





Lifting the Curtain  
Revisiting Booth's East London

Keith Greenough



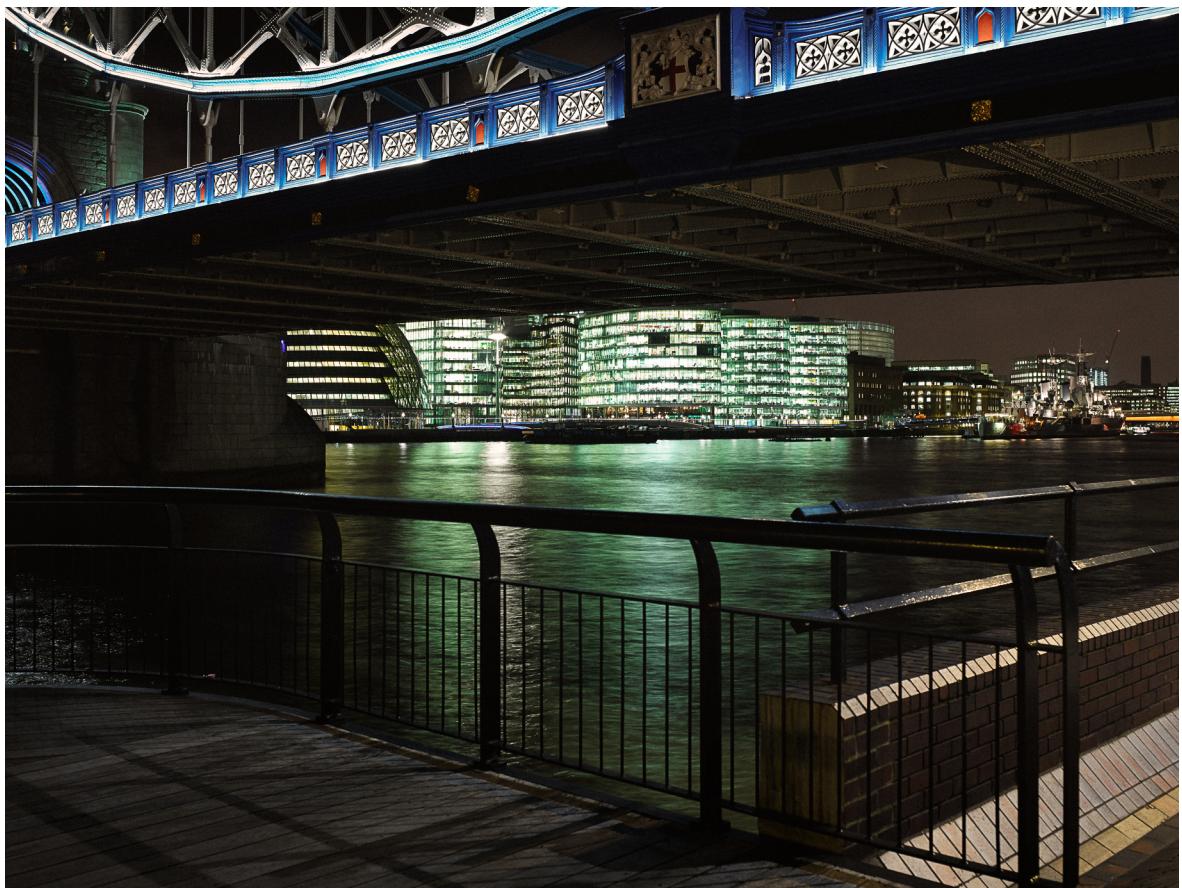
The idea for this book grew out of my fascination with East London and how it has been shaped by its history. It has been a site of continuous change for centuries - change driven by industrial growth and decline, waves of immigration, wartime devastation, and more recently post-industrial redevelopment and gentrification.

My interest led me to Charles Booth's 1889 socio-cultural survey, 'Life and Labour of the People'. Booth's view was that 'East London lay hidden from view behind a curtain on which were painted terrible pictures'. He believed that the mythology overwhelmed the reality. His mission was to lift the curtain and reveal the truth.

Lifting the Curtain revisits Booth's East London through a series of photographs of modern day places juxtaposed with texts extracted from his 1889 survey. The locations pictured are places Booth and his associates would have visited. The texts describe what they witnessed.

Whilst the images and texts are testimony to the changes which have taken place in East London, it is apparent that many of the social issues that Booth observed over 100 years ago still have resonance today.

