, where he would live until 1935. Emily and Mary Anne still lived there, as did Sarah. Sarah may have collected a pension from her husband's occupation, as well as a Mother's Pension provided by the Bethnal Green Borough Council.<sup>328</sup> Mary Anne passed away at the age of 86 in December of



Fig. 16: Wennington Road Smith Map 1928

1927. In 1929, Mary and Maud appeared on the register rolls for the household for the first time, after the enfranchisement of women in 1928. In September of 1931, Maud married William Hodgson, a Bethnal Green native.

William's younger sister Florence Lucy Hodgson moved in with the Abley household, and they probably moved into William's

family house. By 1934, however, they were back in the house.

Economically, the area was worsening. The old-school artisanal trade was beginning to move out of the East End, and Wennington Road was becoming populated with more of the factory and sweated jobs. The income relied on Frederic, who worked in factories. The next few years saw big changes at 15 Wennington Road as Frederick married Lilian Rose in June of 1935

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<sup>328</sup> Henry Bentinck Lytton, et al, "Mother's Pensions" in *The British Medical Journal* 1, no 3031 (Feb. 1, 1919), 143-4. "Over 120 metropolitan, town, and urban district councils ...including Bethnal Green ... have passed resolutions in favour of the adoption of [Mother's Pensions] and urging on the Prime Minister and the Minister of Reconstruction its immediate promotion" – it was resolved in 1920 that those seeking assistance on these grounds could receive a stipend from the Bethnal Green Borough Council if the government did not provide it – Sarah is additionally listed on the electoral register rolls in 1922 as being eligible to vote based on her husband's occupation, despite his having passed away. It can be inferred that his job held some sort of pension in practice for widows.

and the new couple moved to Hackney, where they set up in a household of three couples and Lilian's father on Grove Lane. William was now the head of household at 15 Wennington Road where he and Maud continued to live until 1938. They had contributed the majority of the household's income and so in 1939, Mary and Emily took on a boarder, James Thomas Potts. Despite the strained household economics, it is likely they had pets. "Men, women and children lived with animals and birds, which they enthusiastically bought, sold, bred, compared, kept, raced, betted on and ate."<sup>329</sup> James had lived on neighboring Gardeners Road, and his references would have been easily verifiable.



Fig. 17: Wennington Road 1940 Ordnance<sup>330</sup>

Benjamin Matthews, the son of Florence and Ben, completed school and followed his father into the post office. In May of 1936, he was elected to the position of letter sorter. His father had progressed in the company, and had become a postman manager in 1934. Benjamin Matthew followed his father further, joining the military when the Second World War broke out. His early military experiences probably echoed that of another Bethnal Green man, Jason Stuart, who joined the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Tower Hamlet Rifles. Stuart recalled that:

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<sup>329</sup> Ross, *The Romance of Bethnal Green*, 21.

<sup>330</sup> Courtesy of the Tower Hamlets Archive

We ... gathered together from the East End of London ... we were 'called up' on the 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939. We were fully equipped, therefore we were told to take our rifles home and not to hand them back to the Armoury. We reported for duty the next day ... having said tearful farewells to Mums and Sweethearts, we were marched out of the Drill Hall on Tredegar Road Bow [to] about four hundred yards away from where we started, where our loved ones had just waved us goodbye. We were there for two whole months ... then we were taken to Swindon ... months rolled by, and we were training, training all the time, in the fine arts of a mechanized army, though sadly, we did not yet have our vehicles.<sup>331</sup>

It was 1942 before he would set foot on foreign soil to face the enemy. Benjamin Matthews was recommended for award for his service as a sergeant in the Field Ambulance Medical Corps, serving in the Middle East. None of Ben's sisters or brothers had produced their next generation yet. Maud would be the next to do so, in 1941. She had a daughter in June of that year. She and her husband had moved to a single family residence in Hackney in 1939.

#### **Doris M Bailey, nee Clark**

Doris lived in a cul-de-sac not unlike the Abley's, a little further down Grove Road. She was a regular attendee of Victoria Park Baptist Church, two doors down from Saint Barnabas. She attended Olga Street School, near the south-east tip of Bethnal Green. She was from a 'poor but proud' family, and any smudge of poverty was quickly cleaned up.

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<sup>331</sup> Jason Stuart, "To Sleep Perchance to Dream" from *BBC WW2 People's War*, 1.





Fig. 18: Smith Map 1928; East End<sup>332</sup>

‘Nitty Norah,’ the Borough nurse who inspected for lice and bed bugs, came around to the Olga Street School once monthly. She was

a thin and angular woman, hair scragged tightly into a bun, with a large round navy hat that firmly pulled onto her head and a starched white nurse’s uniform. Her lips were set in a continuous snarl and her nose twitched as though assailed by a permanent nasty smell ... the nit nurse, on an everlasting hunt for head lice, had the least enviable job of all. No wonder she was such a sour creature ... she would lift our hair, peer at our scalps and then utter, one, two, or three in a sepulchral tone and the teacher would write it in her book.<sup>333</sup>

On one such occasion, Doris was rated a three, meaning that she was infested. She knew it had to have been a mistake, and when she looked around, she saw a girl with the same name who should have been in her place. There was no fighting the number, however, and Doris “sat in the dirty block and shrank from everyone, trying hard not to cry.”<sup>334</sup>

The worst was yet to come that day. She had to go home, separated from her friends, forced to walk with the other threes. She walked home that day with Tilly Goat, who seemed

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<sup>332</sup> Smith, *Forty Years of Change* 1, no. 3, Appendix.

<sup>333</sup> Bailey, *Children of the Green*, 5.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

slow to her, dirty, and poor. Doris lived in the court at the end of Hamilton Road, and they were protective of their turf. She left Tilly at the turnoff to her street, slogging the last few steps home, likely trying to spin out the time before going home. When Doris's mother heard about the three, she went spare. It was a wicked sin, a "three!" she shrieked, dashing up the passage and slamming the door. "Shut up, all the court'll hear you!" Doris thought it unlikely that they wouldn't know anyways, with three girls from her school living on the same street. "You can't have three, you can't" [Doris's mother] cried in distress. "Your Dad'll kill me."<sup>335</sup> Doris was scrubbed within an inch of her life with Lysol and hot water. The next morning, her mother brought her back to the school to demand another check. This time, Doris successfully received her normal 'one,' and was allowed to resume her seat.

When Doris was sent home with a "three," it was her mother who went up to the school, "clutching her leather shopping bag in one hand and her worn purse in the other, she bristled at the teacher and cast a few scathing remarks" about the other girl blacking Doris's good name.<sup>336</sup> Doris's mother Bertha was a rare beauty in the East End. "She had aristocratic features, big brown eyes and black curling hair which escaped from the tight bun at the back in little wispy tendrils. Perhaps her nose looked a bit large, but that was because she was thin. Her skin was pink and white, a very good flawless skin, apart from her work-roughened hands."<sup>337</sup> She loved her children, and would race to comfort Doris from her nightmares. Like many families in Bethnal Green, Doris's dad was abusive, especially after Saturday night at the bar.

Sometimes, Mum came running up the stairs and came in and sat quietly crying, on the end of our bed. We would pretend to be asleep and [Dad] would come belting up after her. He would open the bedroom door and point down the stairs.

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<sup>335</sup> Bailey, *Children of the Green*, 9.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

‘Come down and take your medicine,’ he would say in a queer and level voice, and she would go sobbing down the stairs and the thumping began again.<sup>338</sup>

Despite the beatings, Doris did not see her father as a bad person. Instead, she recalled him as “a good Dad, as Dads go.”<sup>339</sup> He was short, bristling with hair and Cockney attitude. He worked long days, and brought in most of the family income. It was on his whim that money was given to the children, whether earned by chores or as a gift. He was a meat and potatoes man, expecting dinner on the table when he got home, and the children to be well-behaved. The slightest mishap in his day would set him into a towering temper. He kept pigeons in the back yard, which he sold at the market. He raised beautiful roses, puttering in his garden on off days and paying the children to collect manure for fertilizer. Livestock was not uncommon in Bethnal Green, and the droppings they offered would fertilize all the local gardens.

On Hamilton Road, there was a dairy. The children would flock there to buy brown-shelled eggs at three shillings, or a pat of butter for the father. If they went

In with a jug for a penn’orth of milk, [they] would stand up on the stool by the open window ... and see the flanks of the cows and hear them softly mooing ... every few mornings, the cows were let loose in the streets as soon as it got light, while their stalls were scrubbed out. If they made a mess, it didn’t matter in the slightest, because the women would come out of their houses with buckets and take the steaming dung in for their gardens.<sup>340</sup>

Doris and her family rarely got cow dung, although they were well-favored for funerals, which had to turn around in the circle in front of their house. “Mum always had a pail at the ready just inside the door on funeral days, and she, or one of us, would grab the pail and a shovel and scoop up the precious stuff before anyone else could get it. Old Mrs. Kay who lived right on the corner had the advantage, but she was a fat woman, and slow with it, whereas my Mum was on the skinny side and much quicker.” There was an overriding imperative, for “a good load of horse

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<sup>338</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>340</sup> Bailey, *Children of the Green*, 7.

roses would put Dad in a sweet temper for once.”<sup>341</sup> Sheep manure could be gotten, for which the children would receive a penny, from farms that were as much as thirty minutes’ walk away.

Doris had an older sister Eva, and two younger sisters. Eva was a glamorous girl, six years older than Doris. She took after her mother in looks: she was also interested in makeup, clothing, and flirting. To Eva, they “lived in Bow.” To Doris, “it sounded a bit more posh, but whether [Eva] like it or not, we came under Bethnal Green Borough Council, voted as residents there and had their dustmen and such like.”<sup>342</sup> Gwen, younger than Doris by two years, was “small for her age, with a tiny heart shaped face, black tightly curling hair, and mischievous eyes ... she was a little monkey, always ready for a joke or a dare and up to all sorts of tricks.” Rosie was the baby of the group, an angelic blond. She was four and a half years younger than Doris, so perhaps it is only in Doris’s memory. “When she was four, she fell sick one day, and that evening Dad took her to the doctor... [Mum the next morning said] ‘Get up now ... Rosie is dead and there’s nothing anyone can do.’ Doris’s reaction was that of disbelief: “Dead! It just wasn’t possible. Not our baby. Other people’s babies died, but not ours.” Rosie was the reason “my mother began to look older, and stopped singing as she worked.” Dad carried her picture in a locket hanging from his watch chain.<sup>343</sup>

Doris’s family lived on the bottom floor, and had fairly exclusive use of the kitchen. Dad was offended when the upstairs dwellers came down in the middle of “a meal, a thing that Mrs. Reynolds [a former tenant] would never do ... and she’d come up the table, and sometimes laughingly picked a potato from Dad’s plate, while we looked up in frozen horror, wondering at

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<sup>341</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>342</sup> Bailey, *Children of the Green*, 12.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid*, 69.

the woman's daring."<sup>344</sup> As it turns out, this was what broke Dad's patience with tenants. He would not countenance another after, preferring to spend the extra money per week instead of keeping them. When the tenants moved out, Doris and Gwen moved into one bedroom, and Eva the other, and it was something to brag about. "A whole house, with no lodgers! I couldn't wait to get to school and boast about it. Lots of my friends were the lodgers and only had a couple of upstairs rooms, but I knew of no one who had the whole house."<sup>345</sup> This was very unusual for Bethnal Green, but as the twenties and thirties moved on, the houses began to thin out. The houses on either side of Doris were inhabited by aunts and uncles, and they had cousins aplenty to play with.

Doris had friends who lived in the circle as well. They went to the Olga Street school with her, played tea and dollies with her. Know-it-all Renee, devilish Maudie, and sweet May. Renee was a gossip, and Maudie was spoiled by her mother. May was docile and kind, "the peacemaker among us."<sup>346</sup> Together they attended Olga Street School. It was schooling provided by the Borough Council. It was segregated according to sex, with separate classrooms entirely for each. School of the 1920s was a bleak affair. "Sitting in serried rows of double desks, we never moved out of except for the fifteen minutes play ... we would queue up in silence and walk sedately to the playground, with a monitor on each landing of the stone staircase to make we did no more than breathe on the way down."<sup>347</sup> The girls received pieces of cardboard covered with black paint to makeshift as a slate. Doris was retrained from writing left handed by a common method of the time; "continuous raps on the knuckles soon cured me of

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<sup>344</sup> *Ibid*, 87.

<sup>345</sup> Bailey, *Children of the Green*, 87.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

that. Or did it? Even now, I'm cack'anded, to use my mother's expression."<sup>348</sup> Schooling was a priority for Doris, however.

