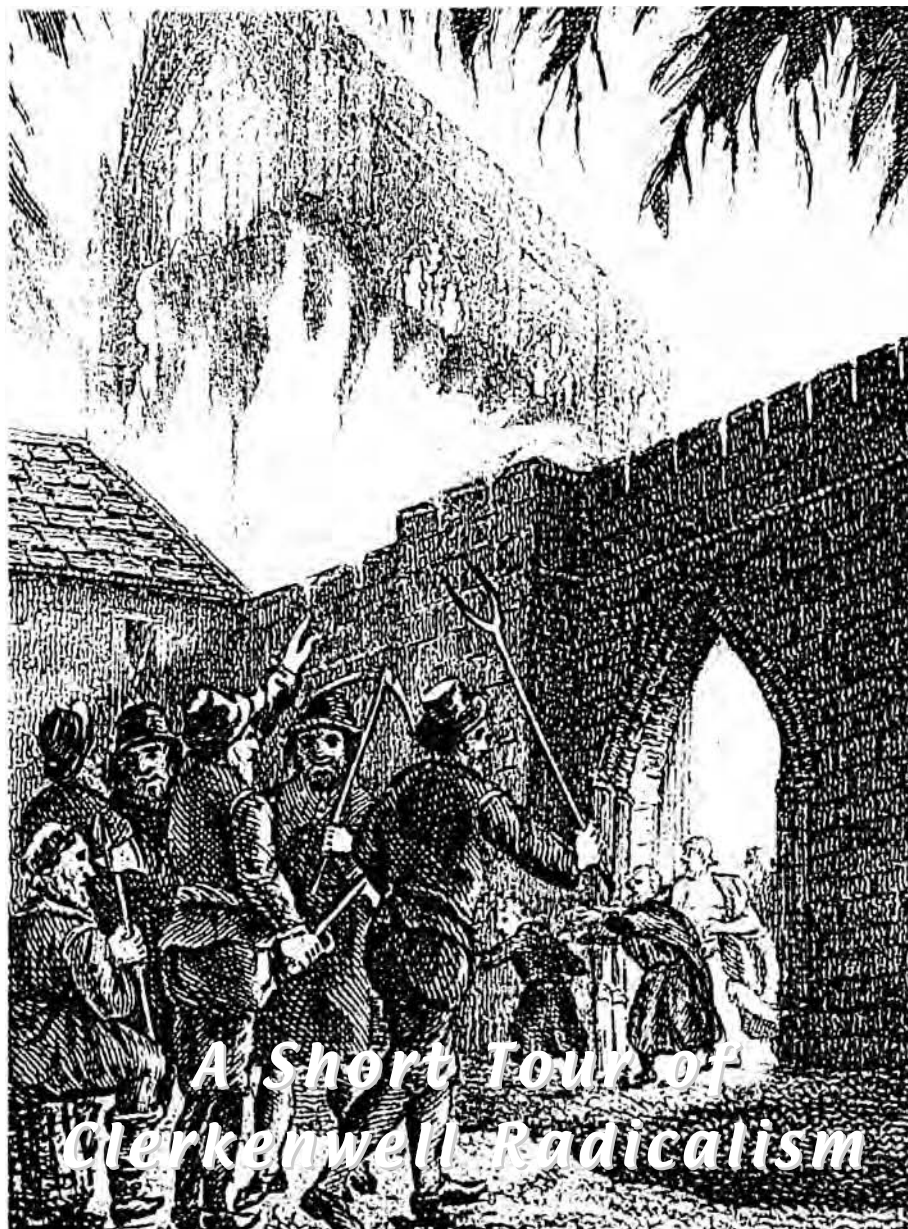


REDS ON THE GREEN



A DEDICATION

TO DAN CHATTERTON AND GUY ALDRED;
TWO FINE SONS OF CLERKENWELL AND ITS
RADICAL CULTURE. AND TO ALL THE MORE
ANONYMOUS CLERKENWELLIANS WHO
SUSTAINED THAT CULTURE; THOSE MEN,
WOMEN AND CHILDREN WHO LEFT SUCH A
RICH LEGACY. FINALLY, TO ALL THOSE WHO
ACCOMPANIED ME ON THE HISTORY WALK IN
JUNE 2003 THAT INSPIRED THIS PAMPHLET.

published by past tense,
october 2005

*Cover image: The Burning of St. John's Priory,
Clerkenwell, during the Peasants Revolt, 1381.*

REDS ON THE GREEN

*A SHORT TOUR OF
CLERKENWELL RADICALISM*

ENCOUNTERING A CAST OF
CHARACTERS AND EVENTS

INCLUDING:

*WAT TYLER
AND THE PEASANTS REVOLT...
JACK SHEPPARD...
THE ROOKERIES...
THE LONDON MOB
AND THE GORDON RIOTS...
THE CHARTISTS...
THE FENIANS... LENIN...
DAN CHATTERTON AND
GUY ALDRED...
GENTRIFICATION...*

FOREWORD

What do we look for in history? It depends on who looks; for today's estate agents and property developers Clerkenwell's historical associations are merely another aspect of the place to be exploited for profit. The occasional historical reference inserted into a sales pitch just adds more gloss to their oily words. As we write (2005), gentrification continues in Clerkenwell, with all its benefits and drawbacks for different sections of the local population, depending on 'which side of the fence' they are located. And Smithfield is under renewed threat from the developers – it seems that anywhere that retains a trace of real character must be 'redeveloped' by these greedy vultures into an ugly synthetic parody of itself.

Those aspects of a place that give it an interesting, inspiring ambience and atmosphere must be sacrificed in the pursuit of capitalising a maximum profit turnover on every square inch. History will condemn them and, hopefully, consign them to its dustbin – but meanwhile we have to live and struggle with their 'contribution'.

But for those of us looking back without such shameful motivations, we seek a better understanding of and grounding in the present through a knowledge of the past we came from. We also, perhaps, need reminding of what was achieved, what was tried and what failed to be achieved in past struggles in locations like Clerkenwell.

The culture of community, commonality and solidarity that sustained these struggles of the poor and dispossessed were what made them possible. It is the immediate shortage of these qualities felt by many in the present that inspire us to look back to past victories and defeats for illumination of the present tasks we face.