Keith Greenough  
September 2014



“Let us imagine ourselves  
on board a Hamburg boat  
steaming slowly  
up the Thames...  
In the stern...  
Polish and Russian Jews...  
in their eyes  
an indescribable expression  
of hunted, suffering animals”

53

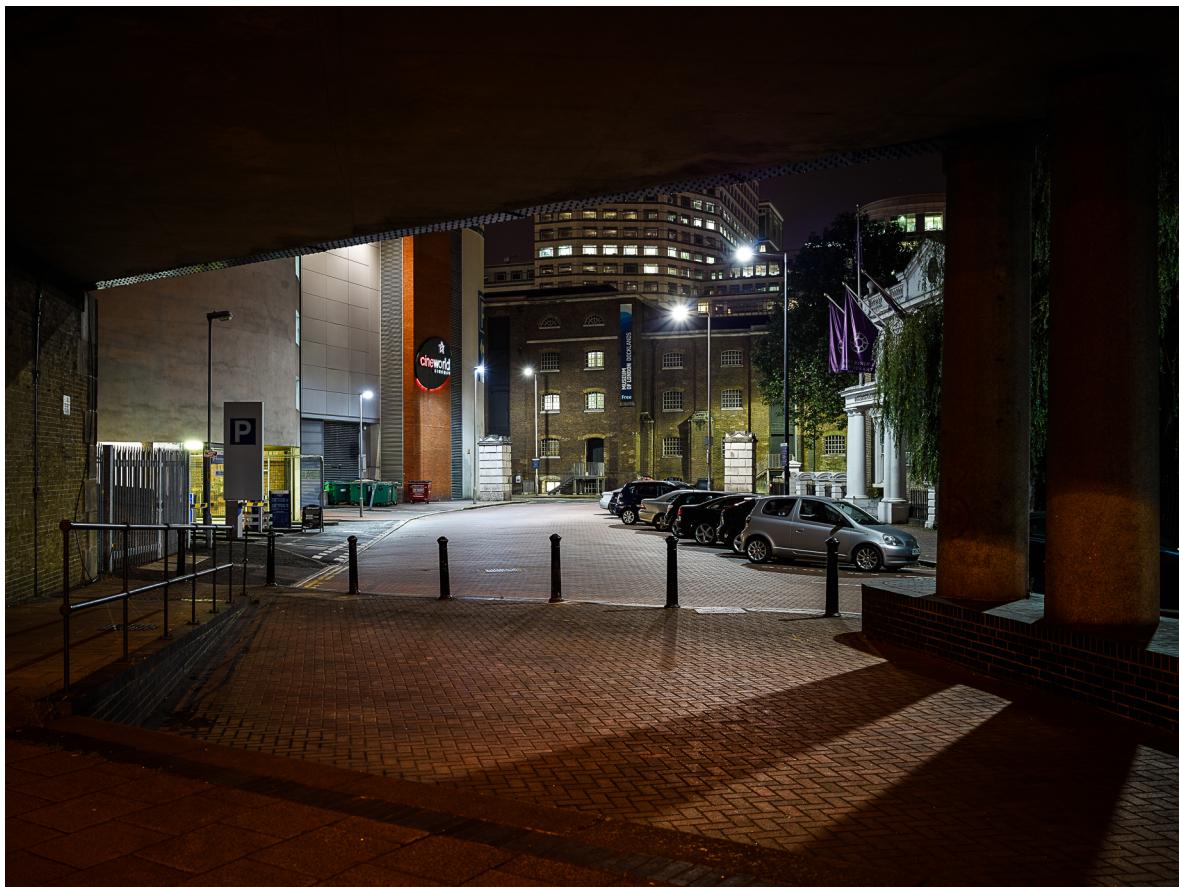
VICTORSTO



“The newcomers have  
gradually replaced the English  
...Hanbury Street...  
and many other streets...  
have fallen before them...  
they have introduced  
new trades  
as well as new habits,  
and they live  
and crowd together”



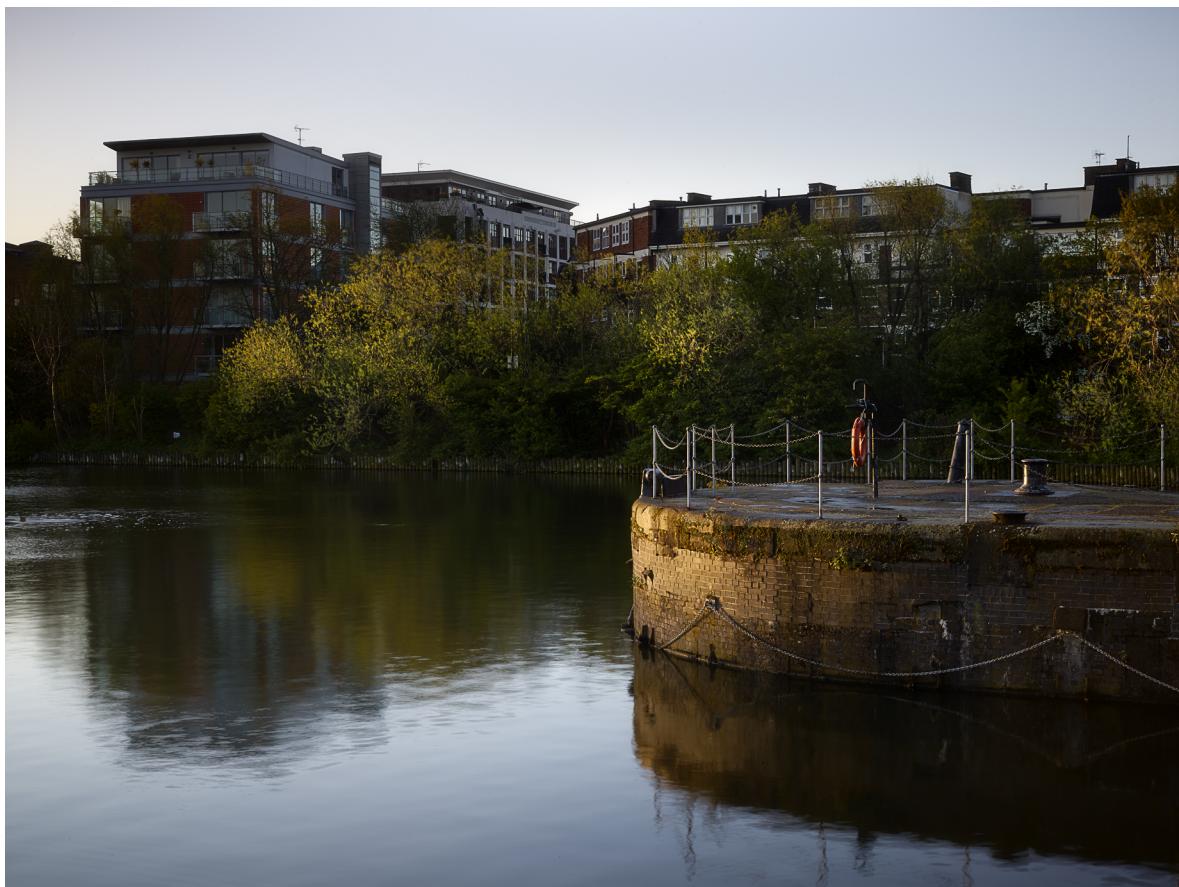
“This living and working  
in one room  
intensifies the evil...  
here it is overcrowding  
day and night —  
no ventilation to the room,  
no change to the worker”



