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Lifting the Curtain

An exhibition of photographs by Keith Greenough

Lifting the Curtain

Revisiting Booth's East London

An exhibition of photographs
by Keith Greenough
liftingthecurtain.net

TOWN HOUSE

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townhousewindow.com

15th-25th October 2015



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FOREWORD by Toynbee Hall

On Christmas Eve 1884, the doors of Toynbee Hall opened for the first time in Whitechapel, East London, and in doing so established the world's first university settlement. The brainchild of Canon Samuel Barnett, Toynbee Hall became a hub of culture, arts, education and debate. Students from Oxford and Cambridge University came to live, work and learn how to actively improve the lives of those residing in the then slums of Whitechapel. 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 prominent survey of poverty in London, *Life and Labour of the People*.

Keith Greenough's fascinating work retraces the steps and locations of interest to Booth and his associates. The way Booth's words are quoted alongside the modern reality provides much food for thought about the social issues faced by East Londoners today, as well as in the past.

We are delighted that Keith has chosen to donate the proceeds from his book and exhibition to Toynbee Hall. The monies raised will be used to help us continue with our work and achieve our aim of a future without poverty.

LIFTING THE CURTAIN

The idea for this exhibition 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 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,
January 2015



CHANGE



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“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.”





“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.”

“...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.”



Whitechapel High Street

A photograph of a multi-story brick building at dusk, showing signs of decay and urban life. The building has several windows, some of which are lit from within. A large, dark, irregular shape, possibly a mural or a large shadow, is visible on the lower part of the building. The word "STRUGGLE" is overlaid in large, white, serif capital letters across the center of the image. The sky is a deep blue, and the overall atmosphere is gritty and urban.

STRUGGLE



“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.”

Hanbury Street

“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.”



CHARLES BOOTH

Charles Booth was born in Liverpool in 1840, the son of a corn merchant. After the death of his parents he set up in business with his brother. He went on to form the highly successful Booth Steamship Company.

Booth's success in business came in good measure from his skill in gathering and interpreting data and from his reputation for integrity. Both of these attributes he applied with enthusiasm in his later work as a social reformer.

By the late 1800s the scale of the problem of poverty in major cities was seen as a threat to society. Concerns about this issue were frequently and sensationally reported in the popular press, provoking fear amongst the general public. Booth doubted that the situation was as serious as was reported and set about quantifying the scale of the problem.

So began Booth's inquiry into poverty in London, *Life and Labour of the People*. The survey dealt with three broad subjects—poverty, industry and religious influences. For the work on poverty Booth and his associates gathered information from the School Board Visitors about the levels of poverty associated with occupation types. These were mapped street by street to produce his *Maps Descriptive of London Poverty*.

Volume I of his survey was published in 1889. This dealt with East London and has provided much of the source material for *Lifting the Curtain*. The final version of the survey covered the whole of London and ran to 17 volumes (London: Macmillan, 1902-1903).



Andrews Road

Cremer Street

Pitfield Street

Bethnal Green Road

Jerome Street

Hanbury Street

Tower Hamlets Mission

Wentworth Street

Whitechapel High Street

Leman Street





ST JAMES THE LESS

ST BARNABAS

ST STEPHEN
the Ford

ST SIMON
Zelotes

Bow Road

HOLY TRINITY
Stepney

ST BENET
Stepney

ST PETER
Stepney

ST MOUNTE
Stepney

ST MATTHIAS
Stepney

ST PAUL
the Bow Church

ST JAMES
the City

ST ANNE
the Limehouse

ST STEPHEN

Shadwell Basin

West India Docks

ST PETER
the Limehouse

Isle of Dogs



INEQUALITY

“...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.”



Wentworth Street



“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...”



Shadwell Basin



ABUSE

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“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!”

COMMUNITY

Tower Hamlets Mission
Supporting Change
17th March 2014

KEEP
CLEAR



“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 Road

“...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...”





“...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 LANDSCAPE OF EAST LONDON

The urban landscape of East London is like a manuscript on which successive layers of writing have been superimposed. Its surfaces reveal the rich history of the place. Older phases of development are mixed in with present day architecture, signage and 'street furniture'. All serve to tell a story.

Quays and warehouses on the riverside attest to its former status as the port of London. Docks and canals broadcast its original role as the conduit for London's trade. Factory buildings speak of its historic position as the manufacturing heart of the Capital. The elegant townhouses remind us of the wealthy merchants and master weavers who used to live there. And modern infill development reveals the impact of bombing during the Second World War.

Successive waves of immigrants have also left their mark—French Huguenot weavers' lofts; Jewish mezuzot on doorways; and most obviously the signage of Asian restaurants and shops. The Brick Lane Jamme Masjid is perhaps the pre-eminent example of the transient nature of the scene—originally a Huguenot Church, later a Jewish Synagogue and now a Mosque.

The recent spate of redevelopment and gentrification is visible all around—too visible for the taste of some. On a positive note many older buildings have been renovated and preserved. Much however has been demolished. The docks and industry have been replaced. Commerce, leisure and tourism have taken over. Who would have thought that the docks would become a theme park with cable cars and exhibition spaces? The only thing that is certain about the landscape of East London is that it will continue to evolve and change.

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The exhibition has been staged with
the generous support of

TOWN HOUSE

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All proceeds from the sale of this catalogue
and photographic prints will be donated

to **Toynbee Hall**

To purchase prints visit liftingthecurtain.net