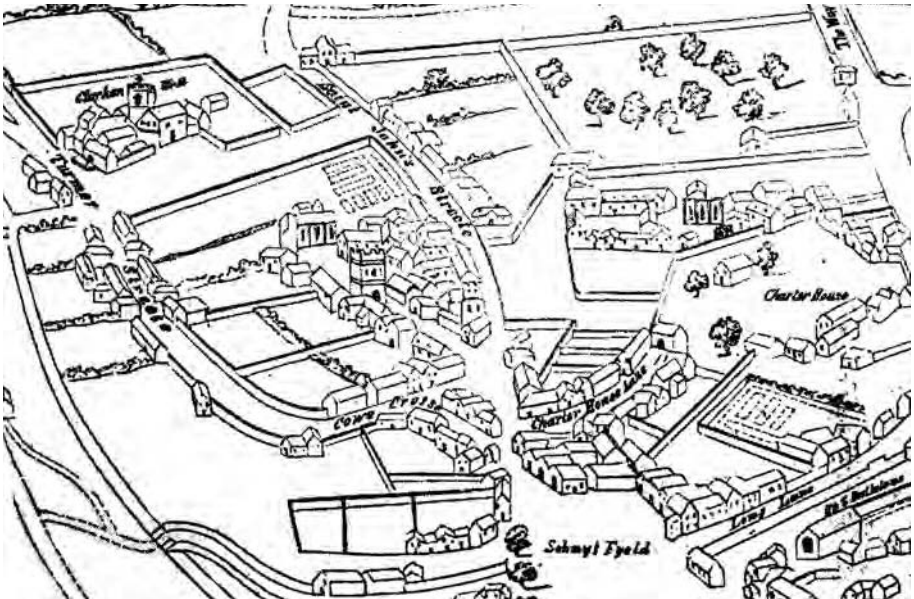
Those who ignore the mistakes of the past really are condemned to repeat them.

And so, back to the beginning...

INTRODUCTION

History Drawn from a Deep Well

It is water that named Clerkenwell and water that made it a desirable place of settlement. A place with several wells of good water supply, one of which, the Clerke's Well, lent its name to the area. So-named because the city's clerks would meet here on public holidays to perform 'mummer's plays' - enactments of scenes from the Bible - to large crowds. The River Fleet also ran through as it headed from its two sources on Hampstead Heath to where it enters the Thames by nearby Blackfriars Bridge. London's second largest river, as it approached the Thames the Fleet was some 60 feet wide. At one time, before it became too clogged up and polluted, it could be navigated by smaller boats; the railway line running into Farringdon Station from King's Cross runs through the river's valley. The Fleet was also an important boundary of the original Roman settlement of 'Londinium'. In AD 43 they built the first bridge across the Thames, close to today's London Bridge, and a fort to defend the crossing was constructed near to where the Barbican stands today. The Fleet formed a convenient natural defence on the western side of the Roman settlement. So the City of London was settled on the banks of the Thames and grew outward from it; it is Clerkenwell's closeness to

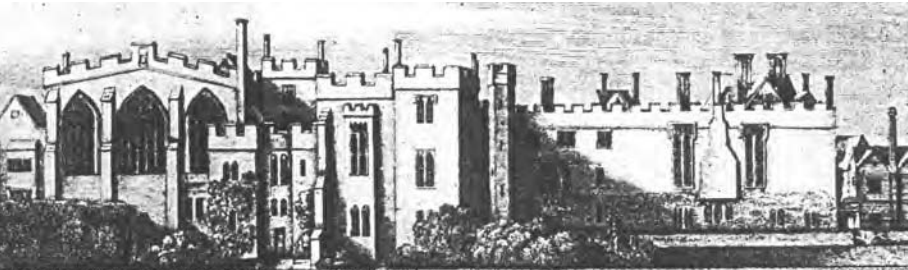


The earliest known map of London, the Agas map c.1560, showing Clerkenwell village.

the City and its wealth, while remaining outside its boundaries, that has made it attractive to its various inhabitants over the years.

The earliest records show this area as common land between the City walls and the Middlesex Forest. The first known settlements of any substance in the area began around 1145 when Jordan de Briset, descendant of a noble Breton family, founded a priory dedicated to St John and, shortly afterwards, a nunnery dedicated to St Mary, on the eastern slopes of the Fleet riverbank. The Priory became the home of the Knights of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, known as Hospitallers. A military order of crusading knighthood formed around 1070 to give care and protection to pilgrims visiting the holy sites of Palestine, they were recognised by the Pope in 1116 and acquired extensive property and wealth throughout Western Europe. Along with their rivals, the Knights Templar, they were in the vanguard of the Catholic imperialist crusades. The Templars settled within the area to the west of the City now known as Temple. The Dissolution of the monasteries in the 1540's ended the Hospitaller's presence in England but they were later revived as an Anglican Order; we know the Order today through their work as the St John's Ambulance Association.

"The bulk of the City's secular population was crowded along the



Hollar's engraving of St John's Priory

busy riverside, which was the focus of its life as the country's leading port. The major religious houses tended, therefore, to be located away from the noise and stench of the wharves and warehouses, along or beyond the line of the City's circuit walls, where there was light and air for a more spacious, gracious way of living. They stretched therefore in a great arc, from St Katherine's Hospital by the Tower in the east, to the houses of the Dominicans (Blackfriars) and the Carmelites (Whitefriars) in the west." (Clerkenwell and Finsbury Past; Richard Tames, Historical Publications, 1999.)

* * *

It has been said that the history of Clerkenwell is a microcosm

of the larger history of London. It's certainly true that whenever there has been major social change and/or unrest in London it has been reflected by events in Clerkenwell, and the unrest often manifested and organised itself here throughout its long history as a radical centre. National and international issues have also found their expression here. We shall try to illustrate this on our journey...

WAT TYLER AND THE PEASANTS REVOLT

Clerkenwell had been a periodic site of rebellion as far back as the Peasants Revolt of 1381 when the Peasant Army burned down the Priory of St John.

Background to the Revolt

In August 1348 the plague known as the Black Death appeared in England and swept the country; it is estimated that between one half and one third of the population died. Large areas were depopulated; over the following decades this shortage of labour pushed up both wages and prices. To counter this the State in 1351 passed legislation - 'The Statute of Labourers' - to impose the earliest known example of a wage freeze. In 1377 Edward III died and the reign of the 11-year-old boy King, Richard II, began. Towards the end of his reign Edward III had become senile and, John of Gaunt (a corruption of Ghent, where he was born), Duke of Lancaster, acted as virtual dictator of England and was hugely disliked; he continued this role when his nephew, the young boy Richard II, took over the throne. (The most popular pub name in the country - *The Red Lion* - of which there are over 600, derives from Gaunt. It was the practice centuries ago for inns to salute a monarch or powerful baron, and the Red Lions take their name from the coat of arms of John of Gaunt. The "*Jack Straw's Castle*" pub at the top of London's Hampstead Heath - on the supposed hideout site of one of the Peasants Revolt's leaders - goes only a little way to redressing the balance.)