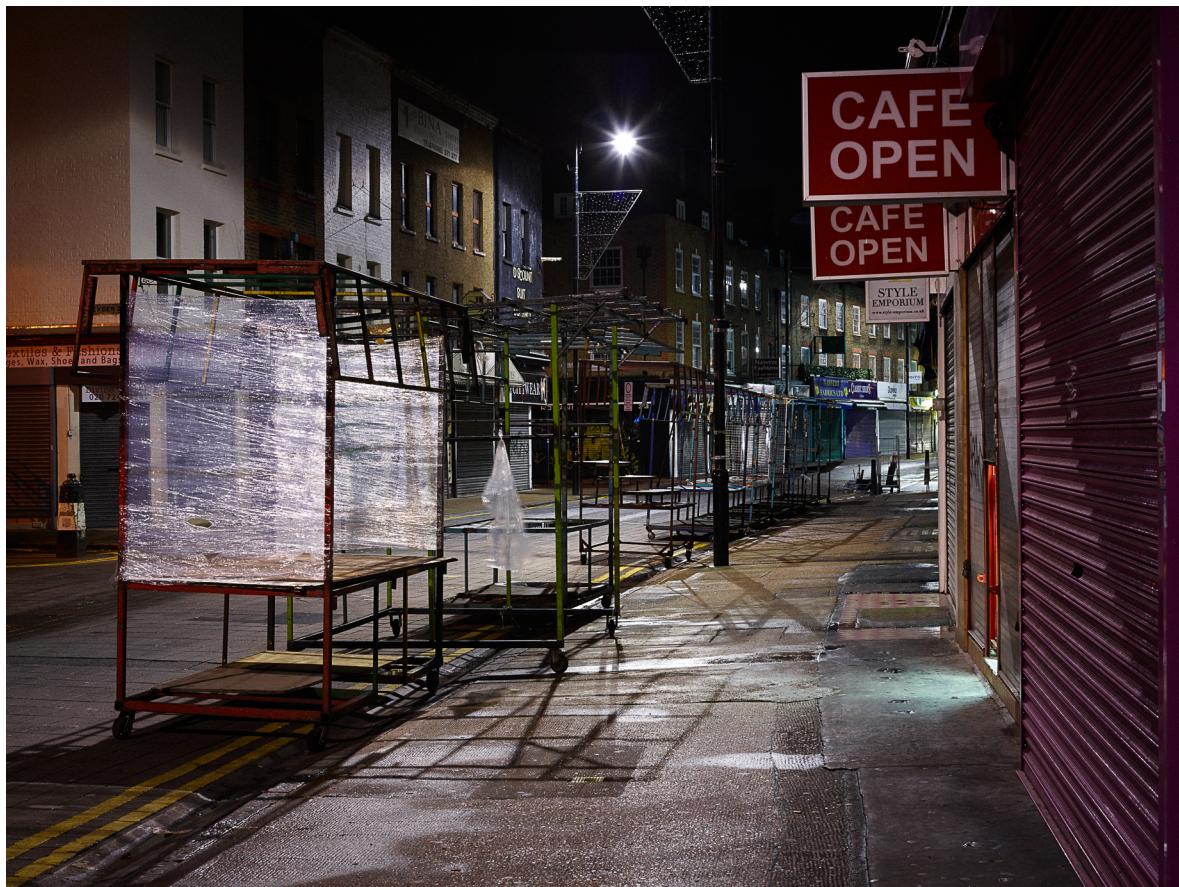
“The struggling mass  
surge into the docks....  
one would think  
it was life and death...  
But Jack having secured a ticket  
by savage fight,  
sells it to needier Tom...  
and goes off with the coppers  
to drink or to gamble’