Doris was the bright one of her family. She may have had such fond memories of her father from the delight he showed in her progress. For him, she recited riddles and calculated sums. Schooling was begun in a borough school, but for bright scholars, secondary school was attainable. The Junior County scholarship examinations were held in the last year of school, and doing well on the tests ensured a good grammar school. Doris prepared for her exams with diligence, and did well enough. "Nine whole pounds [scholarship]! I could hardly believe it, and floated on air for a while, until we came down to the brass tacks of buying my brown school uniform. Everything was so dear, and couldn't be bought in Roman Road. It all had to be just so, and even auntie Rosie couldn't run up something that looked near enough."<sup>349</sup> Transportation was another cost. When Doris went to school, she was an outcast. She was mocked by her teachers: "I remember the shame of being hauled up in front of the whole form for saying 'we was.'"<sup>350</sup> She did, however, eventually make friends, and made connections beyond Bethnal Green.

Her father was a French polisher, a position with some history in Bethnal Green. It was an artisanal trade, one of many dying out slowly in Bethnal Green. He worked nights and weekends, holidays especially, to make ends meet and buy extras. He spent "hour after hour lovingly going over and over the same piece of wood, with little pads of wadding wrapped in linen and soaked in linseed oil ... when the banks in the city were closed [for holidays], there was an opportunity for the long counters to be re-polished. Rich mahogany, lovingly tended, not

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<sup>348</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>349</sup> Bailey, *Children of the Green*, 89.

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid*, 90.

wiped over with a brush full of polyurethane as they are now.”<sup>351</sup> He took great pride in his job, and brought home enough money for the family to be provided for. Doris took great pride in her father’s profession as well, although she wondered at continuing to teach people such skills “in a world that was even then becoming machine minded.”<sup>352</sup> As the 1930s wore on and the Great Depression loomed, Dad’s job was cut to half-pay.

Like many residents in Bethnal Green, Doris had to leave school when the family ran out of money. One resident, Ruby, was a bright girl, nine years old when her father died. She applied for positions at schools, but when they found out her father had died, “well that does it then, your mother can not afford to buy you a uniform and other things so you can’t go.”<sup>353</sup> Too poor to attend a good secondary school, Ruby was expected to go to work. She went to work as a maid for “four shillings a week less one shilling for Cap and Apron.”<sup>354</sup> With an education, she’d have been able to procure better employment, and a more stable environment. Like Ruby, Doris entered the workforce. It was 1932, however, and jobs were scarce. She had no experience, just tutorial application. After a week of scouring newspapers searching for employment, Dad put his foot down. “Take a penny bus ride and walk through Shoreditch. It’s only men that are not wanted.” Off they went, on the penny bus to Shoreditch, to wander through factory want-ads. Doris lamented “everyone wanted girls to use their hands, not brains, and it never occurred to my poor Mum that we were in the wrong area.”<sup>355</sup> She found a job at a booksellers, an odd-ends job, with answering the telephone and fending off the advances of her boss her chief obligations. She was silent and ashamed of her silence, and it disgusted her to go

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<sup>351</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>352</sup> Bailey, *Children of the Green*, 26-27.

<sup>353</sup> “Ruby Baldwin, “Ruby” from *BBC WW2 People’s War*, 1.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>355</sup> Bailey, *Children of the Green*, 106.

to work. Doris, who dreamed of marrying a pastor, confided to the local minister, Mr. Brown. “Out it all tumbled. The horrible old Mr. Thorn, the lies on the phone, the aimless wanderings through Whitecross street and the sheer hopelessness of trying to be anybody, let alone somebody.” He kindly replied “we must get you away ... the trouble is, it’s hard to find a vacancy.”<sup>356</sup> Doris eventually found a job at the uniform shop where her sister worked. She was moved quickly to clerical work. She was compensated well for her extra education. She made three shillings a week more than her sister, and her performance was not tied to the production of fiddly lines of stitching. She stayed with the job except for a brief duration during the war, and Doris was “never ceasing to be grateful for the chance which had been given [her].”<sup>357</sup>

Doris and her family had much to compare with their residence in Bethnal Green. She and her parents travelled to other places. She worked in another location in London. Her sister, Eva, married and moved to Hackney, consistently referring to the family home as a slum.<sup>358</sup> They were aware that they lived in a bad area, and Doris often dreamed of getting away. Although Doris sometimes dreamed that she would marry money and move to a grand mansion, when she was courted by Colin, from a rich family, she realized the tremendous differences between the two. Dates were awkward, and she cringed inwardly at the thought of him seeing her home in Bethnal Green. He saw no reason for there to be awkwardness, for he’d “been there once, when [our cook] was ill and I ran her home in the car.”<sup>359</sup> Doris was appalled by the conditions of her house compared to his. Matters were made worse the following Monday, when she went with him to tea at a restaurant. She ordered fish and chips (an East End staple), and could not figure out the silverware: “there were special fish ones, with a curly bit at the end of

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<sup>356</sup> Bailey, *Children of the Green*, 109.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid*, 111.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid*, 113.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid*, 114.



the knife ... so [Doris] toyed with the chips until [she] got a chance to see what someone else was doing, but it was an uncomfortable few minutes.”<sup>360</sup> She realized then that it was no dream of hers to feel that awkwardly out of place.

It was a combination of factors that caused Doris’s family to move out of Bethnal Green. “All around us, estates were going up in Essex, and we’d dream of a future outside of Bethnal Green.”<sup>361</sup> Doris’s friends began to move out of Bethnal Green, to Dagenham and other suburban areas of London.<sup>362</sup> It was a new world being offered, one in which housing was going up in record numbers in areas that technically weren’t a part of London. They were advertised to East End residents at the same rates as housing in the East End. They had backyards, front yards, space, and single-family dwellings in lower rent rates than Bethnal Green. It was an appealing and attractive package. It lacked only one minor convenience: transportation. Bethnal Green residents moving into these areas were attempting to live up to the new clean standards, “Bethnal Green was beginning to alter now. Some of the worst slums were being pulled down, and the overcrowding was much less severe. People were beginning to accept the new estate at Dagenham, and it was a fairly simple matter to ask for a house there and get allocated one within a few weeks or months.”<sup>363</sup> Relocating was no longer an alien topic in Bethnal Green, but one discussed regularly, especially by the young people.

Doris and her family left Bethnal Green in 1937. She came home from work one day to find her Mum, distressed by a letter from the sanitary inspector for the borough. Her family did not own the building, so it fell on the landlord to provide the work. Numerous reports had been

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<sup>360</sup> *Ibid*, 115.

<sup>361</sup> Bailey, *Children of the Green*, 103.

<sup>362</sup> Dagenham began development in 1921 under the auspices of the London County Council. It became an urban district in 1926 and a metropolitan borough in 1938. It is located east of Bethnal Green.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid*, 121.

made to their address, for the gutters falling off, the roof leaking, the basement, and so on. This time, the inspector had condemned the front wall of the house. “It would all have to come out and be rebuilt, right down to the bottom window sill. It was dangerous and would collapse if left, so needed to be done right away.”<sup>364</sup> Temperamental Dad couldn’t handle the construction and the noise, so Mum was sent shopping for a new place. She was thrilled to find a place in Leytonstone. Dad exploded at the news, but this time Mum was prepared: “If you don’t want to come Joe, you can stay in this hole by yourself. The girls and I are going, anyway.”<sup>365</sup>

Leytonstone was a train ride away from Doris’s job at the factory, and there was a “huge kitchen, bathroom, hot water system and French doors leading out to a pleasant garden.”<sup>366</sup>

### **A Street, A Village**

Physical deterrents, such as cuffing a miscreant’s ear, were commonly used in Bethnal Green. The community, including policemen, had open permission to smack youngsters, and many a threat was heard of: “you’ll feel the flat of my hand, and make no mistake.” These deterrents did not, however, hold over for undeserved thrashing.<sup>367</sup> Mothers often shielded their children. Fathers who came home from the pub on Saturday night the worse for drink would often find alcohol leading to anger. Children were sent to bed early, and the mother stood in place of that outlet. Many children of Bethnal Green vividly recalled those nights: they played games or hid in bed, waiting for the sounds of scuffle and violence to stop. Severe beating of children was frowned upon. Neighborhood outrage could be engendered by spanking harshly or publicly. This public censure could be mitigated, however, by a description of the crime for

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<sup>364</sup> *Ibid*, 124.

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid*, 125.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid*, 126.

<sup>367</sup> Ross, “Survival Networks”, 13.

which the youngster was being punished. The adage of a village to raise a child was no less true than elsewhere, but the village was considerably more compact.

The people of streets and neighborhoods watched local children flourish and grow, learning reading, sums, and lettering at the local school. They also watched for bad apples, and signs of smudges and dirt on Sunday clothes. Many neighbors shared child-rearing duties, shuffling children from one house, apartment, or lot to another to give each mother a break. Children were encouraged to call their neighbors aunt or uncle.<sup>368</sup> Even in disreputable neighborhoods, neighbors watched out for each other: “George Sims ... encountered a woman sharing a ‘wretched room’ with six children, two of whom she told him were ‘only staying with us’. They were ... the children of a widow living upstairs who had been sent to prison for assaulting a police officer.”<sup>369</sup> The older children watched over the younger. Responsibility for their younger siblings set in at a young age, often correlating to how many children the mother had by the time they reached that age. Large families settled responsibilities earlier; more mouths to feed, but more hands for labor.

Children also created their own networks, opinions, and ideas about being from Bethnal Green. Dressing too richly might cast suspicion on you, and almost certainly would exclude you from the poor children’s outings. Wearing the wrong shoes, such as “fragile brown boots of better-off children ... It was felt that brown boots were a cut above the station in life to which we all belonged, and no one was tolerated who tried to rise above it.”<sup>370</sup> Derek Houghton was from a poor family in the west end of Bethnal Green, and was especially sensitive to the social nuance of the street.

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<sup>368</sup> Ross, “Survival Networks”, 12.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>370</sup> Ross, “Respectability in Pre-World War I London”, 45.

Derek describes the life of a boy in impoverished Bethnal Green. It contained pitfalls for the unwary, traps for the unsuspecting, but for a streetwise urchin, it worked rather well. There were bright spots as well. “Walk[ing] into Mr. Iron’s [confectionary and news agency] shop was like walking into Aladdin’s Cave. The colours of the confectionery in glass jars on the rows of shelves would bedazzle and excite the taste buds. To watch Mr. Irons carefully weighs the sweets on his scales and empty them into a small white paper bag became a performance, though what you could buy with a halfpenny or a penny was very limited.”<sup>371</sup> The penny or halfpenny was earned by whatever means, and occasionally the gift of relatives visiting, old ladies at church, and others. Derek and his family were not very poor, but he tells us of them: “they stood out as they carried an air of poverty, their faces telling everything. Devoid of merriment, their body language gave the signs of futility, and their faces had a look of despair.” He admits though, that “it never entered my head that we were also poor; we simply never gave it a thought ... you just didn’t know anything else; there was nothing to compare it with.”<sup>372</sup> Fun could be had for children inexpensively, and toys could be picked up off the street. “Emptying out a boys trouser pockets was like emptying his treasure trove: a catapult, a Jew’s harp or mouth organ; if you didn’t have a musical instrument of sorts, a comb and tissue paper would suffice; as well as marbles, string, penknife, and a lucky charm.”<sup>373</sup>

Derek and his family housed fourteen people under their roof; his grandparents, parents, sister, two uncles, their friend, and six aunts. His mother lost a child eighteen months before Derek was born. He was born at the Bethnal Green Infirmary. He and his siblings would have been among the first generation of children in Bethnal Green born in hospitals. Some families

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<sup>371</sup> Derek Houghton, *A Bethnal Green Memoir: Recollections of Life in the 1930s-1950s* (Gloucestershire, UK: The History Press, 2009), 13.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid*, 76.

still preferred home birth. Alf, the friend of Derek's uncles, married Aunt May and took her off. Each of the aunts except one married in time, and moved off with their husband. Will and Joe, the uncles, also married and moved off. Noona (real name Ethel) was the first to go: she married George Marshall and moved to Walthamstow. Once the house cleared, Derek and his sister moved out of the "one small back room sleeping on the floor with my Mother, Father and sister ... we finally had a bedroom with our very own beds ... there was no water facility upstairs. It was carried up both to drink and wash with in an enameled bowl."<sup>374</sup> Marie was a special case: she joined the Salvation Army ('Sally Ann', as Derek's grandfather called it) and worked her way up to Brigadier.<sup>375</sup>

Derek's grandparents were the quintessential East End couple of the late 1800s. His grandfather, "an uneducated man, but as honest as the day was long," whose favorite quote was 'tell the truth and shame the Devil', was Irish. He was raised Catholic, although Derek "never knew him to attend Church, [though] he was very rigid in his beliefs." He was a Labour man "through and through ... if you ever mentioned conservatism, his feelings and that of many like him were 'what have I got to conserve?'"<sup>376</sup> His grandmother was a native of Bethnal Green, as was her family. His grandmother was "about the hardest working woman [Derek had] ever known ... no taller than five foot, if that." She was a charwoman at a new building in the Strand, the Shell-Mex building. She brought home supplies for neighbors, especially "brown bread rolls and cigarette ends, the longest cigarette ends she could find." Derek "used to take the cigarette ends to 'Old Moore', as my Grandmother called him, who lived in Pollards Row, a continuation of our street. He would sit on the steps of his house, break the cigarette ends open, mix up the

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<sup>374</sup> Houghton, *A Bethnal Green Memoir*, 48.