The English armies were suffering defeat after defeat in what came to be known as 'The Hundred Years War' with France. French armies were raiding the English coast and the country was bankrupt - even the crown jewels had been pawned. There was simmering unrest across town and country. The desperate need of the State to raise funds resulted in a Poll Tax being levied on all

persons over 14 years of age. The architect of this tax was believed to be John of Gaunt. This was a blatant tax on the labouring classes, with preferential discounts for the rich. After widespread evasion by commoners it was decided to send in the tax commissioners with armed escorts to enforce collection. At Brentwood in Essex on 30th May 1381 the commoners refused to pay and stoned the collectors out of town. This appears to have been a pre-arranged signal to commoners in other places. The country was ripe for revolt and the rising began ...

"Cryptic but well understood messages went from village to village when the moment arrived."

They "...biddeth Piers Plowman goe to his werke and chastise well Hob the Robber, and take with you John Trueman and all his fellows and no moe; and look sharp you to one-head [unity] and no moe" ran one of these messages, and another, clearer in language, declared: "Jack Trueman doth you to understand that falseness and guile have reigned too long." [And Truth has been set under a lock, and falseness reigneth in every flock...]

(A People's History of England, A. L. Morton, 1938.)



By early June the commoners of Essex, Kent and other counties had formed themselves into a Peasant Army that marched on London; from Kent they assembled at Blackheath, 4 miles from London Bridge. There were 60,000 of them, more than the population of London. The Essex rebels settled at Mile End, a mile east of the City walls.

London's rulers were in a panic: *"Rent by social struggles, with the trade guilds, once the free societies of artisans and traders, fallen into the hands of the new class of rich*

merchants and masters, the burghers heard no call for its militia to turn out and man the walls. The great bell of St Martin-le-Grand failed to sound the tocsin which would call the Londoners to arm themselves to defend their city. The rulers of the city did not trust their people to assemble armed, once the right of free men." (The English Rebels, Charles Poulsen, 1984.)

Sympathisers in the City ensured the rebels gained entrance and they were welcomed and joined by the London poor. Wat Tyler and the mob ransacked the Fleet prison and the Savoy Palace in the Strand, home of John of Gaunt, architect of the Poll Tax. The Peasant Army evacuated the servants, then systematically destroyed everything of wealth in the Palace (one of the grandest in Europe), which was full with plunder from Gaunt's adventures abroad. They brought with them mortars and pestles to use for grinding diamonds and other precious stones to dust. They then burnt the building.

Moving away from the Thames riverbank they came up the hill and crossed the Fleet into Clerkenwell and set fire to the Priory of the Order of St John. The Priory burned for several days, the mob preventing all attempts to put out the flames. The Order was by this time hated by the poor for the great wealth they had accumulated through the patronage of royalty and the aristocracy. But the main reason it was targeted was because the Prior at the time was Sir Robert Hales, also Lord High Treasurer of England, and so responsible for collecting the hated Tax. He fled to the Tower of London; there the mob found 'Hob the Robber', as they had nicknamed him, with the Archbishop of Canterbury and other cowering members of the ruling class. They were dragged to Tower Hill and beheaded. The rebels also destroyed all the legal documents they could find, burnt the prisons and freed the inmates. All the Crown's armies were away fighting in other lands; for the moment, London - the seat of power - was in the rebels' hands.

Wat Tyler, Jack Straw, John Ball and the Peasant Army met with the king at Mile End, where he granted the demands of the commoners to be free of their feudal obligations to the Lords of the manors; no longer should they have to be bound to donate a part of their labour and produce to their masters. But this was only a ploy to buy time for the king and his court. They later met again at Smithfield, then a large open space west of the City wall and site of a weekly horse and cattle market. Under the pretext of negotiation, Tyler was drawn away from his Army and lured into a trap. An argument was provoked, and he was murdered there; there followed a country-wide reign of terror to re-impose the authority of the ruling class.

At Fishmongers' Hall in the City (where today's ruling class sometimes play out their historic pantomime rituals) the liverymen still proudly display the dagger with which the Mayor, Walworth, murdered Wat Tyler. The City coat-of-arms and flag bears a dagger on it –

officially this symbolises the martyrdom of St Bartholomew, who was skinned alive for his faith, and whose church sits within the City boundary. But it can also be interpreted to represent the dagger used to slay Wat Tyler, so saving the City powers from the greatest-ever threat to their rule. There are monuments to religious martyrs and Scottish nationalists at Smithfield but, not surprisingly, there is no monument to Wat Tyler and the Peasants Revolt - despite it being one of the key moments of English history. (*Maybe after the revolution...*) If the Peasants had won both British and



The death of Wat Tyler at Smithfield

world history might have turned out quite differently – social developments might have taken quite a different turn. Would the English Civil War have happened much earlier in a bid to resolve class tensions with an attempted re-conquest by crown and gentry? With an economy dominated by small-holding peasants - would the Industrial Revolution have still first emerged in Britain?

* * *

In later years the St John's Priory was rebuilt - the surviving gateway dates from 1504. St Mary's nunnery had survived intact. It was a relatively liberal and integrated order - many recruits were women from failed marriages, widows with no means of support or those avoiding marriage rather than devoutly religious characters. They tended to mix freely in society and dress quite fashionably.

The arrival of the religious communities encouraged the growth of a local economy geared towards providing them with services and specialised goods, including supplying parchment or vellum to the religious scribes. (This link with the production of books and documents has continued through the centuries to the present day; many publications have been located in the area, though most are gone now. Until the move to Wapping in the 80's, The Times was printed on Grays Inn Rd, and the Guardian and Observer offices are still on Farringdon Rd.)

The religious orders owned most of the land until the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII in the 1540's. After the Dissolution, the land was given to the new Tudor nobility; as the City expanded Clerkenwell became a desirable suburb and the nobles built themselves fine mansions. By 1658 the nunnery had been transformed into wealthy residences.