“All work of the trade  
is carried on in factories...  
Women cigar-makers get  
from 15 to 40 per cent, less  
wages than men...  
some...when very quick  
with their fingers  
get as much as £1 a week”



“Most of the luxuries  
of our elaborate civilisation  
pass...through  
the dock labourer’s hands...  
The fine lady who sips her tea  
...and talks sentimentally  
of the masses,  
is unaware that she is  
tangibly connected with them”



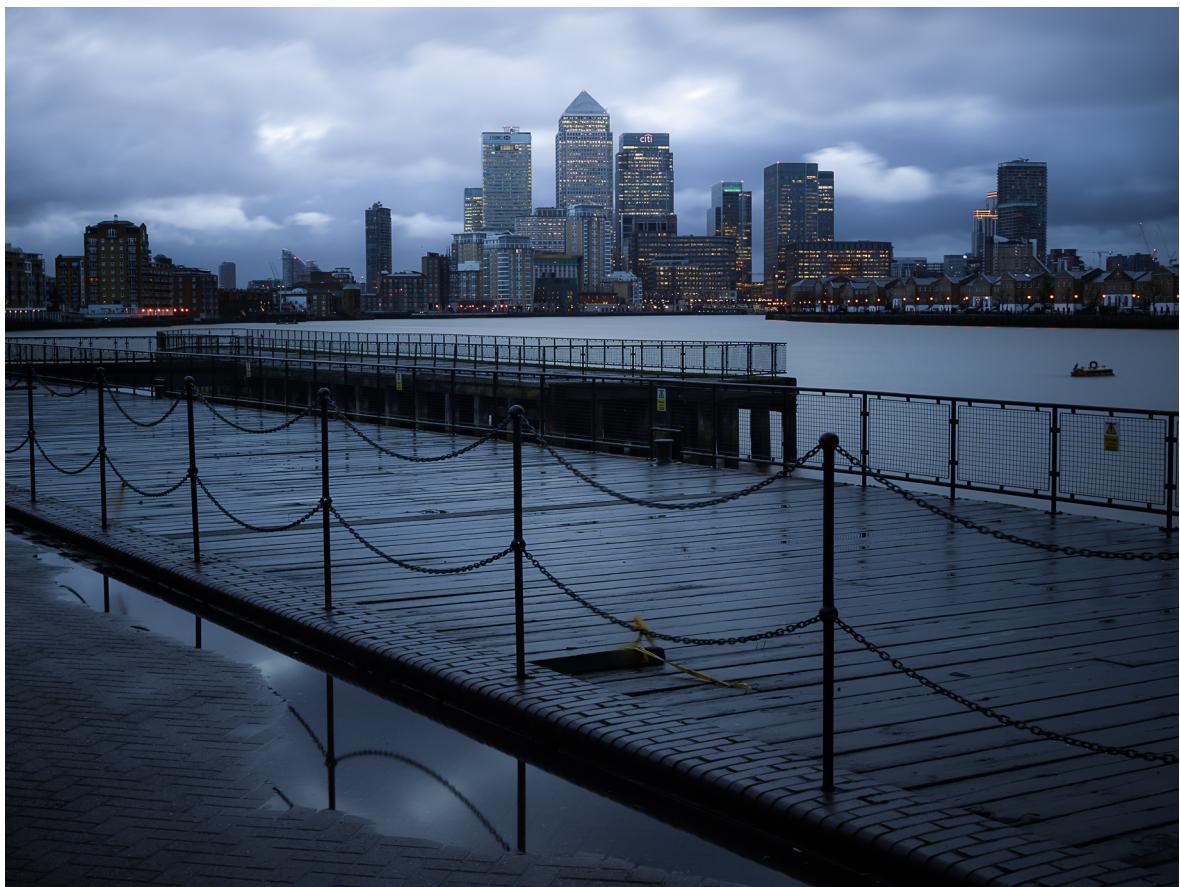
“Strange sights,  
strange sounds  
and strange smells.  
Streets so crowded as to be  
thoroughfares no longer...  
Petticoat Lane is  
the exchange of the Jew,  
but the lounge  
of the Christian”