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

tobacco and roll them into cigarettes. To all intents and purposes he should have died years before, but he lived well into his nineties. Inhaling all that smoke and bacteria from those dog ends over the years, he defied medical science!”<sup>377</sup>

Once she came home from her charring, Derek’s grandmother “commence[d] box-making for a company in Hackney Road, the Stanley Box Company. Glue, and the smell of glue on the gas stove, was forever under our nostrils from morning to night.” Derek and his sister would help, “cutting the corners out of the cardboard which would cause blisters between our thumbs and index fingers ... on completion of two gross or more, the boxes were tied up, and we would place them in a pushcart and take them to the box company to be paid.”<sup>378</sup> Grandmother kept busy, as Derek tells us, running “a loan club for Phillip’s and Scoons ... [and washing] all the towels used by the teachers at our school. She never had a holiday in her life, apart from days out at Southend, which were very seldom ... in the winter I would see her out in the yard doing the washing, scrubbing away on a washboard submerged in a galvanized bath, her arms red raw from the detergent ... [but] she was an atrocious cook.”<sup>379</sup>

Derek did not see his, or other children’s’, lives as hard. While certain conventions of Victorian and Edwardian childhood hold true for Bethnal Green, others didn’t. Street games, including skipping, rhyming, and rolling hoops, were very much in vogue in Bethnal Green. They did not require a great deal of money to play. These games provided further opportunity for identification: “you followed to the order of ‘O’Grady says’. If you made the movement, and O’Grady never said it, you were out.” O’Grady was surely a local name, but the game was not dissimilar to others in London. Dolls and the like were not unheard of, although Derek was

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<sup>377</sup> Houghton, *A Bethnal Green Memoir*, 49.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid*, 49-50.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid*, 50-51.

likely not interested. His younger sisters, however, may have passed under the arch in Bow. A schoolteacher in Bow had instituted the selling of ‘farthing baskets’ of toys if you could fit under the arch, and certainly those in Bethnal Green benefitted from this as well.<sup>380</sup> Other games that children in Bethnal Green played, however, were not common across the whole of London. Money-earning opportunities, such as “netting the canal,” scrounging in tip bins, gathering toshes, or collecting waste for tanneries, were turned into a game. Children had no fear of getting their clothes dirty if they came back with a tosh, pulled from the sewers in a nice part of town, with perhaps a pound or two in them. Items discarded in Regent’s Canal would be dredged out, cleaned up, and flogged at the markets or pawn shops for ‘ready.’ A ‘mudlark’ was one who made a living dragging things from the mud. Crates, boxes, and other debris which could be burnt were brought home, to be divided, sold, or kept depending on the family’s need. Children banded together in small groups, protecting their streets and territory from encroachment.

Food was an important topic for Derek. Aside from the stews and pies that Grandmother cooked, there was ‘Daddy’s Sauce’, which was added to many a meal, “and the flavor of the sauce was better tasting [than] the meal itself.”<sup>381</sup> They bought fish and chips from Little Annie’s for Fridays, with cracklings for the children. Cracklings were the dropped off batter from the fish frying. Derek “was never given any fish in those days, it would be fried egg, sausages or a couple of rashers of bacon with the fish shop chips.”<sup>382</sup> Refrigeration was something for the cinemas. Their food, instead, was put into the safe in the backyard, “a cabinet with a narrow wooden frame, a lower drawer, and metal mesh panels on three sides of the

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<sup>380</sup> Gordon, *Little Book of the East End*, 214.

<sup>381</sup> Houghton, *A Bethnal Green Memoir*, 51.

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*

cabinet, the top covered in an off cut of linoleum to keep it waterproof.”<sup>383</sup> If the food went a little off, they ate it anyways. Food was not to be wasted. Purchasing food was dear. Without refrigeration, women would have to purchase in small quantities, just enough to keep.

“Sometimes, in summer, the bacon could be a little high, sausages sour, which we could term as being ‘on the beagle’, and the cheese a trifle pongy.”<sup>384</sup> Special occasions for food were limited to weddings and funerals: “we never saw a birthday cake.” Children learned the value of a free fruit from Sunday school. Oranges were gifted to children at Christmas. Figs, prunes, and dates were common in Bethnal Green, sold in the market along more exotic, but equally more expensive, fruits. Children could also get cheap apples, especially at the end of a day in market.

### **Open Air Markets**

Markets were an important cultural attribute of Bethnal Green. Two of the ten oldest open-air markets in London exist within the confines of former and current territory. The well-known Petticoat Lane market was at one times within the boundary of Bethnal Green. The Brick Lane market remained within Bethnal Green, thriving for many decades. Charles Booth described it in 1898 as “shops with stalls in front, strips of shoes over poles sticking out from shop walls across sidewalk, as in pictures of old London, much life [and] good humans.”<sup>385</sup> Columbia Road Market went through several iteration, from a place of costermongers to an attempt at an indoor market, to a famous flower market of London. “Street markets in poor neighborhoods kept prices down ... vegetables were the most important item sold this way.”<sup>386</sup>

Government officials at both the local and London levels recognized the relative economic value of these markets for the community, and attempted to boost sales and thus

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<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>384</sup> Houghton, *A Bethnal Green Memoir*, 51.

<sup>385</sup> Booth, *Notebooks* (Sergeant French, 22 March, 1898)

<sup>386</sup> Davin, “Loaves and Fishes”, 172.



revenue. “The London County Council, under its General Powers Act (1903), obtained powers for the local authorities to promote shelters for street traders, and the local authorities are authorized to make a small charge for the accommodation. The local authorities will bear the whole cost of these structures.” The efforts often fell flat, however, as no shelters were erected that proved useful. Often canvas was stretched out from building to building, creating the effect of pooling the water towards the edges, leaving shoppers to walk through one sheet of water after another.

Marketers retained more control over the markets in Bethnal Green than perhaps anything else. If they felt the governments’ stipulations too onerous, they simply packed up and moved elsewhere, down the street or to another market. The constant change of these markets made them exciting and appealing to all ages. Practical too, as they often sold the cheapest and freshest vegetables and clothing. Charles Henry Harrod (of Harrod’s) began in Brick Lane, with a small tea emporium, before moving to Cable Street and opening a wholesale grocer and tea emporium in 1835.<sup>387</sup> Practical and forward thinking men (particularly a phenomena among the poor Jewish community in Bethnal Green) would arrive the night before, laying down lengths of wood and rope to denote a territory. The next morning, they would still be on the scene, ready to sell space to the highest bidder. The marketer lucky enough and rich enough to gain a great sales vantage point was not eager to lose it. Corner spots sold for the most, as street corner crying took on another dimension in this world. Attracting customers meant money.

Derek Houghton told of his Sunday in the 1930s, the day of the week in which “the street really came alive,” which “also meant regular visits to the market.” Located a scant distance from the Columbia Road Flower Market, he described the morning time as “moving in a

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<sup>387</sup> Gordon, *Little Book of the East End*, 56.

continual throng from the Flower Market through to Petticoat Lane via Brick Lane,” hitting every major market on the west end of Bethnal Green and reveling in the “[market’s] atmosphere, colour, and its characters, the yelling, shouting, haggling, and the banter from the vendors ... the many tongues becoming a symphony, the crowds a moving canvas.”. They passed next to the ‘Shallorams,’ a series of second-hand shops where “practically the whole of the East End shopped.”<sup>388</sup> Next, they went to Club Row, home to (most commonly) dogs and cats, although exotic species like monkeys were infrequent visitors. The next few streets housed the birds, all manner and color of aviary arrangement. From there, it was on to Brick Lane, which in Houghton’s day was heavily Jewish. The Brick Lane Market tradition, however, had been carrying on since the 1500s, and there were an equal representation of all Bethnal Green residents there selling. Each street in the Brick Lane area had its own particular merchandise, such as a stall in Cheshire Street “showing the wonderful liquid vibrant colours of pineapple, strawberry, raspberry, and orange, and sarsaparilla,” an ice cold beverage a lure for adults and children alike. From Brick Lane, the market carried onto the Petticoat Lane Market (still the oldest established open-air market in London). The tradition of markets continues in Bethnal Green to this day, although markets have moved, changed, expanded, and disappeared.

### **St Peter’s Before the War**

Derek was a good Anglican boy, attending Sunday school and church regularly. He joined the choir at St Peter’s, where

On Sundays we would change into our cassock and surplice, with fresh scrubbed faces and hair parted looking like little cherubs when, in fact, we were quite the opposite. In procession we would enter the church, ascending the three stairs to the altar, pair off to be seated into the pews directly opposite the church organ ... the cost of [our very own white high stiff collar] and [small black] bow was a penny and three farthings. When we were handed that shilling after a wedding

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<sup>388</sup> Houghton, *A Bethnal Green Memoir*, 15.

service we felt like millionaires. We could then afford to buy a bar of Double Six chocolate from ‘Arry Orseye’s’ ... that shilling meant the world to us!<sup>389</sup>

Derek also collected money around Christmas for the church. He and the other boys would sing in the streets, until money came down from the upper floors of houses. They collected it all, though they “thought nothing of retaining a few coppers for ourselves and giving the rest to the church, even at that age we had learnt to charge a commission!”<sup>390</sup> The church offered many opportunities for Derek, including the Boy Scout meetings held weekly in its classrooms.<sup>391</sup>

### **Beyond Our Borders**

Those who chose to stay in Bethnal Green began to experience more of life in other parts. The 1930s saw the implementation of a number of planned outings, similar to those of the children in the early 1900s. Grannies Holiday was an organization by the Victorian Dock Mission to let the elderly of the East End go to Walton once a year. Other groups began to implement similar outings, geared towards adults as much as children, and they were a riotous success. Many a fond memory was of the trip to the train station for an annual outing to the beach. By 1939, the obstacle to most leaving the East End was lack of credit in the suburbs, for “working-class life without access to credit was almost impossible.”<sup>392</sup> Derek Houghton recalled vividly the outings he went on, where he “loved the smell of the sea, the smell of the seaweed washed ashore in black and green heaps lying across the pebbles, and we loved to pop the little

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<sup>389</sup> *Ibid*, 78.

<sup>390</sup> Houghton, *A Bethnal Green Memoir*, 78.

<sup>391</sup> Churches in Bethnal Green offered a wide variety of opportunities for locals, including technical classes, free babysitting, Bible instruction, reading lessons, day-trips, coal and pension funds, etc. For children of Bethnal Green particularly, there were numerous opportunities offered by the churches which would have been unavailable otherwise.

<sup>392</sup> Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures England, 1918-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 126.

Pods of the seaweed, looking for small crabs and picking up interesting sea shells to take back home to London as a memento.”<sup>393</sup>

Doris had two excursions a year to look forward to, one with the Band of Hope to Southend, and the other to either Loughton or Southend with the Sunday school. Her family also occasionally made excursions to Southend by themselves, boarding the train in Bethnal Green and enjoying a day at the beach. She carried with her the great joys of Bethnal Green, music and dancing. It did not matter if the music was good, as Doris tell us, for once on a trip, she sang off-key to the strains of a local accordion player as her friends danced. Nevertheless, “the pennies started pouring into the hat and the onlookers clapped the dancing.”<sup>394</sup> When visiting Loughton, Doris dreamed of living there, how different her family’s life would be. Her father “whistled as he walked ... didn’t smoke his endless cigarettes, and ... didn’t even swear.”<sup>395</sup> They were blissful and idyllic excursions for her.

Some families visited friends and relatives who had moved to the suburbs. The suburban dwellers, moved into a place of new buildings and “they tried hard to live up their clean and decent surroundings. They bought new furniture and new curtains, and even put carpets on the floors. They saved hard and got what they wanted, and you could furnish a little place nicely for a hundred pounds.”<sup>396</sup> The houses were not the only appeal. There was considerably more open space than in Bethnal Green, and local shops and schools were never as crowded as in London. Many of the residents in these suburban communities began to create new businesses, which mimicked the old ones from Bethnal Green in character, but never had the same volume of

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<sup>393</sup> Houghton, *A Bethnal Green Memoir*, 77.

<sup>394</sup> Bailey, *Children of the Green*, 44.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid*, 45.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid*, 121.

customers.<sup>397</sup> The ties between residents in these suburban areas were nothing compared to Bethnal Green, but they were growing stronger.