PLAGUE AND FIRE

Refugees from the Plague in 1665 and the Great Fire of London in September 1666 moved out northwards from the City. John Evelyn, the diarist, commented that as they fled the fire, *"some under miserable tents and hovels, many without a rag or any necessary utensils, bed, or board, who from delicateness, riches, and easy accommodations in stately and well-furnished houses, were now reduced to extremest misery and poverty...I then went towards Islington and*



H i g h g a t e, where one might have seen 200,000 people, of all ranks and degrees, dispersed and lying along by loss, and though ready to perish for hunger and destitution, yet not asking one penny for relief, which to me appeared a

The Plague: a woodcut from a 1636 tract.

stranger sight than any I had yet beheld." This is probably a reference to the refugee camp of 200,000 on Highbury Fields, one of several shanty-town-type encampments in the northern suburbs.

450 acres of London were levelled, as were 87 churches including St Paul's, 44 Livery Company halls, 13,000 houses and Newgate Prison; yet only nine deaths were recorded. The Fire was finally contained, after six days, at Fetter Lane - and at Smithfield on the edge of Clerkenwell where it had jumped the Fleet River. But this great levelling did not lead to a new modern street plan for the City of London, despite many imaginative proposals. For many victims the title deeds of their still-smoking land plots were their only remaining wealth - and the great jumble of deeds, leases, copyholds and charters was more than the authorities could afford to buy in order to implement a new city-wide plan.

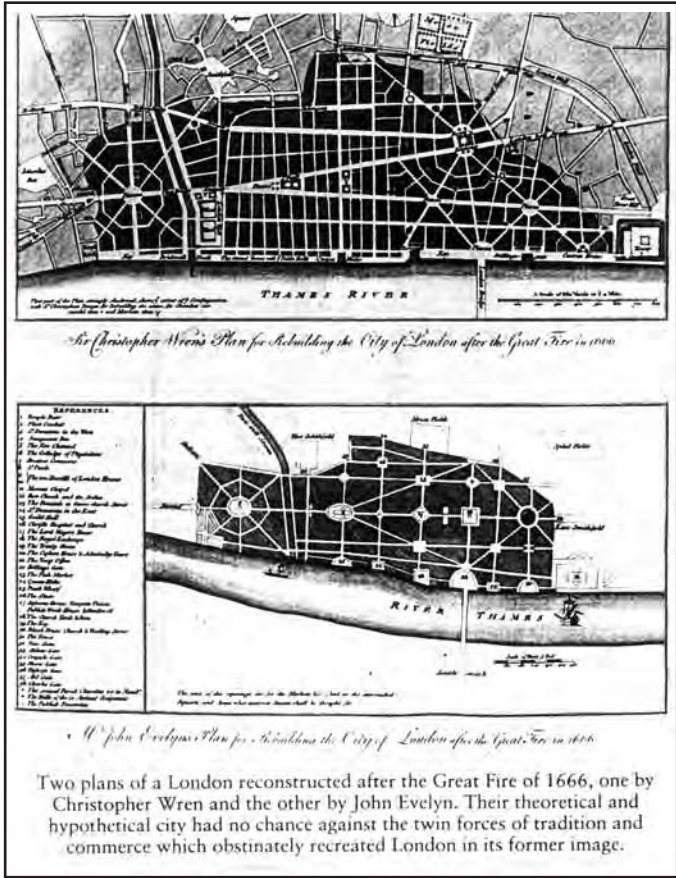


So, apart from those main roads the Victorians later ploughed through, the old street plan of the City area was rebuilt and remains today much as it has been for a thousand years.

(It is striking that today the heart of the City is mainly a jarring confrontation; between the most modern towering concrete, glass and steel monstrosities and the occasional 1000 year old church or other architectural relic marooned, now totally out of context, in this sea of futuristic alienation. Talk of progress, diversity etc and other apologies for this mess cannot hide the evidence of a sane person's senses...)

The aftermath of the fire brought an influx of craftsman from

outside London for the massive rebuilding project - craft Guild restrictions were relaxed for the purpose. The government decreed that in future only stone or brick were to be used for buildings - but the bricks had to be weathered for several months after being fired and the earliest they would be ready after the September fire was in May 1667 (though a small amount of rebuilding began earlier



using stone recycled from burnt out ruins of churches). Clay was dug, in amongst other places, the then rural village of Kentish Town, and Moorfields just outside the city walls - then a swampy waste. This situation led to many of those displaced - as they waited for the rebuilding - gaining a liking for the cleaner environment they discovered in the suburbs and deciding to settle there permanently. And so London's suburban expansion began in earnest. The influx of tradesman must also have encouraged this growth in places like Clerkenwell, both by supplying the labour for the building expansion and by artisan settlement in the cheaper accommodation of the area.

Those who had managed to retain or rebuild their wealth after the Fire began to seek more pleasant pastures; within the next few decades the number of houses trebled in Clerkenwell parish. William Pinks tells us that in the 17th century Clerkenwell Green "was environed by the mansions of the noble and affluent, who sought and found a comparative seclusion from society in the rural suburb of

Clerkenwell; the foot-paths in front of the houses were skirted by lofty trees..." Meanwhile the poorer inhabitants tended to settle in the back streets and alleys further from the Green - but predominantly on both banks of the already smelly and polluted Fleet River.

The Conquest of Measured Time and Space

Later in the 17th century the class composition of the area changed; Clerkenwell became more industrialised and densely populated with craftspeople and artisans taking advantage of the opportunity to work without the restrictive regulation and closed-shop protective practices of the City Guilds. By the 18th century it was an area full of small workshops devoted to various trades such as watchmaking, jewellery and precious metals, bookbinding, printing and cabinet making. Clerkenwell's tradition of radicalism developed from the conditions and needs of this artisan workforce; mainly employed in the production of quality and luxury goods for the wealthy, yet usually working in poor conditions for low pay often on piece rates (as 'sweated labour'). But the workshop environment of small numbers working together in quiet conditions encouraged thought and discussion on the job, living and working together in the same neighbourhood added to the close-knit solidarity of the area as a stronghold of radicalism; and the fact of having several open spaces close to the City regularly used for holding large meetings and demonstrations - Clerkenwell Green, Coldbath Fields, Spa Fields - made it the heart of radical London. Many unions held their meetings here, and there were several coffee houses, ale houses and workers clubs where radical proletarian activists would meet.