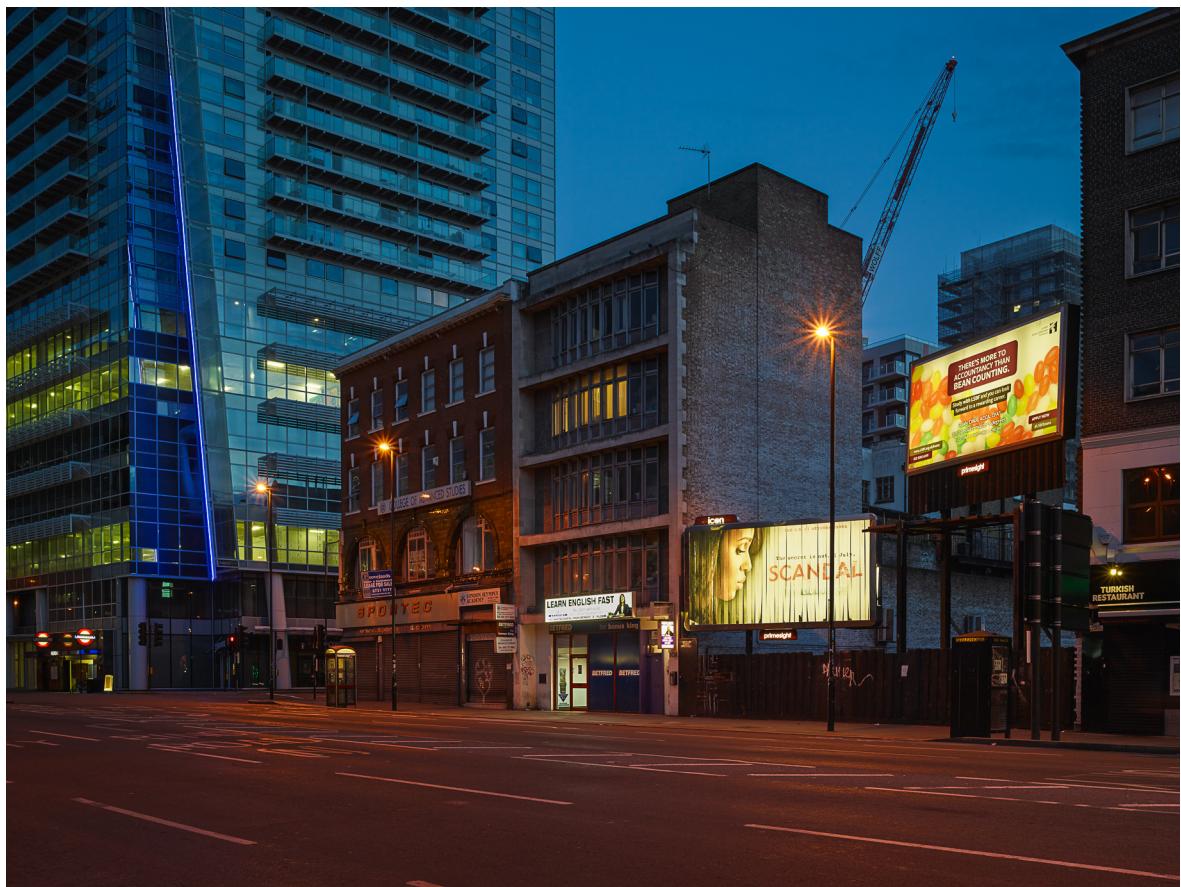
“Nearly all available space  
is used for building,  
and almost every house  
is filled up with families...  
The building of large blocks...  
only substitutes  
one sort of crowding  
for another”



“The line of the Regent’s Canal  
...is in itself a girdle  
of poverty,  
the banks of the canal being,  
along nearly its whole length,  
occupied by  
a very poor population”



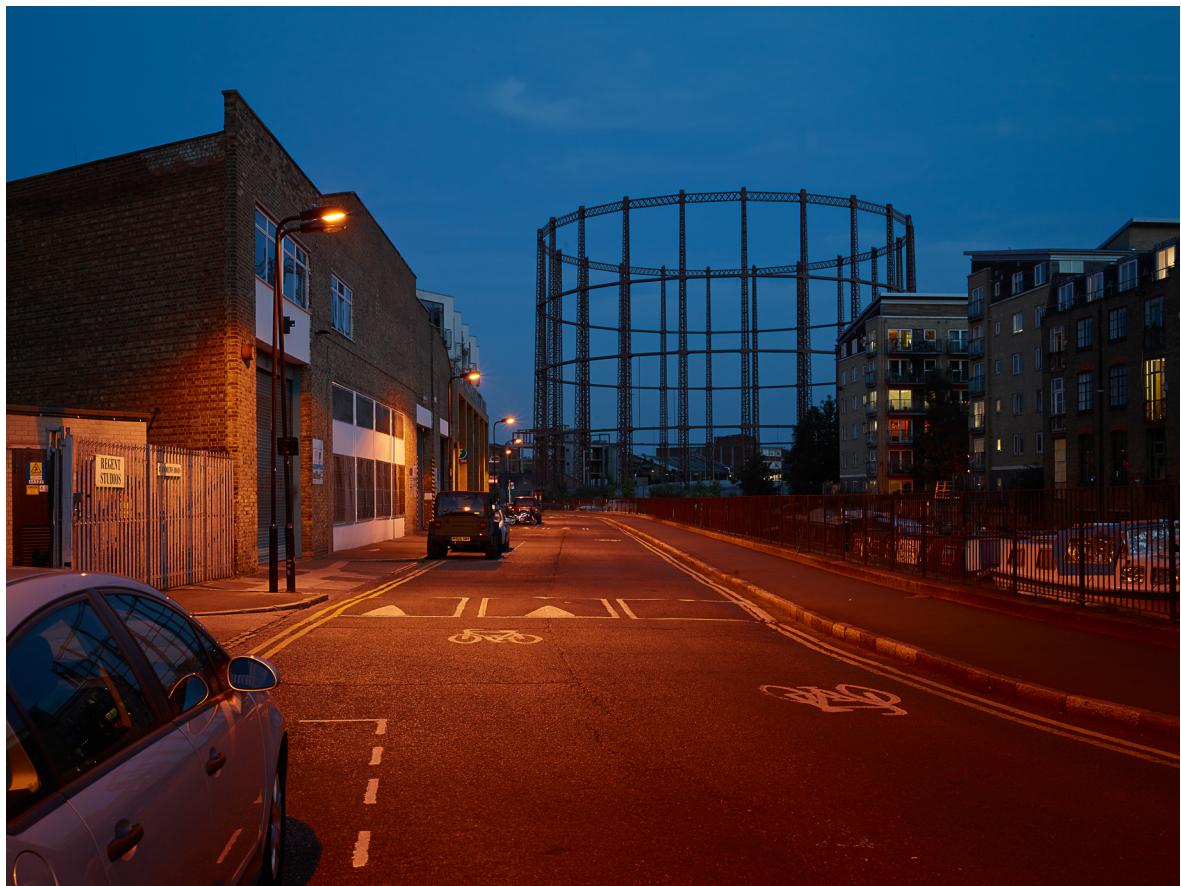
“Poplar, a huge district...  
includes the Isle of Dogs  
— transformed now  
into an Isle of Docks.  
In all it is vast township,  
built, much of it,  
on low marshy land,  
bounded...by a great bend  
in the Thames”