### **The War Drums are Beating**

By 1938, it was recognized that Bethnal Green needed to be linked to the underground railway in London. Construction began in that year at the juncture of Cambridge Heath and Roman Roads, at the head of Bethnal Green Road. At the foot of Barmy Park, it was a grand design. The ticket hall stretched for 100 feet under the park. Further entrances, including one on the Bethnal Green side of the road, were already planned. Workers tiled the main hall, poured concrete, cut steps, and prepared to punch through the tunnel connecting to the main line. Work halted in 1939, however, with the outbreak of war. In September of 1938, workers also descended on Bethnal Green to begin digging trenches. Reginald Baker, a resident of Bethnal Green, can recall playing in the sandbags which appeared everywhere.<sup>398</sup> Sixty-six thousand gas masks were issued to the people of Bethnal Green.<sup>399</sup> Railings and fences began to disappear all over Bethnal Green, being claimed for scrap towards the war effort. Nearby Victoria Park closed to the public, and training maneuvers as well as anti-aircraft guns, known as ack-ack guns for their distinctive sound, were installed there. (The park was eventually used as a prison camp for POWs, but at various times, it was opened for the public to enjoy free shows, such as the Sadler Wells Ballet Company giving a performance at the fountain.<sup>400</sup>) The Hertford Union Canal and

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<sup>397</sup> Holme, *Housing in East London*, 136.

<sup>398</sup> Reginald Baker, "Oral Interview" conducted 4 March 2014.

<sup>399</sup> George F. Vale, *Bethnal Green's Ordeal, 1939-1945* (London: Bethnal Green Borough Council, 1947), 7.

<sup>400</sup> Gordon, *Little Book of the East End*, 134.

Regent's Canal were in constant use, moving supplies to the factories producing war material. St Peter's crypt was cemented over in preparation for using it as mortuary.<sup>401</sup>

War provisioning, rationing, and planning began in earnest. All around town, civilians were recruited to the fire watches and the civilian brigades. Air Raid Precaution Handbooks were given out by the thousands, on numerous topics. At the advice of one such handbook, hundreds of thousands of animals were put down. Animal owners grappled with the options, and many decided that it was not worth the family pet enduring rationing conditions which did not allow for family pets.<sup>402</sup> As many as 750,000 domestic animals were destroyed in a week.<sup>403</sup> Characters such as Potato Pete and Dr. Carrot were introduced, in an effort to get people excited about rationing. Flyers, pamphlets, and posters began to appear, touting the wartime lifestyle. "Make do and mend!" implored a brochure on reusing clothing. Residents were also encouraged to 'Dig for Victory.' Derek Houghton and his friends "made ourselves a vegetable patch in the garden of a bombed out house, 'doing our bit.'"<sup>404</sup> At the same time, Londoners were warned to be wary of conversation in public places. Blackout hours and curtains were also introduced.

War preparations for the library began in 1939. The iron fences came down, to be recycled for scrap. Windows were boarded up, valuable volumes stored at the Museum, which would remain open as a shilling restaurant for the duration. A plan was sent to George Vale to put a satellite library in the Tube station. At its peak, it contained 4,000 volumes.<sup>405</sup> Despite the war, and being bombed during it, the Central Library continued to expand. In 1943, a report was published on the library: "the past year ... finished in a most gratifying manner with

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<sup>401</sup> *The Story of St Peter's in Bethnal Green*, 7.

<sup>402</sup> Alison Feeney-Hart, "The Little-Told Story of the Massive WWII Pet Cull" from *BBC News Magazine* (11 October, 2013), 1.

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>404</sup> Houghton, *Bethnal Green Memoirs*, 102.

<sup>405</sup> Gordon, *Little Book of the East End*, 102.

increased activity ... the freedom from enemy bombing, and the return to the Borough of many of its evacuated children caused book circulation to reach almost pre-war limits ... an increase of 3,337 over the previous year [in borrower's tickets] in spite of a reduction in population of nearly fifty percent ... the Roman Road Branch Library has been closed until after the war, and with the release of the staff from here, it was found possible to re-open the children's library at the Central Library. This has proved a great success."<sup>406</sup> The Report noted that there were 19,294 borrowers' tickets in force in 1943.<sup>407</sup> The Library continued to operate throughout the war.

Evacuation of Bethnal Green began before war was officially declared. Residents had been warned in advance. Children would be taken from school to the nearest train station. They were to come equipped with their gas masks, extra clothing, and various sundries. If parents did not want their children to be evacuated without being able to say goodbye, beginning in August of 1939, they were warned to keep their children at home.<sup>408</sup> James Morten, a Bethnal Green native, recalled that the scenes "of screaming, crying children, crying parents, not knowing where their children were going to, because the government didn't tell anyone, and they were simply told as and when they arrived where ever the evacuation points were that they were to be told where their children were."<sup>409</sup> This was the first of many actions that the government would take in the war which made Bethnal Green residents uneasy. This scene was enacted again and again across London in September 1939, with 826,959 children evacuated that month.<sup>410</sup> The state paid the fare to their destination, and disclosed their whereabouts to the parents after they arrived. More than ever, the kinship bonds between these groups were being tested. Parents

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<sup>406</sup> "Library Reports" in *The Library World* (July, 1943), 12.

<sup>407</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>408</sup> Edward R. Murrow, *This is London* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1941), 2

<sup>409</sup> James Morten, Imperial War Museum Sound Archives, 1971.

<sup>410</sup> Richard Titmuss, *Problems of Social Policy* (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1950),

were welcome to visit their children once settled, and special fares and accommodations were made throughout the transit system. Pregnant women and the elderly were expected to evacuate as well. By September 4, 1939, “London had completed the removal of 600,000 people, without a single casualty,” of a total 1.5 million evacuated that month.<sup>411</sup>

Reginald George Baker, a child during the Second World War in Bethnal Green, described his evacuations to the BBC. The first time, he “was sent away with Mrs. Clark, who lived in the building, and her son, and we went to King’s Lynn. We was evacuated in a doctor’s house.”<sup>412</sup> Reginald vividly recalls the announcement of war coming over the radio. He returned to Bethnal Green after a few weeks, and was evacuated a second time for two Christmases at Weston-on-the-Green. “I can remember well, you had your gas mask then, you had your label, a carrying bag, which always had a large bar of chocolate in it, with a tin of condensed milk.”<sup>413</sup> Upon returning to Bethnal Green, “the doodlebugs had started up then ... I remember it was incredible, because you could still walk about in London, the ack-ack guns was firing at it, course it was coming down anyways.”<sup>414</sup>

Like Reginald Baker, Lillian Brooks also experienced both evacuation and return. She remembered her first trip out of Bethnal Green during the war:

In 1939 my father and my friend, Beatty’s parents, discussed sending Beatty and me to stay with Beatty’s Aunty in Southport ... It was just before the war started and they thought it would be best for us. We packed up our things and were put on a train to Southport and told to look for the clock when we got to our destination and wait under it, where we would be picked up by Aunty, and we would recognize her because she would be wearing a brooch. Well we got off the train and waited under the clock, as directed, which seemed to be a long time, but we were determined not to move. The porters asked us in a broad Lancashire accent what we were doing. I replied, in my cockney accent, that we had been

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<sup>411</sup> Murrow, *This is London*, 14.

<sup>412</sup> Reginald George Baker, Imperial War Museum Sound Archive Collection, 1983.

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*



told to wait under the clock. He seemed satisfied with this and walked off. Eventually Aunty came and collected us and took us home. I went to an ordinary school in Southport then. After 7 months we returned to Bethnal Green.<sup>415</sup>

Brooks was evacuated the second time, picked up from school and sent to Cardiff one morning in June of 1940. She and her classmates were evacuated to Rhymney, Monmouthshire. She initially dreaded it, but the people were friendly and welcoming, and she eventually relaxed into her new environment. She stayed for eighteen months. Her mother had died of breast cancer before the war, and her father died of pneumonia in December of 1940. Sent to her sister's fiancé's family in Leeds, Lillian Brooks remained there the rest of her life.

Reginald Baker's and Lillian Brooks' experiences of evacuation, return, and re-evacuation were typical. During the Phony War, the period of relative peace between September 1939 and September 1940, Bethnal Green parents recalled their evacuated children in large numbers. Air raid sirens sounded almost every night, but no bombs came. "Complacency about gas mask carrying and other protective measures became evident" throughout London.<sup>416</sup>

### **There they came, up the Thames, bold as brass**

In the summer of 1940, however, the "real war" for Londoners began. On September 7, the first bombs fell on London. Bethnal Green fielded ten casualties the first day. By the end of the first week, Bethnal Green had suffered 84 deaths of residents. Thirty-six died at Columbia Street Market in a direct hit to the entrance late in the evening of the 7<sup>th</sup> and into the morning of September 8<sup>th</sup>. The bomb, "by a million to one chance, entered the shelter by means of a ventilating shaft and caused extensive casualties."<sup>417</sup> Tom Betts survived the Columbia Road Market bombing. He knew something was different that day. As the air raid sirens wailed, he

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<sup>415</sup> Lillian Hen Brooks, "Evacuation from Bethnal Green London, 1940" from *BBC WW2 People's War* Collection.

<sup>416</sup> Grayzel, *Air Raids*, 251.

<sup>417</sup> Vale, *Bethnal Green's Ordeal*, 12.

climbed up six floors onto the roof to take a better look. There were hundreds of German airplanes, flying so low that the crosses on their wings were clear to see. Then bombs began dropping from them and landing on the docks. It was bizarre – I remember looking down at the square below where children were playing, oblivious to the destruction not too far away.<sup>418</sup>

The second set of sirens came and they made their way to the shelter. “It became very hot.

Everyone was calm and in one spot there was a wedding party going on ... the noise outside told us all that bombs were falling and the occasional rumble indicated they were getting closer ... I must have fallen asleep ... All that I can recollect after that was felling giddy and sick ... It was dark. I could hear screams and whistles ... The air was full of dust and it was pitch black.”<sup>419</sup>

As he crawled towards a lone bulb still shining, Tom realized he was bleeding from the head. He fought his way to the First Aid room in the shelter. “A nurse bandaged my head and we sat in there for what seemed like hours ... I was led ... out into the street that was as light as day from the glow of the fires.”<sup>420</sup>

On September 13<sup>th</sup>, Ruby and her husband went to fetch his parent’s furniture from Bethnal Green. “There were bombs dropping everywhere with fires all over the place and the planes kept coming over in droves.”<sup>421</sup> By September 24<sup>th</sup>, “95 high explosive bombs ranging from 50 to 1,000 kilograms, two parachute mines and literally thousands of incendiary bombs [had fallen] on Bethnal Green.”<sup>422</sup> By the end of the year, 125 residents had been killed in Bethnal Green. The bombs continued for 57 days and nights straight. The first phase was high explosive ordinance, which did as designed, ripping through buildings, exploding after impact. It caused severe shrapnel from the bomb and the buildings.

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<sup>418</sup> Tom Betts, “September 7, 1940” <http://spitalfieldslife.com/2013/09/07/on-saturday-7th-september-1940/> last updated September 7, 2013 (accessed April 23, 2014).

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>420</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>421</sup> Baldwin, “Ruby”, 3.

<sup>422</sup> Vale, *Bethnal Green’s Ordeal*, 9.

The proximity of Bethnal Green to the heavily targeted port area meant the neighborhood was among the hardest hit. Just under 1,300 high-explosive bombs and parachute mines fell between September of 1940 and June of 1941 in Bethnal Green. One night in 1940, Ada Patten and her family were at home when a bomb went off very nearby. Fire quickly spread, and Dad urged them out of the house. As they made their way to a nearby shelter at a pub, “we heard a Jerry pass over and then the shrill whistle of a couple of bombs coming down. We all threw ourselves down on the ground and hoped for the best. They passed right over our heads and came to rest on a block of flats in Kingsland Road. Dad later had the job of trying to rescue the people buried beneath the flats. They recovered sixteen bodies, 4 alive and 12 dead, but it is feared that there is still about twenty people buried there.”<sup>423</sup> Whole streets were levelled. On Thorold Street, for example, forty-seven people died in early 1941. The street itself was levelled, and scroungers carried off the pieces. It ceased to be used as a road.

Life in Bethnal Green became about the bomb shelters. The press presented idyllic photographs of mothers gardening on top of Anderson shelters. Most in Bethnal Green, however, had no room for one. Some houses had small shelters which were kept in the kitchen. Work crews had appeared in Bethnal Green as early as 1938, assessing households and public spaces for fitness for shelter areas. Public shelters, scattered throughout Bethnal Green, were the best answer. Some neighborhoods had their own shelter, intended for a few houses to use. These were weighted to withstand anything but a direct blast. In 1939, plans were drawn up by the Bethnal Green Borough Council to convert the new Tube station, still under construction, to a deep shelter. Officials placed its capacity at 10,000, with 5,000 beds. The only other deep shelter in Bethnal Green was Columbia Road Market, a large reinforced building with a cellar. As we

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<sup>423</sup> Ada Patten, “A Personal Letter Describing the Effects of the Air Raids in Bethnal Green in 1940” from *Tower Hamlets Archives*

have seen, the safety of the market building proved illusory, with massive casualties on the first night of the Blitz.