This influx of craftsmen was linked to the growing division of labour in production. The protective practices of the Guilds, based on the skills of master craftsmen, were in many cases being made increasingly obsolete as mass production expanded. For example, in the watch and clockmaking trade the process of creating the finished timepiece was no longer begun and finished in the hands of one highly skilled artisan; the process was now broken down into progressively smaller individual tasks, increasing the tedium of the work but making production faster and more profitable.

"In the seventeenth century watches were toys, ornaments, insignia of power or stores of wealth. In the eighteenth century the watch assumed new functions; it became a measure of labour time or a means of

quantifying 'idleness'. England led the world in the measurement of time. Her watches were widely imitated..." (Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged*.) The development of a high level of craft skill and invention was linked to England's role as a great seafaring nation and the needs of ships for sophisticated instruments - compasses, ship's clocks etc. As the ships passed down the river they would stop at Greenwich dock to set their timepieces by the great clock there before taking to the oceans of the world. The growth of the railway network expanded this export of measured time; railway timetables standardised time geographically, abolishing the older variations of the more local time systems.

"The importance of an abstract measure of minutes and hours to the work ethic and to the habit of punctuality required by industrial discipline has long been accepted. It was probably Marx who first recognized that 'idleness', more than anything else, was the form of resistance most effective in 'the period of manufacture'. The creation of the 'detail labourer' who performed 'fractional work' in the workshop meant that the value-producing class became collective, since no single worker produced a whole commodity." [...]

"The specialization of tasks in watchmaking provided William Petty and other political economists with their favourite example of the division of labour. By the end of the century it was estimated that there were 120 different branches to the trade. The enumeration of some of these (dial-makers, case-makers, wheel-polishers, escapement-makers, movement-makers, pinion-makers, chain-makers, jewellers, enamellers, gilders, brass-wheel-makers, screw-polishers, figure-painters, etc.) required the longest sentence in Capital, to illustrate the characteristic of heterogeneous manufacture whereby the product was the result of the assembly of many different components rather than the successive application of different qualities of labour to the same material (homogeneous manufacture). In watchmaking therefore the division of labour did not have to take place in a single workshop, but among many dispersed and small locations. In the eighteenth century such places were concentrated in the northern suburbs - in Clerkenwell and St Luke's, the location too of allied trades such as optical work, mathematical-instrument-making and jewellery. The interlocking nature of these hundreds of rooms and garrets was at least as complex as the 'wheels within wheels' of the watches themselves. (Linebaugh, op. cit.)

The trade employed perhaps 8,000 men and a small number of women; wages were generally low, often based on piecework, and working conditions poor. The main occupational injury was blindness. George Gissing in his novel *The Nether World* describes Clerkenwell's Wilmington Square in the late 19th century, and 'the contradictions between what their residents produced and

what they enjoyed' in the allied trade of jewellery:

"The inscriptions on the house-fronts would make you believe that you were in a region of gold and silver and precious stones. In the recesses of dim byways, where sunshine and free air are forgotten things, where families herd together in dear-rented garrets and cellars, craftsmen are forever handling jewellery, shaping bright ornaments for the necks and arms of such as are born to the joy of life. Wealth inestimable is ever



Traditional lockmakers

flowing through these workshops, and the hands that have been stained with gold-dust may, as likely as not, some day extend themselves in petition for a crust. In this house, as the announcement tells you, business is carried on by a trader in diamonds, and next door is a den full of children who wait for their day's one meal until their mother has come home with her chance earnings." (Cited in *Clerkenwell and Finsbury Past*, op. cit.)

Similar conditions were seen in locksmithing. The design of locks had changed little since Roman times until the 1780s when a more modern system was introduced. *"As the material civilization of the urban bourgeoisie became more refined, its belongings - ever increasing in variety and number - became arranged with a view to display and security. The control of space is the essence of private property, and its architecture became more complex: yards, fences, railings and gates formed an outer perimeter; stair-wells, doors, rooms and closets an inner one; bureaux, chests, cabinets, cases, desks and drawers protected the articles of private property themselves. Each space was controlled by locks, and access to each required a key."* (Linebaugh, op. cit.)

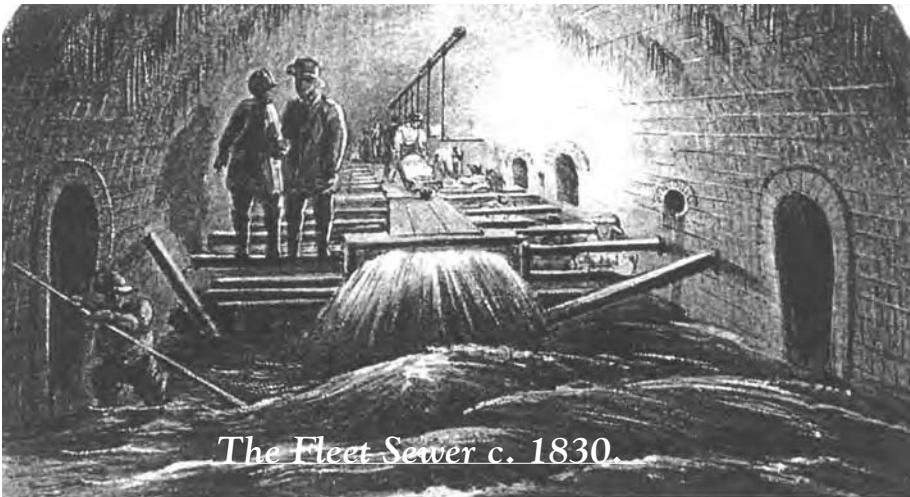
So Clerkenwell's watchmaking and locksmithing trades were the motor for the conquest and privatisation of time and space - the technology that defined and measured the new social relationships of capitalism.

* * *

Water, sewage and their byways

In the Rosebery Avenue area was sited the New River Head, which had piped in the City's clean water supply from springs in Hertfordshire since 1613. This led to the development of several leisure and entertainment facilities. The suburban tea gardens that grew up in this area led to the growth of leisure facilities such as pleasure gardens and health spas with accompanying entertainments of music and drama. Sadler's Wells Theatre has its origins in these developments; *"Mr Sadler drew the crowds from 1684 to see his wells, and contortionists and acrobats were provided by him for their amusement."* (Islington: A History and Guide, P. Zwart, 1973.) There is still a spring under the stage of this theatre and its water has recently been marketed as 'designer springwater' (catering for and reflecting the modern yuppie tendencies of today's Clerkenwell).