"Clearances and rebuildings  
cause a far greater  
disturbance of population...  
The model blocks do not...  
provide for  
the actual displaced  
population, so much as for  
an equivalent number  
of others...  
of a different class"



“If we wander down  
into the maze of streets  
and waterside nooks...  
we may find entrance  
to an opium den, where  
twenty or thirty Celestials  
...are dreaming  
over their pipes”



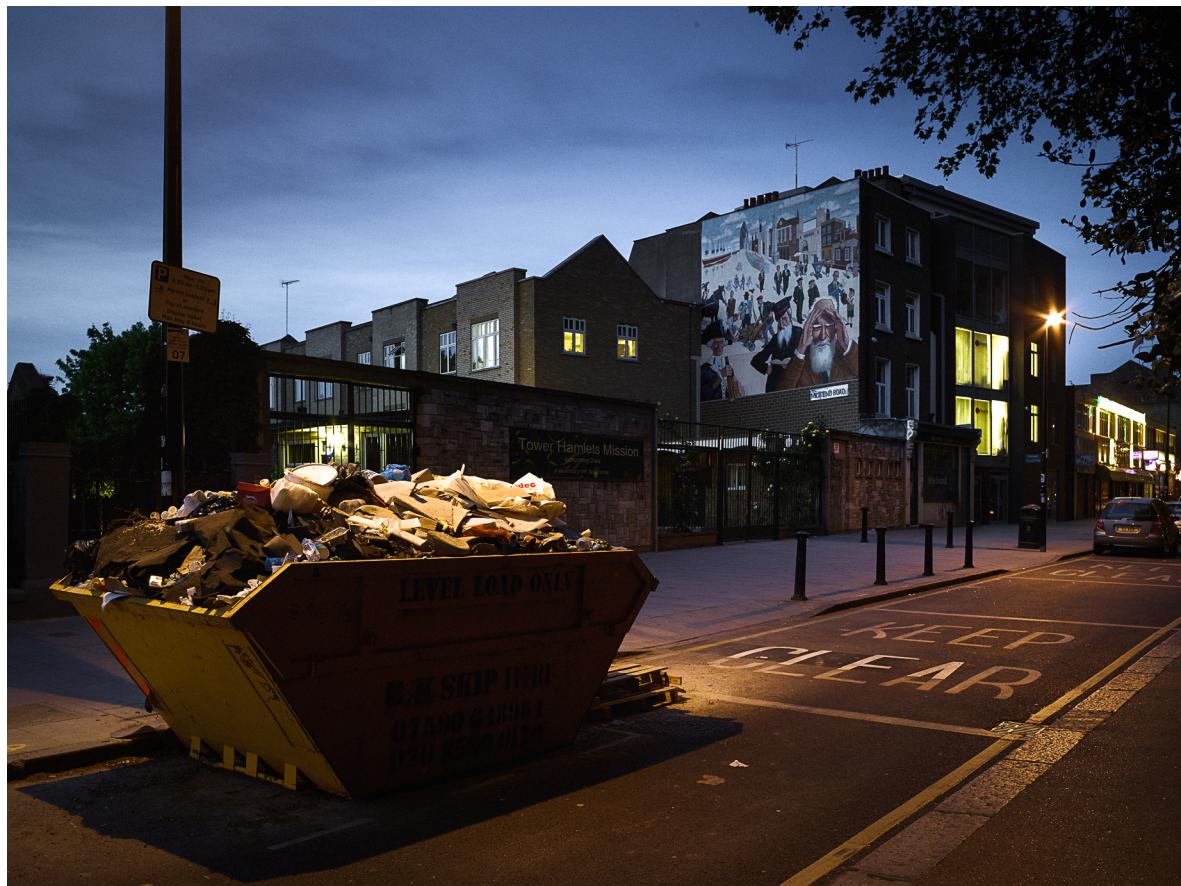
“Neighbourhood of the gas works  
accounts for  
what roughness there is...  
pistol-gangs of boys aged 14-17,  
a girl was wounded  
and the sentences passed  
very heavy.  
Since then there has been  
no trouble”