An entire way of life developed around the shelters. The Tube Station shelter included a concert hall, a branch of the public library, and a store. Once the war was underway, residents of Bethnal Green objected when officials tried to put more sleeping space in: “nah that cuts down on dancing!” Children who had been brought back from evacuation were sent to the shelters to save space for the family to spend the night there. Queues would form, orderly and polite, to enter the public shelters. In one of the shelters, residents even moved a piano in. Dolly Rolph, then the air raid warden, recalled her superiors calling for her assistance: “You’d better come over, Doll, because you know the people and you can deal with them.”<sup>424</sup> The indomitable pub atmosphere and life that flowed through Bethnal Green continued in the shelters.

It even continued in the bombed-out streets. George Vale wrote of one encounter with an unforgettable Bethnal Green woman:

The indomitable will of these amazing people after nearly five years of war, was surely exemplified by this old lady whose first remark on being rescued was to ask the workers to be careful of her stockings (it will be appreciated that at this stage there was hardly one brick standing on another). She then looked up to the top of the crater and seeing her son she called out, “I always told you that it was a b-----y good table.” After sitting her up and calling for some tea, some linen was passed so that she could wipe her face. Seeing that this linen was being pulled from the debris she said, “What the h--- are you using my best sheets for this for?” When the tea was brought to her she said, “I don’t want any tea, bring me a Guinness.” Finally, as she was being carried away on a stretcher she sat up and said, “Where the h--- are you taking me to now.”<sup>425</sup>

The Syrett family still lived next door to the Ableys in 1939. Most of the grown children had moved away, but May Kate remained with her mother and father. In 1938, the Divalls had moved in as well. It is likely both families remained in the house until at least November 1940.

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<sup>424</sup> “British Civilian Deputy Warden with Air Raid Precautions Account of Life in Air Raid Shelters in Bethnal Green”, *BBC Productions*, 1957.

<sup>425</sup> Vale, *Bethnal Green’s Ordeal*, 8.

Thomas Syrett was injured on the 13<sup>th</sup> of October in 1940. He was on his way home for the day when he was hit. He was transported to Bethnal Green Hospital, and succumbed to his injuries later that day. Emma and May Kate likely knew when he didn't come home. There had been a strike on 39 Wennington Road that same day which killed four people, two in the street outside the building.<sup>426</sup> The blast did significant damage. One of three to fall on the road throughout the war, it was likely responsible for the destruction of seven houses (even numbered houses from 22-34). The blast site was near to the entrance of Wennington Road onto Grove Road. The bomb also did significant damage to the warehouse which was at the junction of Grove and Wennington Roads. Thomas's death meant that Emma and May Kate had just lost the primary breadwinner in the household. They moved out of Wennington Road before the end of the war. The final bomb to hit Wennington Road was in 1944, at house number fourteen, where two were fatally injured.

A further 107 people lost their lives in 1941. Derek Houghton recalled that "when the air raids were at their height, we gave up going down into my Grandparent's bedroom. It was decided that we would all bed down in the kitchen at night ... during one particular raid, we had an explosion so powerful in its force that it lifted me over the wooden spar of the table on to the top of my Grandmother!"<sup>427</sup> A lull came in 1942. Children had gone through a secondary wave of evacuations. Parents waited longer this time, but many children were still recalled. Residents had become considerably more used to shelters by the time of the "Little Blitz." Anderson shelters had now invaded every public space they could, and the council and Boy Scouts set up

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<sup>426</sup> "Bethnal Green" in *Civilian Casualties During World War II* (London Metropolitan Archives).

<sup>427</sup> Houghton, *Bethnal Green Memoirs*, 100.

Morrison shelters in people's homes.<sup>428</sup> Bethnal Green residents did not hesitate to show their loyalty and patriotic sensibilities. They adopted the HMS Crane during warship week in 1942, supported "Wings for Victory" in 1943, and "Salute the Soldiers" week in 1944.<sup>429</sup>

### **Bethnal Green Tube Disaster**

No bombers visited London in the first few months of 1943 but air raid sirens and the flight to deep shelters continued. On the night of March 3, children queued up as normal outside the Bethnal Green Tube Shelter. It was the most popular shelter in Bethnal Green, roomy and as close to home comforts as could be. There were a limited number of beds, however, and the people of Bethnal Green did not want to lose them to outsiders. They sent their children down to stand in line, usually around 4:30 at night. The shelter opened at 6:30, or with the wailing of air raid sirens, whichever happened first. That night, many children went down into the shelter, staking claim to two or three cots with bundles of clothing and toys. They raced among the cots, played firestones, and passed the time waiting for adults. Some adults were already in place as well, particularly those without children to queue. There was an expectation of reprisal raids from the Germans, after the RAF bombing of Berlin on 1 March. The sirens rang at 8:17 pm, just as two busses were letting out passengers at nearby bus stops. A large crowd was already forming, added to by a local cinema letting out. The queue was terrific, and tensions were high. In Victoria Park, the new anti-aircraft missiles, a Z-battery, was given its first test.<sup>430</sup> This unexpected sound alarmed the many people waiting in line, and they began to press forward.

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<sup>428</sup> Anderson shelters were larger outdoor shelters, designed to accommodate up to six people (although in Bethnal Green they often accommodated more). They survived many bombings which destroyed neighboring buildings, but were not weighted to withstand a direct hit. Morrison shelters were developed *circa* 1940, and consisted of do-it-yourself parts, which when assembled resembled a mattress with chicken wire around the outside.

<sup>429</sup> Vale, *Old Bethnal Green*, 31.

<sup>430</sup> James Hayward, *Myths and Legends of the Second World War* (London: The History Press, 2009), 99.

Near the bottom of the stairs, a woman carrying a baby and bundle slipped and fell. The press of the crowds grew worse as panic set in, and in a matter of seconds, it was a fatal crush. Alf Morris, who was near the bottom of the stairs when the panic started, described it as follows:

I was being carried down the staircase and the noise of the new rocket guns could be heard. Someone shouted “there is a bomb coming” and people started to push forward. I was about the third stair from the bottom but could not move as my legs were trapped. An air raid warden called Mrs. Chumley pulled me out of the crush by my hair and then put her arms under mine and pulled me out.<sup>431</sup>

Men, women, children, old and young, 178 people perished in a matter of moments.<sup>432</sup>

An investigation was mounted within days, but the results were suppressed until the end of the war by order of Herbert Morrison, the Home Secretary. There were so many bodies they overflowed the morgues, church crypts, schools, and hospitals in the surrounding areas. Bodies were laid out in the street. Agnes Morris, who had been safe in a Morrison shelter at home, learned about it from her brother. George, who had been on the way home, happened on the scene. “He said they had to put the bodies anywhere they could, churches, hospitals, on the pavements, and in Barmy Park behind the Tube Station.”<sup>433</sup> Local officials were ordered to minimize the information released, and many people spent weeks and months not knowing what happened to their family members. Agnes’s family spent days searching for her aunt Lyddie, who was found in a church, stripped of valuables and her identification card.<sup>434</sup> Mrs. Reid, whose grandmother perished in the incident, remembers that there were funerals for days, but she “can also remember that when we went to get our mourning clothes from Petticoat Lane they

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<sup>431</sup> Alf Morris, “Bethnal Green Tube Disaster” from *The Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust Histories*, 2003.

<sup>432</sup> Official estimates place the number between 173 and 178 dead. The memorial roll lists 178 names.

<sup>433</sup> Agnes Morris, “Bethnal Green Tube Disaster” from *The Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust Histories*, 2003.

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid.*

refused to let us pay for them.”<sup>435</sup> Alf and Agnes remembered numerous funerals a day and for weeks after the incident. Dr. Joan Martin, who worked at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital for Children, remembered that “the next morning we were told not to discuss what had happened and to this day I have tried to suppress the ghastly memories of that night.”<sup>436</sup> Rumors flew through Bethnal Green. “The cowardly Jews were so terrified that they stampeded!”<sup>437</sup> Was it an old bomb that had fallen in the street? Without official word, many were left to speculate about the deaths. The real reason for the disaster, as the official report revealed, was the lack of an 18 shilling brick knee wall, which had been recommended by the Bethnal Green Borough Council. The plan to build it was rejected by the London Transport Board, which saw no reason to upgrade until the station was opened for business. Many residents of Bethnal Green claimed that there was a cover-up, a vast government conspiracy led by Herbert Morrison. At the 71st anniversary celebration marking the event, Leon Silver, President of the East London Central Synagogue, brought up once again the rumor that Jews had been behind it all, reminding the crowd that “this was absolutely not so.”<sup>438</sup>

The Bethnal Green Tube Disaster was the largest civilian disaster in the United Kingdom during the war (and accounted for all civilian deaths in Bethnal Green but one in 1943). The number of air raids increased in 1944, resulting in 92 deaths. The introduction of V2 Rockets was particularly deadly. “At sunrise on 13 June 1944 a curious chug-chug sound, like a motor-bike scraping across the sky, had suddenly stopped, followed by an almighty crash. It had

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<sup>435</sup> “Bethnal Green Tube Disaster Re-lived” in *Essex County Publications* (March 3, 2008), 1.

<sup>436</sup> Joan Martin, “Bethnal Green Tube Disaster” from *The Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust Histories*, 2003.

<sup>437</sup> Boris Johnson, *Johnson’s Life of London: the People who Made the City that Made the World* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012), 270.

<sup>438</sup> Rabbi Leon Silver, *Bethnal Green Tube Disaster Memorial Service Address*, March 3, 2014.



landed at Grove Road, Bethnal Green, cutting the railway bridge and rendering 266 people homeless.”<sup>439</sup> It was the first unarmed bombing of London. Twenty of these flying bombs fell in Bethnal Green that year.<sup>440</sup> Joan Styan was at a cinema in Bethnal Green when

Quite suddenly, a massive V2 rocket fell just behind the cinema and there was a huge blue flash from the screen which collapsed and the entire cinema was shrouded in choking, blinding smoke and debris. As it was a V2 rocket we had no warning and it if had been a few yards nearer, the cinema would have got a direct hit. The noise was deafening and was couple with the screams from the audience in their shock and panic to escape. We all crowded to the emergency exits which were flung open and we eventually staggered out into the clear, fresh air. We were breathless from the choking smoke and also from blinding fear.<sup>441</sup>

One incident, early in 1945, claimed the life of one person. The total of resident civilian deaths was 487. The total number of civilian deaths in Bethnal Green was 555, and 400 more were seriously injured.

The war tore apart the physical fabric of Bethnal Green. In all, 21,700 homes were destroyed or rendered unlivable. Bethnal Green Hospital, the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, the Central Library, Columbia Market, the power station in Bethnal Green Road, the Hadrian Estate, the Burnham Estate, the Vaughan Estate, the Bethnal Green Estate, St Matthews’ and St Paul’s Church in Gossett Street were just some of the buildings destroyed by enemy bombs.<sup>442</sup> St Matthews had only the four walls remaining, although parishioners pitched a tent in the enclave and held church services. During the war, services were conducted in the nave of the now open air church. Every Anglican Church in Bethnal Green was hit by some type of device. Some were destroyed, others left roofless hulls of their former selves. In St Paul’s, where the vicar had stretched his wartime rations by eating pigeons he caught in the belfry, the roof was blown out in

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<sup>439</sup> Maureen Waller, *London 1945: Life in the Debris of War* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2004), 20.

<sup>440</sup> Bethnal Green Medical Officer of Health Report 1949.

<sup>441</sup> Joan Styan, “Air Raids in London” from *BBC WW2 People’s War*

<sup>442</sup> Vale, *Bethnal Green’s Ordeal*, 11-13.

1940.<sup>443</sup> Two parishioners, Edna and Flossy, vividly recalled their time during the war. Edna was bombed out, and sent to live in an evacuees' household with fifteen people on three floors, only one frying pan and one cooking stove between them. The first floor used them first, then the second floor, then the third floor. Flossy was evacuated, "the only blight on [her] record."<sup>444</sup> Eight places of worship, including a synagogue and Roman Catholic Church, were permanently decommissioned.<sup>445</sup>

Despite the mounting fatalities, life did carry on in some normal ways. Derek Houghton left school at age fourteen, sent out into the world to find a job. He worked in a factory for 15 shillings a week, moving things with another boy. As the air raids continued, they "would dash up to the factory roof which had an excellent view over London. We could see the flying bombs coming over quite clearly, the throb, throb, throb of their engines, with flames spurting out, suddenly coming to a stop and gliding down to earth, creating death and destruction."<sup>446</sup> His company sent him all over London, and he saw many instances of destruction first hand. Melville Troy, writing of the after effects of bombing, "noted that it was extraordinary 'how quickly devastated streets are put right – completely out of business one day and carrying on as usual a day or two later, and how normal a great part of London looks in spite of the many disasters to individual localities."<sup>447</sup> Bethnal Green residents scavenged damaged sights, carting away building materials and extra bits and bobs to decorate, but for the most part, their scars remained very visible.

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<sup>443</sup> Heather Atkinson, Oral Interview conducted 4 March, 2014.

<sup>444</sup> Heather Atkinson, Oral Interview conducted 4 March, 2014.

