

Lifting the Curtain
Revisiting Booth's East London

Keith Greenough

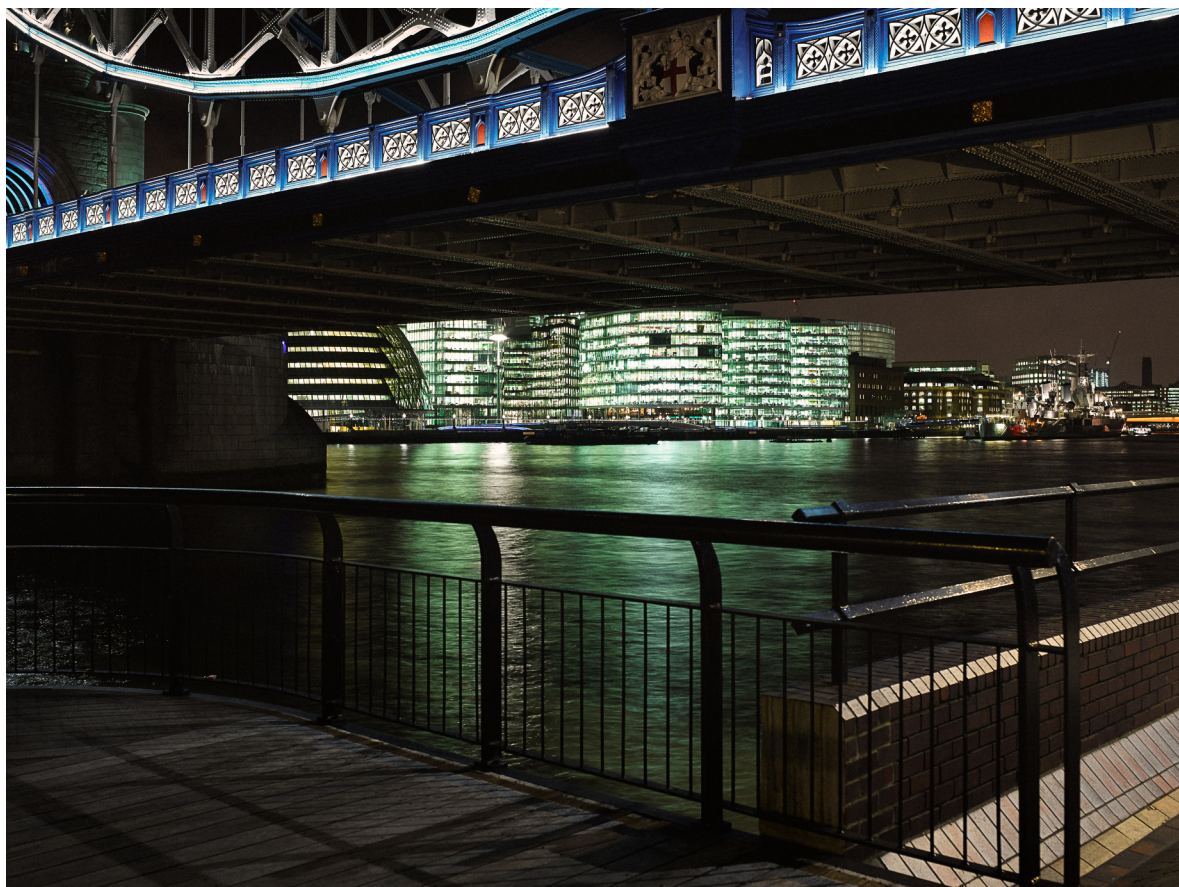
The idea for this book grew out of my fascination with East London and how it has been shaped by its history. It has been a site of continuous change for centuries - change driven by industrial growth and decline, waves of immigration, wartime devastation, and more recently post-industrial redevelopment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



“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 of 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”



“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