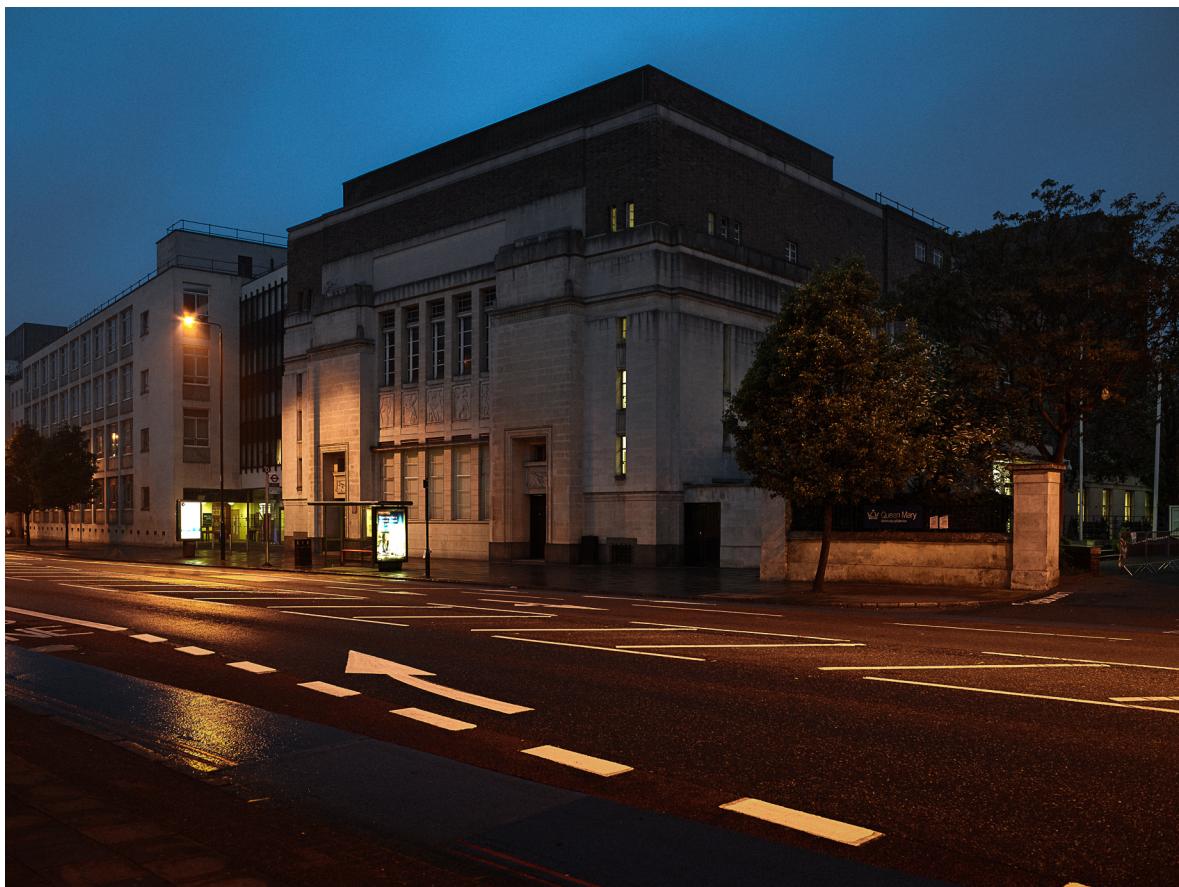
“He complained  
of the great pressure  
put upon the police by publicans...  
also...by the police on the police  
not to give up a lucrative  
source of revenue.  
Very little beer is now give  
...money payments  
have taken its place”