<sup>445</sup> Bethnal Green Medical Officer of Health Report 1949

<sup>446</sup> Houghton, *A Bethnal Green Memoir*, 110.

<sup>447</sup> Grayzel, *At Home and Under Fire*, 288.

Emily passed away during the war as well. No official records of her death exist. She was 70 years old at the outset of the war. She was not one of the 555 civilian deaths in Bethnal Green recorded specifically related to the war. Mary Ellen probably left Wennington Road at that time. The Abley family, who had been present on Wennington Road since at least 1881, and in Bethnal Green since the early 1800s, was no longer there. Some members lived in nearby Hackney. Others had scattered to the suburbs of London. Beatrice would pass away in 1953 in Hertfordshire. Ben died in March of 1960 at Wood Green. He was survived by Alice, Benjamin Matthews, and Constance. Frederick died in 1967 at Waltham Forest. Maud died in 1996 in Harlow. Mary Ellen never returned to Bethnal Green. She may have married and had children, but no records exist to document this. Her death date and location are unknown.

## CONCLUSION: AFTER THE WAR

The cheers of thousands filled the streets of London when the war was declared over. Bethnal Green joined in this celebration, and numerous memoirs tell of pints and kisses exchanged in the street. The dirty poor people of Bethnal Green had survived and triumphed once again. Bethnal Green's population at the end of the war, however, was little more than half what it had been in 1939. "The decline in Bethnal Green's population had started before the war, but it accelerated with the bombing."<sup>448</sup> Many who left during the war never returned. In 1947, the population of Bethnal Green was only two-thirds of its pre-war level. By the 1951 census, the numbers had dropped even further. "Officially, no Cockneys were born between 11 May 1941 and 1 December 1961 because Bow Bells (in the City of London) were destroyed in an air raid and not restored for twenty years."<sup>449</sup>

After the levelling of most of the East End by bombers in the Second World War, it took a while to pick up the pieces. Families displaced by the war were put on a waiting list which stretched to twenty-five years. Along with the end of the war came an economic slump, with hundreds of women displaced from factories in favor of returning men. The hundreds of civilian deaths took their toll on London. Many of the evacuated chose simply not to come back, having found a reasonable job elsewhere in Great Britain. The decades after the war showed a great pouring of people out from the urban areas of Britain. Public transportation and civil infrastructure improved to make commuting more feasible.

Some fifty thousand people still remained in Bethnal Green, however. George Vale tells us that they, "having endured the terrors of total warfare during nearly six years, [have] now emerged, scathed and scarred, but triumphant, to go forward as a most progressive Metropolitan

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<sup>448</sup> Waller, *London 1945*, 449.

<sup>449</sup> Gordon, *Little Book of the East End*, v.

Borough.”<sup>450</sup> St Paul’s was damaged in 1941, and the process of rebuilding commenced immediately following the war. Services were held in the farmhouse next door, which in 1949 was taken over by N.P. Mander Ltd. They operated an organ restoration, repair, removal, and building service which became world famous. Mander made his name first by restoring St Paul’s war-damaged organ.<sup>451</sup> With the energetic attentions of George Vale, the public library quickly recovered its pre-war status. He wrote passionately and eloquently of the intrepid spirit of the people of Bethnal Green. The people of Toronto, Canada, having read his tales, decided to hold a book drive. They collected some 1,500 books, which they sent to the library. In writing his and the people of Bethnal Green’s thanks, George concluded that “so far as we know, such a scheme as this had never been attempted between public libraries of two countries, and there is ground for pride in the fact of Bethnal Green having been singled out in this way.”<sup>452</sup>

Housing, of course, constituted a huge problem. The Medical Officer of Health wrote in 1949 that “although the population of Bethnal Green has decreased ... [in] recent years ... the borough still has its housing problems, which the council and the London County Council are making bold and successful efforts to solve.”<sup>453</sup> Some areas of Bethnal Green were quickly cleared of debris, renovated, made safe, or declared unsalvageable. Others languished on as the private property owner’s problem. Legal certification of property in London was an issue in the 1950s. How much of Bethnal Green’s property belonged to whom? Vast lots were left vacant, or almost vacant. Pictures of Bethnal Green in the 1950s were often of dilapidated buildings next to war damage. There was no money to invest, and little interest in recovery, of some of the

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<sup>450</sup> Vale, *Old Bethnal Green*, 23.

<sup>451</sup> *The Story of St Peter’s in Bethnal Green*, 7.

<sup>452</sup> George F. Vale, “Canada’s Gift to Bethnal Green” from *Ontario Library Review* (5 Sept 1947), 404.

<sup>453</sup> Bethnal Green Medical Officer of Health Report, 1949.

areas. In 1957, however, the Borough received much needed financing. They bought chunks of land in the eastern end of Bethnal Green, and began to build tall apartment buildings, in a modern and abstract confection of steel and concrete. Efforts continued through until the 1970s. Apartment buildings still dominate today's Bethnal Green.

Despite the population exodus and physical rebuilding, something of the old Bethnal Green survived, as Peter Wilmott and Michael Young discovered when they moved into Bethnal Green in the early 1950s. They were social scientists, eager to study this famous area. They released ground-breaking studies on family, kinship, young boys, and male friendships. In their 1957 publication *Family and Kinship in East London*, Wilmott and Young found that the people still lived and separated themselves by old histories and prejudices. "I reckon it's nice – this part of Bethnal Green Road I'm talking about ... I'm not talking of Brick Lane or that end. Here we're by Victoria Park ... It's all right on this side of the canal ... I wouldn't like to live on the other side of the canal. It's different there ... I am not particular where you send me, the farther the better ... I'd like to be back in Bethnal Green."<sup>454</sup> The social dividers that they found were the same ones found 65 years before by Charles Booth. These social designations worked to united people as much as divide them, creating communities from historical identities. Newcomers to the area found it difficult to fit in to new areas, as Mrs. Tawney tells us: "We're both from Bow. We're not very well known around here ... in Bow you know everybody, grew up with everybody, everybody recognized you. Over here, they're a bit on the snobbish side."<sup>455</sup> The experiment of 1900 had failed, and the Bethnal Green identity was fractured for many. The remaining identities were instilled by traditional values. One woman, describing the sense of

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<sup>454</sup> Peter Wilmott and Michael Young, *Family and Kinship in East London* (New York: Penguin Books, 1957), 111.

<sup>455</sup> *Ibid*, 112.

belonging, said “well, you’re born into it, aren’t you? You grow up here. I don’t think I’d like to live anywhere else. Both my husband and me were born here and have lived here all our lives ... I suppose when you’ve always lived here you like it.”<sup>456</sup>

### **Bethnal Green Today**

Development over time is shown clearly in the layers of construction. Progressing down streets of Victorian terraced garden houses, one might dead end on a Regency-era circle. Distinctive types of Council Housing show across Bethnal Green for all the decades from 1800 to the 1980s, except for the 1940s. Some areas of Bethnal Green show the march of technology’s progress and end as well. The Northeastern Railroad Company Lines, which looped along the belly of Bethnal Green, were discontinued for use after 1940. Buildings began to spring up on the tracks, over them, and around them, leaving behind a permanent impression via brickwork arches which propelled railways over roadways. Other railroad space in Bethnal Green was coopted and absorbed into the public transportation system. Public space was reexamined, remodeled, and at times reorganized to further aid the population. Victoria Park was joined into a network with 200 other parks in the Greater London area in anticipation of the 2012 London Olympics. It is often called the ‘Necklace’, with the prefix determined by whether the speaker is for or against the plan. Locals call it the ‘Togs Necklace,’ claiming that park pieces don’t resemble a necklace so much as a line of dog defecation. Officials accept the nickname of the ‘Queen’s Necklace,’ as it was officially completed for Elizabeth’s Jubilee. Perhaps they are hoping that the local appellation will disappear like the racy street names did in the 1800s.

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<sup>456</sup> *Ibid*, 113.

Bargains are the byword of the Roman Road Arch Market. After the devastating blow of the Zeppelin bombing in World War I, it was again subjected to air raids in World War II. A few neighboring houses were destroyed, but by and large the area remains the same as it was one hundred years ago. Narrow streets lead to apartment buildings, two-up and two-down, although the number of people living in them is greatly reduced. Rent pricing is different as well. To purchase a lease in one of these places, roughly £100,000 is necessary. Rent is subject to a year lease, and runs close to £800. Regent's Canal is the string upon which the Queen's necklace is strung in Bethnal Green, segregating the eastern edge of old Bethnal Green. Wennington Road still exists, though it is little more than footpath. Gardener and Ashwell Roads were levelled and repurposed, turned into a park. The housing on Wennington Road was destroyed as well, leaving only the large warehouse that had stood at the corner since 1842. Wennington Green was part of an effort to link Meath Gardens and Victoria Park to the Queen's Necklace. It has three modern sculptures in it, smooth shapes of concrete most commonly used as perching surfaces for runners to adjust their laces. The towpath running alongside Regent's Canal, from Victoria Park until it runs out of Bethnal Green in the south, was expanded and paved. It is used frequently by numerous runners, joggers, bicyclists, and pedestrians. Victoria Park is no longer the "preservation of green space" and sanitary space it once was. The green space remains, but the park is no longer used as a method of public hygiene. Swimmers are prohibited from the ponds within. The bathing hall is gone, as are many of the structures once adorning its greens. The Chinese pagoda remains in the center of one pond, but most of the buildings have been demolished in favor of a manicured lawn, bordered by bursts of hedges and colors of flowers along every path. Any day finds it filled with the sounds of children at play and adults chatting.



The paved walkways are well-used. Recreations of the ‘Dogs of Alcibiades’ now preside over the Bonner Entrance, as well as reconstructed gates.<sup>457</sup>

In the north-west corner of Bethnal Green, infamous site of slums, the London Council Housing still holds the majority of the buildings. It is a relatively safe neighborhood for residents, because the “drug dealers know them and leave them alone.”<sup>458</sup> The streets are the narrow, twisted back-alleys of Ripperlore, and there is little reason for people to go down them at night. The residents, however, are as mixed as on any of the streets of Bethnal Green. Council housing is supplied at the same purchase rate as other, similar locations in Bethnal Green, approximately £100,000 for a flat. Rent, however, is as low as £500 per month, one of the most sought after rates in London. Waiting lists for housing in Bethnal Green grow as demand for a place in the city grows. As tenants grow older, they are still inheriting the rent-rates of their ancestors, modified only for inflation. Their children may choose to inherit after them.

The youngest children of the last generation born in Bethnal Green before the outbreak of World War II turned 75 in 2014. Few of them remain in Bethnal Green. There are some in a small band of houses threading along Old Bethnal Green Road, and they are noted among their neighbors. They taught the Cockney ways to their children, including the rhyming slang of the costers, but without the ever-present mimicry in the street, the Cockney slang underwent a long period of disuse. It has been revived recently, and revamped, to appeal to tourists. Many of the residents of Bethnal Green work outside the borough.

New construction is showing in Bethnal Green. All along Cambridge Heath Road and east along Roman Road, old buildings are getting facelifts, renovation and reconditioning in one.

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<sup>457</sup> The original recreations of a Hellenistic era sculpture were presented to the park by Lady Aignarth in 1912. They were damaged in the Great War, and removed in 1920. New reproductions were placed instead.

<sup>458</sup> Heather Atkinson, “Oral Interview” conducted 4 March 2014

Some buildings have been razed in an effort to build more comfortable residential space. Those Bethnal Green residents who have lived in the area since before the war are concerned what will happen to their property after they die. “Our kids have no interest, they’ve gone off to other places, and what’re we to do with the place?”<sup>459</sup> Many have opted to sell out of their leases, as Council housing in the area retails for as much as £100,000 to buy. They receive a tidy compensation packet, and retire nearer to where their children and grandchildren live. Very few families care to carry on the legacy of pre-war generations.

Most of the residents of Bethnal Green rely on public transportation. Most places do not offer on-site parking, and there are not many car parks. Instead, every morning and evening, a stream of people walk to the Bethnal Green Tube Station, which has entrances on all four corners of Cambridge Heath Road, Bethnal Green Road, and Roman Road. The entrance which was the sight of a World War II disaster is lightly shaded by the beginnings of a memorial. The “Stairway to Heaven,” commemorates the victims of the Bethnal Green Tube Disaster. It is a great marble and concrete structure, with small brass studs in the concrete around it, one for each who lost their life there that day. When completed, it will have a teak awning, with one hole punched in it for each victim lost. It has been difficult to raise funds for the project, which requires another £80,000 as of the writing of this work. Various pledges have been made, including £10,000 by Boris Johnson, mayor of London. Much of the money comes from outside the Borough, collected by survivors at an annual memorial service held at St. Johns. The Pearly Kings and Queens attend every year, and spend the next several days collecting for the fund in the Tube Station and on the streets. There is no longer a Pearly King or Queen representing Bethnal Green alone. The Tower Hamlets King now reigns over the area.

