

Lifting the Curtain
Revisiting Booth's East London

Keith Greenough

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Introduction ©Keith Greenough 2014
Maps from LSE Library's collections, Booth/E

FOREWORD

On Christmas Eve 1884, the doors of Toynbee Hall opened for the first time in Spitalfields, East London. Established as a settlement and one of the first of its kind in the world, it was the brainchild of Samuel Barnett. A key element of its mission was 'to enquire into the condition of the poor and to consider and advance plans calculated to promote their welfare'.

It was in this spirit that during the late 1800's Toynbee Hall served as a base for Charles Booth and his group of researchers working on the his survey of poverty in London, 'Life and Labour of the People'.

Keith Greenough's fascinating work retraces the steps of Booth and his associates and provides much food for thought about the social issues faced by East Londoners, then and now. We are delighted that Keith has chosen to donate the proceeds from the sale of this book to Toynbee Hall. The monies raised will be used to help us continue with our work and achieve our vision of eradicating all forms of poverty in East London.

xxxxxx

Toynbee Hall

LIFTING THE CURTAIN

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 drawn 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, many of the social issues that Booth observed over 100 years ago still have resonance today.

Keith Greenough,
December 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...”



“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...”



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ALD GATE EAST STATION

“In the inner ring
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.”



“And 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 bell rings, the gate opens
and 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."



“Our attention is arrested...
by the fact that 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 of them, however,
when very quick with their fingers
get as much as £1 a week...”



“...most of the luxuries
of our elaborate civilization
pass familiarly 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 crowded
so as to be thoroughfares
no longer...
Petticoat Lane is
the exchange of the Jew,
but the lounge of the Christian.”



“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.”



“Or if we wander down
into the maze of streets
and waterside nooks...
we may find entrance
to an opium den, where
some 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 of pressure
by the police on the police
not to give up
a lucrative source of revenue.
Very little beer is now given...
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 of them
spend it well!”



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



“...the daughter of a dock labourer
in irregular work...
With unconcious irony she told me
how delighted she was to find
in the reading room
in the People's Palace, on Sunday,
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
— rarely more...
Sunday afternoons
she will be found promenading
up and down the Bow Road,
arm in arm
with two or three other girls...”



“...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,
sometimes of a different class.”



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

REFERENCES

The locations and texts were drawn from:

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

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

- 01 St Katherine's Wharf — Poverty, 1, pp. 580-581
- 02 Hanbury Street 1 — Poverty, 1, pp. 546-547
- 03 Lemn Street — Poverty 1, pp. 30-32
- 04 Hanbury Street 2 — Poverty, 1, p. 221
- 05 West India Docks — Poverty, 1, p. 202
- 06 Jerome Street — Poverty, 1, pp. 370-377
- 07 Shadwell Basin — Poverty, 1, pp. 189-190
- 08 Wentworth Street — Poverty, 1, pp. 66-67
- 09 Regent's Canal — Poverty, 1, p. 29
- 10 Limehouse Causeway — Poverty, 1, p. 543
- 11 Andrews Road — Walk with Sergeant Barker, 3rd May 1898, Booth Archive,
<http://booth.lse.ac.uk/notebooks/b352/jpg/55.html>
- 12 Cremer Street — Walk with Constable W. R. Ryeland, 20th May 1898,
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- 13 Bethnal Green Road — Walk with Sergeant Barker, 31st March 1898,
Booth Archive, <http://booth.lse.ac.uk/notebooks/b352/jpg/13.html>
- 14 Tower Hamlets Mission — Poverty, 1, pp. 121-122
- 15 The People's Palace — Poverty, 1, pp. 474-475
- 16 Pitfield Street — Poverty, 1, p. 116
- 17 Bow Road — Poverty, 1, p. 472
- 18 Whitechapel High Street — Poverty, 1, p. 522
- 19 Isle of Dogs — Poverty 1, p. 71



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Poverty Classification —
 Maps Descriptive of
 London Poverty 1898-99

	BLACK: Lowest class. Vicious, semi-criminal.
	DARK BLUE: Very poor, casual. Chronic want.
	LIGHT BLUE: Poor. 18s. to 21s. a week for a moderate family
	PURPLE: Mixed. Some comfortable others poor
	PINK: Fairly comfortable. Good ordinary earnings.
	RED: Middle class. Well-to-do.
	YELLOW: Upper-middle and Upper classes. Wealthy.

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