The need for a new water supply had become urgent as London's local rivers had become often little more than open sewers, heavily polluted by both domestic and industrial waste. (It was not until Victorian times that London would gain a proper sewage system.) The once pleasant Fleet was now a foul stinking mess, an open sewer known as the Fleet Ditch. A combination of all kinds of human waste, chemicals from artisan workshops such as tanners (a key ingredient of the tanning process was dog turds) and dyers, the offal from the local butchers of Saffron Hill and further downstream the discarded remains of the slaughterhouses of Smithfields meat market - all combined to become a black putrefying sludge with a stench to take the breath away. Famous



The Fleet Sewer c. 1830.

for its quantities of dead dogs, Jonathan Swift described the Fleet in the 1700s in his *City Showers*:

*“Now from all parts the swelling kennels flow
And bear their trophies with them as they go:
Filth of all hues and odours seem to tell
What streets they sailed from by their sight and smell
[...]
Seepings from Butchers’ stalls, dung, guts and blood;
Drowned puppies, stinking sprats, all dressed in mud,
Dead cats and turnip-tops come tumbling down the flood.”*

* * *

It was factors such as this that influenced patterns of house building, urban development and shifts in population. Only those with no other affordable choice would live in such unsanitary riverside areas. In Clerkenwell, this, along with the pressure of a growing London population (wages were 50% higher than in many rural areas), contributed to the development of its famous rookery. By the 1660’s the area around Turnmill and Cowcross Streets on the east side of the Fleet and the Saffron Hill area on the west had merged into one (sub)urban mass with a well established reputation for thievery and brothels. The area was ideally situated for illegal activity and refuge as it was an administrative borderland where responsibility for policing was split between the authority of Middlesex, the City and the parishes of Clerkenwell, St Andrew Holborn, St Sepulchre’s and the Liberty of Saffron Hill. The few constables and watchmen in service generally limited their patrols to their own patches.

* * *

THE ROOKERIES

Another consequence of the migrations caused by the Great Fire was that both the homeless London poor and the tradesmen from elsewhere attracted by the rebuilding work created new accommodation needs that led to housing development in Clerkenwell. Their origins are obscure, but early maps indicate that the growth of the overcrowded tenement slums that came to be known as rookeries began in the area in the late 1500s (as it did in other London suburbs). In Goswell St tenements were crammed in alongside the growing entertainment venues of banqueting halls, bowling alleys and gardens. This all occurred



An 18th Century
Rookery

alongside the continued presence of many well-to-do residents, some of whom complained that newly erected tenements were let out *"by the week and some for less time unto base people and to lewd persons that do keep evil rule and harbour thieves, rogues and vagabonds..."* (Letter of the Privy Council, 1598, recording complaints of residents of the City's periphery.) By the early 1600s there were also several brothels in the area. Shakespeare in *'The Merry Wives of Windsor'* (Act II, scene II) has one of his characters, Falstaff, refer to the rough reputation of Picket Hatch, a notorious area near Clerkenwell Green; others described it as the *"refuge of the destitute, the sanctuary of the disorderly."* It was in such areas that 'idle apprentices' such as the young Jack Sheppard (who we'll here more of later) might discover a life of crime.

The rookery appears to have been the main form of working class housing and neighbourhood in Clerkenwell for at least 200 years, from the mid-1600's to the mid-1800's. With a population boom and a series of slum clearances the 19th century saw both the expansion and then decline of the rookeries.

"During the 1840s the problems of poverty and pauperism emerged with greater force in London than had hitherto been the case. So too did the problem of the slum or 'rookery', as witnessed by the growing usage of the terms themselves in contemporary works. There were several reasons why this should have been the

case. First, structural problems relating to the competitiveness of the metropolitan trades resulted in severe pressures on wages and working conditions in several occupations, notably clothing and shoemaking. Secondly, collapse of the house-building boom in 1825 resulted in higher rents, and worsening housing conditions in inner areas throughout the 1830s and 1840s. Thirdly, these factors, coupled with deteriorating wages and conditions of work increased pressure on the Poor Law and in turn helped to fuel rate rises in central and eastern districts. Finally, worsening conditions and rising rates encouraged middle class flight to the suburbs, leaving behind decaying homes and an increasingly impoverished population unable to support the mounting tide of pauperism. At such times and under such conditions slum formation was both rapid and widespread.

London at mid-century was already a city with a distinctive geographical pattern of poverty. Differences in the fortunes of eastern and western districts were already evident by the time of John Stow's survey in 1598, and at the time of the Great Fire status distinctions between the areas were already engraved into the fabric of the city. In the first half of the century, however," this east-



A depiction of the 'rookery' of St Giles parish, in 1800; it was perhaps even more noisome and squalid than this sketch suggests. Note the pig.

west economic divide "was disrupted somewhat by a growing distinction in social status between inner and outer zones radiating from the old commercial core." The inner circle around the core was becoming more rotten and this was encouraging suburbanisation by the fleeing middle classes. "In 1844 Joseph Fletcher described the city in terms of three contrasting geographical components. At the centre was the City of London, already 'one vast counting house and warehouse' with a declining population that consisted increasingly of poorer artisans, shop workers, labourers and street hawkers. The outer suburbs, in contrast, were growing rapidly as a result of the immigration of a wealthy population which had sought to escape the growing impoverishment of inner-city environments. Between the two came the inner industrial belt, stretching from St Giles in the west, eastwards to St George-in-the-East and southwards into Southwark, and here it was that the mass of poverty was concentrated."

According to a variety of social indicators this inner zone contained the most impoverished districts, particularly to the east and south of the City. Districts such as Bethnal Green, Southwark and Bermondsey were characterised by a combination of factors indicative of poverty, including concentrations of sweated and unskilled occupations, high rates of illiteracy and mortality, large families with high dependency ratios, poor quality housing and high poor rates. Within such districts emerged some of the worst slums: the Church Lane rookery in St Giles - Whitecross Street near Smithfield in St Luke's [by Clerkenwell], and Wentworth Street in Whitechapel.

* * *

"One writer described the [St Giles] rookery as: 'One great maze of narrow crooked paths crossing and intersecting in labyrinthine convulsions, as if the houses had been originally one great block of stone eaten by slugs into innumerable small chambers and connecting passages.'" (Slums and Slum Life in Victorian England: London and Birmingham in Mid Century, D. R. Green and A. G. Parton in S. M. Gaskell, ed. Slums, Leicester University Press, 1990.)