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<sup>459</sup> Sydney Perkins, Oral Interview conducted 4 March, 2014

Now, the area of Bethnal Green Road, Roman Road, and neighborhoods on either side are known as Bengali-town, a reflection of the vast numbers of migrants from the area of Bangladesh. They are the transmitters of a different culture. No longer the stench of poverty, replaced by the smell of doner and the spices of Asia. The grey institutional color of clothing, and the black and white of “respectability,” have been replaced with brightly colored saris and sherwanis. As buildings decay and crumble, they are replaced with accommodating flats for £100,000.

Of the five remaining Anglican churches, four have been fully restored from war damage. St Johns had suffered years of neglect in addition to the war damage, and restoration is ongoing. The Library is still in use, offering free night classes in English, free reading instruction, and books to borrow. The Museum has changed names, but little else, to the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood, and many people come from all over to see it. Brick Lane, Roman Road, and Columbia Flower Markets still exist, as does the market culture. Today’s markets are about the tourist crowd, however, and the East End string of markets has become synonymous with vintage shopping. Clothing, shoes, flea sales, and antique hunting are the prime attraction. Roman Road is the only market which still continues to function as a strictly neighborhood market.

Despite the diversity of modern day Bethnal Green, there are few barriers in communication. Neighbors at street stalls will call out for translation, and any of their fellow market people will help them. English, Arabic, and Bengali fly through the air, broken only by the occasional other language. The influx of immigrants to London, particularly from former British colonies, did much to shape the continuing culture of Bethnal Green. Today, the central area of Bethnal Green, and extending all the way up and down Bethnal Green Road, is known as Bengali-town. The firehouse built in 1887 has now become the London Buddhist Centre. Lamb

doner and fish and chip shops reside side by side on the street. Women's clothing is mixed, an overwhelming majority reflecting the cultural traditions of the Bengali people by the wearing of bright and colorful saris and the religious piety of Islam in the sober and dark colored hijab; dresses, jeans, sweaters, punk hairstyles and the like are not unknown. The north-west corner is where you are most likely to find those residents with familial roots predating the war. They stayed on in the harshest of conditions, and helped little by little to rebuild their area. Efforts to modernize and adapt to changing traditions have met with mixed success.



Fig. 19: Praxis Church, Modern Day

West on Bethnal Green Road, not far from the intersection with Cambridge Heath is a small church. It was partially restored after the war, having been heavily bombed along the south-west side. The architecture is strangely emblematic of Bethnal Green. From the street side, the front three-quarters of the church are that of a 1800s Gothic Revival, with a belfry and turreted arches. The back half of

the church is modern steel and glass, a product of the design era of the 1960s. Inscribed on one stone is the identification of the building company, and on another set of stones are a series of children's-style murals, replete with the message of the kindness of God. Praxis, the church which now exists in that space, is a mixed denomination church, primarily involved in outreach to new Christians. The roof and inside, like many churches in Bethnal Green, were likely devastated by the war. It was rebuilt, but with a fundamental design change. The narrow church was kept partitioned from the modern attachment, but the belfry and all space was kept empty.



roll up, put up a display rack, and throw up their merchandise in a well-practiced dance. The street comes alive as the morning progresses and the crowds get thicker. Silk saris beckon next to displays of bright costume jewelry. Small markets sell fresh fruit. Electronic stores promising to jailbreak an iPhone or fix a cracked screen. Small delis offer poultry, halal meats, eggs, milk, rice, beans, hot peppers, and curry. Local takeout shops offer Bengali cuisine. There are few halal butchers in the area, because there is no longer enough open land to graze in. Some people do still keep chickens, and there is a goat who famously keeps a terraced garden cropped near Brick Lane. Every corner along the way develops an extra thick display of goods, as marketers try to get to as many customers as they can. The open air market is alive and well, particularly at Brick Lane: Throngs of people crowd in, even on rainy days, to buy things. Bargain hunters come early in the morning, armed with lists and prices, prepared to haggle down to a penny. There is rarely a language barrier. Most of the shopkeepers speak some combination of English, Arabic, or Bengali. Help translating is the next stall over. Stall keepers mind each other's store, quote prices on neighboring tables, and happily point customers to interesting items 'across the way' or 'over there.' A trifold display of silk head scarves, in every color imaginable, shields the observer's eyes from the sight their nose is sensing exists. Down the side street to the next market is where the food lies, everything from Japanese to Greek to espresso done out of the back of a repurposed London black cab. The oldest bookstore in the East End, open on Brick Lane since 1811, throws its doors open and has 50 shilling sales on the sidewalk. Designer dress vintage boutiques throw out luring samples. Corner stores become rapidly crowded when a spate of rain hits the area, but umbrellas are opened and off the bargain-seeking crowd goes. Vintage is the byword of the Brick Lane market.

Perhaps the most fundamental change is that officially, Bethnal Green no longer exists. The reworking and rezoning of London resulted in many changes. Bethnal Green was absorbed into the Tower Hamlets in 1965. The Bethnal Green Tube Station is the County of London's only official recognition of Bethnal Green. Throughout the former Borough, however, signs have been put up by the Tower Hamlets Council and local residents acknowledging the area's former name.

Bethnal Green was unique in the annals of London history from 1881 to 1945. It received the most attention from philanthropic groups, especially the "five-percent philanthropy" groups. Over the course of sixty-four years, Bethnal Green would also experience an unprecedented amount of building and slum clearance schemes by civic methods. Despite concerted effort, overcrowding was not abated by these means. It took the evacuation of London during World War II to bring the population in line with housing available in the area. Bethnal Green residents who distrusted the government would only have had more reason to do so after the decade preceding the war and the war itself. Despite the stated preference of residents for individual houses, which enabled them to plant gardens and keep small animals, London County Council, the Borough, and private companies installed more of the model dwelling houses. Bethnal Green in 1881 had been a relatively flat area of London, with the only buildings above two-and-a-half stories being the churches and Columbia Market and Square. By 1939, the skyline of Bethnal Green was dramatically altered, and most of the buildings were three stories or taller. The bombing of Bethnal Green levelled whole neighborhoods. Despite this, there was a relatively low mortality rate. The largest number of deaths can be directly attributed to the Bethnal Green Tube Disaster, a seemingly preventable disaster. For all the hardship that Bethnal Green endured, the betrayal of the government was felt keenly.

The generation which grew up in the interwar period of Bethnal Green enjoyed the most advantages, whether civic or charitable. Education reached a peak in this period, and secondary learning institutions, like the Museum and Library, were key to the improved circumstances. Hospitals throughout Bethnal Green also offered instruction to locals, and technical training courses were offered throughout the Borough. Churches throughout the area instituted any number of learning courses, focused on helping residents transition from invisible labor employment to positions as clerks, teachers, nurses, etc. It was this that most aided the residents, for education was the key to removing them from impoverished circumstances. With better education came better opportunities, and the people were not reliant on public relief to better themselves. No single institution had more to do with the changing of Bethnal Green's economic circumstance than the School Board.



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### **A Brief Explanation of Primary Sources Used**

Charles Booth began a project in 1885 as a critical response to the assertion that 25 percent of Londoners lived in abject poverty. This project devolved to the *Life and Labour in London* series, which began publishing in 1889. By the end of this project, in 1905, Charles

Booth, his team of investigators, and fellow writers discovered that the poverty rate was even higher than had been asserted. The conditions of the impoverished were worse than the most pessimistic assumptions. The works were instrumental in changing public opinion. Beginning with the elite, and passing down to the middle class, the conditions of lower classes were trumpeted to the world. Most of Booth's work was unpublished, however. The London School of Economics has recently published notebooks which are the work of Charles Booth and his investigators. They were instrumental in changing Booth's mind, as well as influencing his later publications. For the purposes of this work, only five notebooks were used. The entire collection is available online at <http://booth.lse.ac.uk/static/b/districts.html>. The notebooks used for this work are as follows:

#### District 9: Bethnal Green North and South

B349 – Inspector Pearn, December 1897

B350 – Inspectors Pearn and Drew, January 1898, George Duckworth, January 1899

#### District 10: Bethnal Green East

B351 – Sergeant French, March 1898

B352 – Sergeant Barker, March-April 1898

B355 – Sub-Division Inspector W. Miller, November 1898

These notebooks provided invaluable outsider perspective of street-level detail about Bethnal Green. They are written in short-hand, from a first person perspective. For the purposes of this work, some creative license has been applied to create a conversational style.

In addition to the outsider perspective offered by Booth and his researchers, much indebtedness is owed to the insider perspective offered by the Medical Officers' of Health for Bethnal Green, beginning with George Paddock Bate in 1877. Much of the statistical information provided throughout this work came from the Medical Officer Health Reports, published annually. They

are available digitally through <http://wellcomelibrary.org>. For the purposes of this work, the reports from 1877 to 1951 were used.

Electoral information was gleaned from a number of sources, including the Electoral Rolls and Registers available in digital format online through <http://ancestry.co.uk>. For the purposes of this work, the rolls and registers from 1831 to 1911 were used. Statistical information regarding voting was also taken from *A Vision of Britain Through Time*, available at <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/place/968/units>.

The Abley Family sections were reconstructed through the use of censuses dating from 1831-1911. In addition, electoral rolls, homeowner rolls, and tax rolls were used. For the younger generation, military information was taken from medal rolls, volunteer cards, and the Bethnal Green Library Roll of Honour. More information on Bethnal Green War Memorials can be found online at <http://www.bethnalgreenwarmemorials.com>.

The BBC began a project in 1947 to catalogue living memories of war veterans, both military and civilian. These efforts are available online and at the Imperial War Museum Archives, located in London. Wherever possible, a direct website has been used to note those available online. In addition, the Stairway to Heaven Memorial Foundation has made a considerable effort to record memories of those most directly affected by the Bethnal Green Tube Disaster. They hold an annual memorial for the disaster *in siteiu* at which some recordings were taken, with the permission of the subject, by the author. Heather Atkinson, the historian for St. Peter's Bethnal Green, also expended considerable effort to provide some recordings, personal testimonials, and archival material to the author. In all, some fifty recordings were used, many of which were primarily used to provide an appropriate sense of the "Cockney" cant and accent. The author has transcribed to the best of her ability, using phonetic spelling common

to the American dialect. Where a standardized spelling is available, it has been used. It is important to note that the Cockney cant called for a long vowel sound on the first stressor or syllable of a word. Words of more than three syllables were generally reduced by the middle syllable; governor becomes guvna, or more commonly guv. There are several dictionaries of the Cockney cant available online, as well as via traditional means, such as a Cockney Dictionary published by Rand McNally as late as 2006. Tourist pamphlets, as well as UK Historical Informational Cards, record further the Cockney language. The most common form of accent in Bethnal Green today is that of an Indian born family. Younger generations speak the King's English in a broad and flat London accent. Some effort has been made to record the dying Cockney accent by local and private groups.

## APPENDIX 1: CHARITIES IN BETHNAL GREEN

	Primary Endower	Year Founded (Year Endowed)	1818-1837	1857-1876	1890-1904		Special Changes (Year)
Poor's Land		1690		£59 spent on coal (1820) £154 income (1834)	£172 income 100 recipients (1857) 190 recipients (1868)	£307 income 20 weekly pensions (1896)	Lease land to Matthew Wright (1722) Northern close sold to Bethnal Green Museum (1868) Majority of land under control of London County Council (1893)
	Prisca Coburn	1701					Association ended (1743)
	Dame Sarah Pritchard	1718					Association ended (1743)
Fisher's		1711					Merged with Trinity Almshouses (after 1836)
Parmiter's	Thomas Parmiter	1722 (1682)		£338 income (1819)	£400 income (1863)	£1,262 income (1894)	Gloucester Street site purchased, three new almshouses (1838) New estate purchased – 1/3 income used for

							almshouse (1884) Two new almshouses at Gloucester Street (1891) Almshouses merged with Widow's Fund (1913) Thomas Rippin leaves £600 to almshouses (1927) Bombed (1945)
Spitalfield's	William Henry Lee	1720					
Spitalfield's Widows	John Peck	1739					No further association with parish (1795) Closed (1838) Moved to Islington (1841-1842)
George Crump's	Mary Edith Crump	1925					New building bought (1933) Combined with Mary Bowry's charity (1933)
	John George Fabry	1794		Dividends £7 14s. 1d.	Dividends £8 4s. 7d. (1857)	No distribution (1890-	



				(1819)		1894)	
Bread		1817		£120 consols £50 annuities (1817)	£38 income (1857)	£88 income (1893)	Joseph Merceron - £200 endowed (1840) Merged with Educational Charities (1933)
Bread, Dole, Clothing, Coal	Nehemiah Robson	1863			£2 9s. 4d. Dividends (1864)		Distributed on St Thomas Day, but irregular
Bread, Coal	Louisa Fontaneau	1893				£41 income (1894)	
Bethnal Green Philanthropic Pension		1822			£478 income 41 pensioners (1870)	£4,235 government securities (1894)	Purchased property in Hackney (1906) Purchased property in Islington (1914) Sold property Hackney and Islington (1930- 1949)
	Robert Leverington	1865			40 recipients (1865)	£36 13s. 4d. Dividends 37 recipients (1894)	
Hastelow Pension Fund	Henry Hastelow	1892				£346 income 53 recipients (1892)	
Dole	George Fournier	1841			£133 income	£119 income	Created trust under