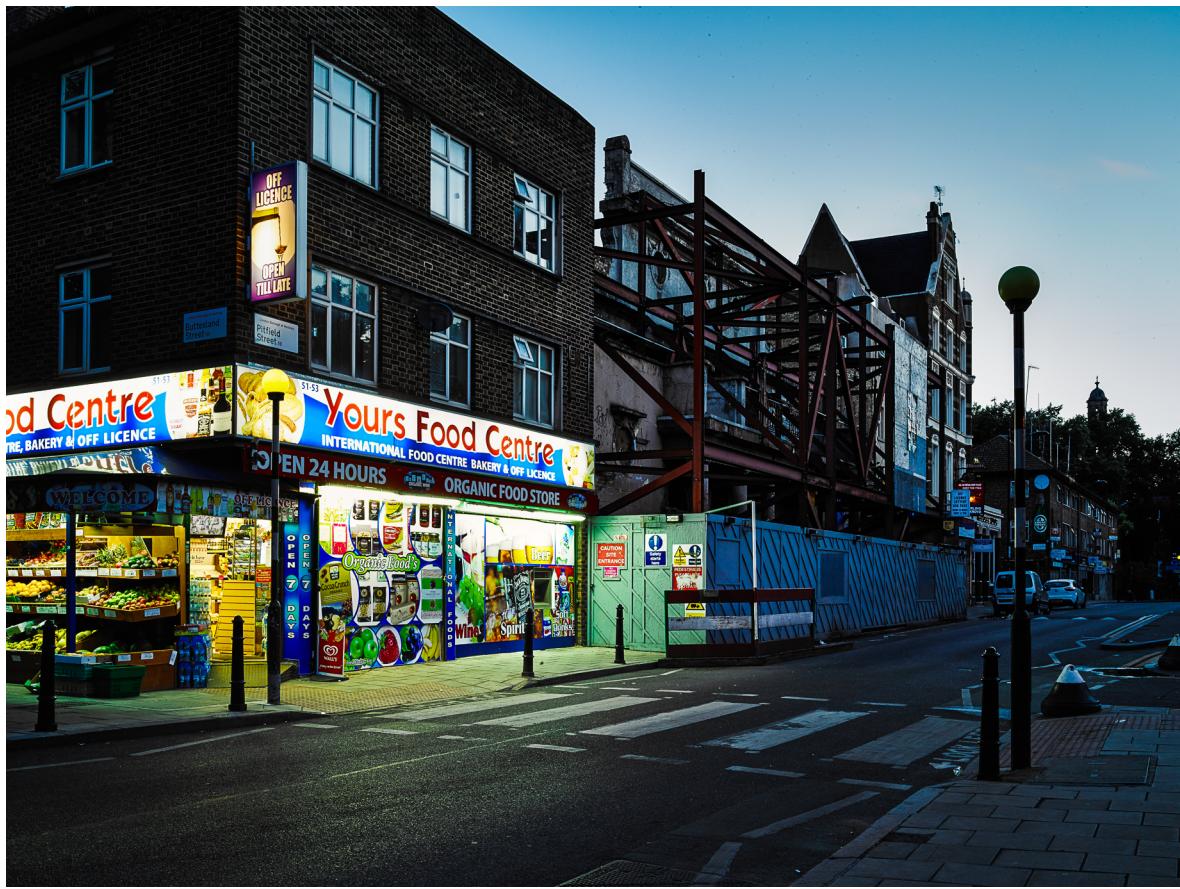
“The workers  
of the district are  
cabinet makers who drink  
— glass blowers who drink  
— and costers who drink  
— They make  
good enough money  
but none spend it well”



"Assembly Hall Mission...  
Mile End Road...  
is carrying on  
an extensive work,  
and draws several thousands  
of people  
to its religious services"



“She was the daughter  
of a dock labourer  
in irregular work...  
she told me how delighted  
she was to find  
in the reading room  
of the People’s Palace  
books ‘that you can  
read on a weekday’”



“The regular East End  
theatre-goer  
even finds his way westwards,  
and in the sixpenny seats  
of the little house  
in Pitfield Street  
I have heard a discussion  
on Irving’s representation  
of Faust at the Lyceum”



Bow Church

“The factory girl generally  
earns from 7s to 11s...  
Sunday afternoons  
she will be found  
promenading up and down  
the Bow Road,  
arm in arm with  
two or three other girls”

The texts (and their associated locations) were extracted from Booth's survey using the following two sources:

Charles Booth, 'Life and Labour of the People', Poverty Series,  
Volume 1, 1889

Notes gathered during walks with members of the police, 1897-8,  
data accessed via the Charles Booth On-Line Archive at the London School  
of Economics <http://booth.lse.ac.uk>

The references for each image/text are as follows:

St Katherine's Wharf - Poverty, 1, pp. 580-581

Hanbury Street 1 - Poverty, 1, pp. 546-547

Hanbury Street 2 - Poverty, 1, p. 221

West India Docks - Poverty, 1, p. 202

Jerome Street - Poverty, 1, pp. 370-377

Shadwell Basin - Poverty, 1, p. 189

Wentworth Street - Poverty, 1, p. 66-67

Leman Street - Poverty 1, p. 30

Regent's Canal - Poverty, 1, p. 29

Isle of Dogs - Poverty 1, p. 71

Whitechapel High Street - Poverty, 1, p. 522

Andrews Road - Walk with Sergeant Barker, 3rd May 1898, Booth Archive,

<http://booth.lse.ac.uk/notebooks/b352/jpg/55.html>

Cremer Street - Walk with Constable W. R. Ryeland, 16th May 1898, Booth Archive, <http://booth.lse.ac.uk/notebooks/b352/jpg/223.html>

Limehouse Causeway - Poverty, 1, p. 543

Bethnal Green Road - Walk with Sergeant Barker, 31st March 1898, Booth Archive, <http://booth.lse.ac.uk/notebooks/b352/jpg/13.html>

Tower Hamlets Mission - Poverty, 1, p. 122

The People's Palace - Poverty, 1, p. 475

Pitfield Street - Poverty, 1, p. 116

Bow Road - Poverty, 1, p. 472