The physical structure of the rookery evolved from a complex process. In the less regulated areas building in London had always had a certain random, organic aspect to it. For example, a roadside stall might begin as a table and a sheet of canvas, gradually gain a more substantial roof, then the walls would be reinforced and eventually another storey would be built above what had become a permanent shop front. Until the 19th century unregulated and illegal building was a constant fact of London life.

The flight of the wealthy to the suburbs left behind large

houses with gardens and courtyards. These were quickly sub-divided into many smaller rental units with an incredibly high density of occupation - three families or 20 people living in one room was not unusual. Sometimes one bed would be rented to three different workers, each working the morning, day or night shift and returning home to wake the sleeper up and claim his turn in the bed. Slum housing was actually very profitable with a steady demand - and this encouraged landlords to build cheaply in every available space. So a nest of secluded streets, courts and alleys off the main street - and usually without through traffic - sprang up and quickly deteriorated into slums. Courtyards and gardens were built over and alleys giving access were knocked through ground floor rooms. This reduced light, ventilation and drainage, encouraging disease. The basic plumbing systems that might have been adequate when a spacious house was occupied only by one family and servants (usually an underground cesspool) became useless under the weight of multiple occupation. Cesspools were often built over when full but would sometimes reappear through the floorboards. (This problem was not confined to poor areas - Samuel Pepys complained in his Diary of finding turds floating in his cellar coming from his neighbour's overflowing cesspool. London as a whole was not provided with an adequate sewage system until the second half of the 19th century.)

The other main forms of accommodation in the rookeries were the 'low lodging houses'. These were doss houses of varying sizes and standards; *"The main room, and the focus of the whole place, was the kitchen, where, except in the very poorest houses, a fire blazed away winter and summer. Before it the lodgers warmed themselves, dried out their clothes, and toasted their food. Their cooking might be helped by a meagre selection of pots and pans that could be borrowed from the management against small pledges. Benches and a bare table or two were likely to be the chief furniture, unless there were removable cots or bunk-boxes around the wall. In the towns where there was a gas supply, a single jet on a bracket by the chimney-breast half-lit the place after dark... In the sleeping rooms, usually the most offensive part of the place, there would be beds or palliasses [straw mattresses] jammed close and equipped sometimes with blankets, sometimes with a single heavy coverlet. They were often shared and usually verminous. Sometimes there were old four-posters in which a whole party, perhaps a family, slept together. When the place was crowded - and in some of the rougher houses as a general practice - people stretched themselves out at night on the floor wherever they could, the strongest or most favoured by the fire, the worst-off along the passages or under leaking garret slates... washing might be possible under a tap or pump in the stinking back yard*



Lodgings kitchen, Fox Court, Gray Inn Lane

where there was also some kind of privy - a collection of buckets or a hole over a cess-pit. Payment was by the night and customarily entitled the lodger to hang about the kitchen till the following evening." (*The Victorian Underworld*, Kellow Chesney, 1970.)

The lodging houses were used by a variety of people; some were quite large enterprises, cramming in a hundred or more lodgers a night. Those passing through for varying periods would include tramps, beggars, thieves, casual labourers, the poorer type of prostitutes, roadsweepers, buskers, unemployed servants and journeymen artisans "and more or less unspicifiable riff-raff. Nevertheless, there was a tendency for those who shared the same interests to favour particular houses. Some were literally thieves' kitchens, chiefly frequented by pickpockets, house robbers and their confederates, while others were largely tenanted by beggars. Others again enjoyed a reputation as 'servants' lurks' where out-of-work servants of bad character congregated, often ready to make plans for robbing their ex-employers. There was a good deal of club spirit about some of the smaller lodging-house kitchens, a sense of membership that encouraged sharing and conviviality when someone had a stroke of luck, and that made them specially dangerous to intruders. (Chesney, *op. cit.*)

Other inhabitants included a few educated people - ex-clerks and businessmen, occasionally clergymen and lawyers fallen from grace - often helped by a fondness for strong drink. These men sometimes built up practices as 'screervers' or drafters of false employment references, testimonials and other documents. Some

were also professional writers of begging letters, a fairly common crooked activity of the time.

"A lodging house frequented by beggars and criminals was obviously a good site for commissions of this kind, and that may partly explain why people one might have expected to prefer any sort of misery to the communal brutishness and turmoil of a nethersken kitchen seem actually to have been drawn to them. (Though one educated lodger who, according to Mayhew, had formerly 'moved in good society' gave a different explanation, observing that 'when a man's lost caste ... he may as well go the whole hog, bristles and all, and a low lodging house is the entire pig'.)" (Chesney, op. cit.)

Children were also often residents, some belonging to adult lodgers, others part of gangs of professional child thieves - some lodging-house keepers ran schools for pickpockets in their kitchens. These were the inspiration for Dickens's *Oliver Twist* - Oliver first meets Fagin in Clerkenwell, and is introduced to the art of pickpocketing on the Green. There were also many independent stray urchins on the streets of London, surviving as best they could, dodging the horrors of confinement in the charity schools and workhouses.

Landlords

The rapid expansion of London's population made slum landlordism highly profitable, particularly from the early 1830's onwards. Some were local small businessmen, e.g. shopkeepers and publicans; others building tradesmen clubbing together to try their luck at a bit of speculative building, usually of poor quality erected quickly for renting. Others were substantial property owners also having property in wealthy areas. A system of leasing and subletting evolved; the leaseholding landlord would let property towards the end of its lease to a 'house farmer'; this conveniently released them from legal obligations of repair and maintenance, while ensuring a healthy income. "... in turn, housefarmers [as they were known] who purchased the fag-end of leases themselves maximised short-term gains on housing through the evasion of repairs, subletting and rack rental. The result was a rapid deterioration in conditions wherever the system took hold. Housing in the central areas abandoned by the middle class provided perhaps the worst examples of slum conditions, but the most lucrative source of property speculation. Long since past its best, such housing was ripe for subdivision and subletting. The pattern was illustrated clearly in St Giles in the 1830s:

The way these houses are set out is this, the ground landlord lets out the whole estate, or two or three streets to one person, and he pays the rent

by the year; and he again lets those houses to one person who pays him weekly; and that person gets in and lets in his turn every room separately and when an inhabitant has got into a room he again lets off part of the room to anyone who comes in by the night.