					(1861)	12 recipients (1894)	St Matthew's (1884)
Dole	Alexander Truss	1864 (1851)				£45 income 9 recipients (1894)	
Dole	George Robertson	1862					Scheme enacted (1897)
Dole	Esther Doe	1871			£10 annuities (1871-)		
Dole	Mary Baker	1872				£137 10s. income 28 recipients (1894)	
Dole	Jane Wood	1904					
Dole	Alfred Ewin	1910					
Dole	Emily Searley Long	1912					
Clothing	Margaret Vaughan	1843 (1836)				£47 income distributed (1893)	
Coal	James George Greenwood	1837			£39 income (1861)	£36 income 61 recipients (1893)	
Parmiter's	Jemima Margaret Thomas	(1854)			£100 stock – Henry Merceron (1864)	£100 consols – Jane Thomas (1892) 3 recipients (1894)	Merged with Parmiter's Almshouse (1913)
Parmiter's	Thomas Parmiter	1722 (1682)		£338 income (1819)	£400 income (1863)	£2243 income (1894)	Gloucester Street site purchased, school moved (1838) New estate purchased – 2/3 income

							used for school (1884) school moved (1891) School becomes separate foundation (1913) Thomas Rippin leaves £500 to school (1927)
Greenwood's Gift	James George Greenwood	1837					Merged with other educational charities (1933)
	George Robertson	1862			St Matthew's National School beneficiary		
	B. Wise	1900				Board School (1900)	

## APPENDIX 2: DEVELOPMENT AND TYPE OF BUILDINGS, 1872-1940<sup>461</sup>

Year	Name	Company or Founder	Type	Location	# of Blocks, Flats, etc.
1872	Leopold Buildings	Improved Industrial Dwellings Company	PMW	Columbia Road	
1876	Rush Mead			Elizabeth Street	
1877	Mansford Street			Saffron Close (Elizabeth Street to Bethnal Green Road)	
1877-1881	Red Cow Estates	Christopher Forrest	PVT	Edward Street	40 dwellings
1878-1880		Charles Firne	PVT	Darling Row	23 dwellings
1879	Huntingdon Buildings	Improved Industrial Dwellings Company	PMW		
1879			PVT	Rush Mead	8 dwellings
1879	Red Cow Estates Byde Estates	Bethnal Green Vestry	SLC	Bethnal Green Road	800 people
1879-1888	Fitches Estate	Alfred Ewin	PVT	Virginia Row, Crabtree Row, and Gascoigne Place	80 dwellings
1880	Gales Gardens	Bethnal Green House Property Association	PVT	Gales Gardens	35 dwellings
1880-1884			PVT	Key Street	29 dwellings
1880-1889	Wilmot House, Mansford Buildings, Toye's Buildings		PMW	Mansford Street	
1881	Mansford Street			Rush Mead	
1881	Red Cow Estates	Christopher Forrest	PVT	Busby Street	6 dwellings
1882	Linden Buildings	Henry Foskett	PMW	Brick Lane, Shackleswell Street, and Tyssen Street	

<sup>461</sup> Information for this was obtained from Baker, "Building and Social, 1876-1914" and "Building and Social, 1915-1945." PMW stands for Model Dwellings, SLC stands for Slum Clearance, and PVT stands for private houses.

1882-1883	Quinn Square	Thomas Quinn	PMW	Russia Lane	10 blocks
1883			PVT	Mansford Street	4 dwellings
1883-1884		George Chambers	PVT	Peel Grove	12 dwellings
1883-1884	Turney Estate	George Cannon	PVT	Pollard Row and Squirries Street	90 dwellings
1884		J.H. Johnson	PMW	Pereira Street	4 dwellings
1884		John Peppiatt	PVT	Ramsey Street	18 dwellings
1884	Fitches Estate	William Jones	PVT	Mount Street	17 dwellings
1884	Queen's Buildings		PMW	Prince's Place, Gosset Street, and Prince Street (Chambord Street)	6 model dwellings
1884		Christopher Forrest	PMW	Boundary Street	
1884		Christopher Forrest	PVT	Cambridge Road and Punderson Garden	22 dwellings
1884-1885	Hollybush Gardens	Vestry	PMW PVT	Hollybush Garden	15 houses, 1 model dwelling
1885		M. and A. Davis	PMW	Half Nicholl Street	1 block
1885-1887	Cooper's Gardens		PVT	Victoria Street and Cooper's Gardens	17 dwellings
1886	Red Cow Estates	Christopher Forrest	PVT	Granby Street	6 dwellings
1886-1887	Parmiter's Estate	Henry Winkley	PVT	Felix Street, Clare Street, Cambridge Circus	60 dwellings
1887			PMW	Lisbon Street	3 model dwellings
1887	Queen's Buildings		PMW	Prince's Place, Gosset Street, Chambord Street	2 model dwellings (200 people total)
1887	Willett Estate	Frederick Higgs	PVT	Derbyshire Street	14 dwellings
1888	Museum House	East End Dwelling Company	PMW	Victoria Park Square and Globe Road	166 people
1888	Willett Estate	Henry Winkley	PVT	Derbyshire Street	18 dwellings
1888-1889		Balaam Brothers	PVT	Mape St, Menotti Street, and Cheshire Street	20 dwellings
1890		Great Eastern Railroad Company	PMW	Winchester Street to railroad	3 model dwellings

1891	Linden Buildings	London County Council	PVT	Goldsmith's Row	1 dwelling, 144 people
1891	Brady's Buildings	B. Wire	PVT	Hart Lane	10 dwellings
1891-1894	Barnet Grove	B. Wire	PVT	Hart Lane (Barnet Grove 1897)	52 dwellings
1892		A.W. Price	PVT	Bonner Street and Mace Street	16 dwellings
1893-1894			PVT	Chambord Street	21 dwellings
1893-1894			PVT	Mount Street	14 dwellings
1894		East End Dwellings Company	PMW	Mansford Street	2 blocks
1895		B. Wire	PVT	Daniel Street	12 dwellings
1897	Ravenscroft Buildings	East End Dwelling Company	PMW	Ravenscroft Road, Columbia Road, Hassard Street	1 building, 194 tenements
1899		Davis Brothers	PVT	Brick Lane	11 dwellings
1899-1900	Snow's Estate	Davis Brothers	PVT	Boreham Street	32 dwellings
1899-1901		Charles Winkley	PVT	Temple Street, Canrobert Street, and Catherine Street	37 dwellings (33 shops, 8 workshops)
1900	Mendip House	East End Dwellings Company	PMW	Globe Road	
1900	Shepton House	East End Dwellings Company	PMW	Gawber Street and Kirkwall Street	
1901	Merceron House	East End Dwellings Company	PMW	Sugar Loaf Walk	
1901	Montfort House	East End Dwellings Company	PMW	Sugar Loaf Walk	
1901	Gretton House	East End Dwellings Company	PMW	Globe Street	
1901	Teesdale Street	Davis Brothers	PVT	Saffron Close	95 dwellings
1901		Davis Brothers	PVT	Blythe Street	50 dwellings (with workshops for cabinet makers and tailors)
1901		Guinness Trust	PMW	Hackney Road and	6 blocks

				Columbia Road	
1903-1906	Jarvis Estate		PMW	Somerford Street, Tapp Street, Barnsley Street, and Collingwood Street	8 blocks
1904			PMW	Brick Lane	2 model dwellings
1905	Evesham House	East End Dwellings Company	PMW	Old Ford Road	
1905	Moccatta House	4 Percent Industrial Dwelling Company	PMW	Brady Street	
1906	Globe Road, Cyprus Street	East End Dwellings Company	PMW	Globe Road	
1909	Bethnal Green Estate	Sutton Dwellings Trust	PMW	James Street (Sceptre Road)	8 blocks, 160 tenements
1910		Peabody Trust	PMW	Cambridge Crescent, Minerva Street, Felix Street, Centre Street	7 blocks, 140 flats
1911	Boundary Estate	London County Council	PMW	Boundary Street	23 blocks, 1,069 tenements, 5,524 people, 1 laundry, 188 shops, 77 workshops, 2 churches, 3 schools
1911	Bethnal Green		ALL		322 blocks, 4,716 flats, 13,327 other dwellings
1913			PVT	Chambord Street	10 dwellings
1914	Brady Street	London County Council	SLC	Brady Street	Ordered to comply with 1890 Act
1915		Peabody Trust	PMW	Minerva Street	1 block
1917		London County Council	SLC		5 condemned areas
1922	Brady Street	London County Council	SLC	Brady Street	
1922-1924	Burns, Milton, Moore, Morris, Shelley, Swinburne, and Whitman Blocks	Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green	PVT	Kirby's Castle, Bethnal Green	137 flats
1922-	Collingwood	London County	PMW	Brady Street	185 flats, 1,126

1927	Estate	Council			people
1926	Queen Margaret's Flats	Bethnal Green and East London Housing Association	PVT	St Jude's Road	15 flats
1927	Lenin Estate (renamed Cambridge-Heath Estate 1928)	Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green	PVT	Cambridge-Heath Road, Parmiter Street	32 flats
1927-1930	Harvey House, Blackwood House	Rowley Brothers	PVT	Merceron Road	
1929	Weavers House	Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green	PMW	Pedley Street	16 flats
1930	Teale Street	London County Council	PMW	Pritchard's Row	
1930	Rutherford House	Rowley Brothers	PMW	Brady Street	272 dwellings, 1600 people
1931	Vaughan Estate	Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green	PMW	Diss Street	20 flats
1932	Hadrian Estate	Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green	PMW	Hackney Road	83 flats
1933	Claredale Estate	Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green	PMW	Rush Mead	1 block, 73 flats
1933	Nag's Head Field	London County Council	SLC	Hackney Road and Border Street	
1934		Bethnal Green and East London Housing Association	PVT	Bonner's Road	
1934	Mulberry House	East End Dwelling Company	PMW	Victoria Park Square	
1934		London County Council	SLC	Potts Street, Hollybush Gardens, Ada Place, Pritchard's Row, Delta Street	
1934	Dinmont Estate	London County	PMW	Pritchard's Row	4 blocks, c. 60



		Council			flats, 1076 people
1934		London County Council	SLC		11 condemned sites
1935		London County Council	SLC	Pedley Street	
1936		London County Council	SLC	Darling Row and James Street	
1936	Hollybush House	London County Council	PMW	Hollybush Gardens to railroad	
1936		London County Council	PMW	Brady Street and Scott Street	8 dwellings
1936	Digby Estate	Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green	PMW	Globe Road	1 building, 55 flats
1936	Coventry House	Allen & Hanbury	PMW	Coventry Street	10 flats
1936			PMW	Cheshire Street and Menotti Street	Tenements and workshops
1936	Sebright Estate		PMW	34-40 Viaduct Street	1 block
1936		S. Leapman	PMW	107-109 Cambridge Road	1 building
1937		London County Council	SLC	Minerva Street, Emma Street, Vyner Street, Tent Street, Cooper's Gardens, Punderson's Gardens, Lansdell Place	
1937	Horwood Estate	London County Council	PMW	Bethnal Green Road, Potts Street	511 people
1937	Waterloo Estate	London County Council	PMW	Waterloo Road	4 blocks total (construction halted for war) – 1939, 152 flats completed, 107 under construction
1937		Nag's Head Housing Society	PMW	Shipton Street and Ropley Street	
1937	Delta Estate	Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green	PMW	Gosset Street	35 flats
1937		New Era Estates	PMW	Cheshire Street	24 flats
1938	Pritchard's	London County	PMW	Pritchard's Row	77 dwellings

	Estate	Council			
1938	Abingdon	London County Council	SLC	Herald Street	
1938	Northesk House	London County Council	PMW	Tent Street	61 dwellings
1938	Butler Estate	Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green	PMW	Bacton Street	40 flats
1938-1939		London County Council	SLC	Turin Street, Squirries Street	
1939	Burnham Estate	Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green	PMW	Globe Road and Burnham Street	80 flats
1939		Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green	PMW	Ravenscroft Street	
1939		London County Council		Minerva Street, Turin Street, Darling Row, James Street	2,170 flats built, 1,830 flats planned (375), (640), (198), (188)
1939		Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green			601 flats
1940	Colville House		PMW	Waterloo Road and Estate	

## **VITA**

Audrey Gray was born into a US Navy family stationed at Thurso, Caithness, Scotland. The majority of her growing up years were spent in New Hampshire, the Live Free or Die state. As an adult learner, she pursued a Bachelors in History, concentrating on Human Rights and Genocide, at Kennesaw State University. She is currently pursuing a Masters and Doctorate at Louisiana State University, with a concentration in British History, with particular emphasis on World War II and British Colonialism.