Where such a chain of tenancy arose, it proved difficult if not impossible to enforce repairs. In his report to the privy council on the state of common lodgings in the metropolis, Captain Hay of the Metropolitan police commented 'Such tenancy and occupation have rendered it extremely difficult to reach the person really responsible as 'keeper' for the condition of the house; for there is first the owner; secondly his tenant for the whole house; thirdly the subtenant for a room; and fourthly five or six persons or families occupying one room as lodgers.'

Speaking in 1866 of the worsening condition of housing in London, Dr Julian Hunter commented on this practice: "There is regular trade of dealing in fag ends of leases and the art of eluding covenants is well studied. Gentlemen in this business may be fairly expected to do as they do - get all they can from the tenants while they have them, and leave as little as they can for their successors.'

Small tradesmen and shopkeepers, in particular, whose object was a quick return on capital as well as a continuous inflow of money, were most likely to enter this part of the property market and it was these local property owners that were frequently cited as the main cause for deteriorating housing conditions. Temptation was great; profits could be high, some claimed as high as 100 per cent if landlord expenditure was minimised." (D. R. Green and A. G. Parton, op. cit.)

Though tenant moonlight flits were understandably common, given the fluctuation and insecurity of many incomes, most moves were within a small area and there were long-term attachments to one's neighbourhood and community. Living at such close quarters to each other also imposed a certain communal structure on daily life. Eyewitness investigators noted that the rookery communities were often tight-knit and mutually supportive; amid the terrible conditions of the rookeries, still a certain commonality and solidarity bloomed like roses on a dung-heap.

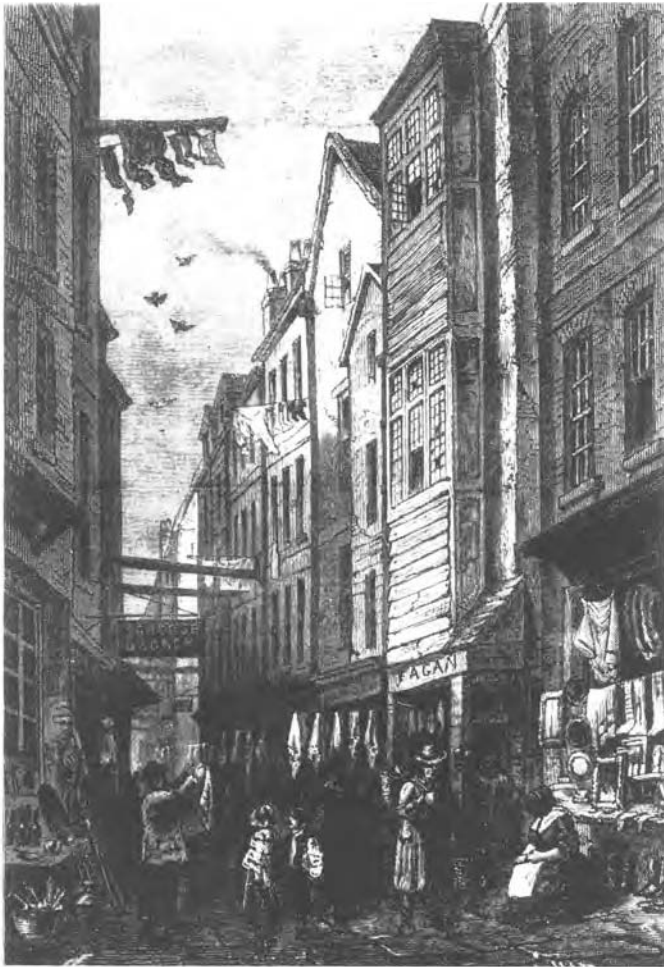
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Crookery in the rookery

The London rookeries were generally sited close to sources of wealth; either the City, the West End or the docks. This was ideal for thieves as they could quickly disappear with their loot into the almost impenetrable maze of the rookeries. The police only rarely

went into the rookeries; and if they intended to arrest, then only in large numbers. So there usually was plenty of forewarning; sometimes large numbers of the rookery population came on to the street to confront a police invasion. Such criminal legends as Jack Sheppard, Jonathan Wild and Dick Turpin were all at times residents of Saffron Hill.

Being so autonomous from regular police presence meant that the rookery thieving community evolved a sophisticated environment to protect their trade. Much of the following evidence was only revealed through demolition during the slum clearances to make way for the new railway and road through



The Field Lane Rookery in 1840. Dealers in handkerchiefs & other stolen goods often set up stalls along the narrow passageway. Note 'Fagan's' shop!

Clerkenwell:
"Against the incursions of the law...there were remarkable defences. Over the years the whole mass of yards and tenements had become threaded by an elaborate complex of runways, traps and bolt-holes. In places cellar had been connected with cellar so that a fugitive could pass under a series of houses and emerge in another part of the rookery. In others, long-established escape routes ran up from the maze of inner courts and over the huddled roofs: high on a wall was a double row of iron spikes, 'one row to hold

by, and another for the feet to rest on,' connecting the windows of adjacent buildings. ... To chase a wanted man through the escape ways could be really dangerous, even for a party of armed police. According to a senior police officer... a pursuer would find himself 'creeping on his hands and knees through a hole two feet square entirely in the power of dangerous characters' who might be waiting on the other side: while at one point a 'large cesspool, covered in such a way that a stranger would likely step into it' was ready to swallow him up." (Chesney, op. cit.)

The Fleet, now an open drain, was also utilised; flowing through the middle of the rookery (and being a rough boundary between the Clerkenwell proper and Saffron Hill sections), "though its dark and rapid stream was concealed by the houses on each side, its current swept away at once into the Thames whatever was thrown into it. In the Thieves' house were dark closets, trap-doors, sliding panels and other means of escape." In the area's most notorious low lodging house, the Red Lion Inn in West St, "were two trap-doors in the floor, one for the concealment of property, the other to provide means of escape to those who were hard run; a wooden door was cleverly let into the floor, of which, to all appearance, it formed part; through this, the thief, who was in danger of being captured, escaped; as immediately beneath was a cellar, about three feet square; from this there was an outlet to the Fleet Ditch, a plank was thrown across this, and the thief was soon in Black Boy Alley - out of reach of his pursuers." Famous fugitives such as Jack Sheppard and Jerry Abershaw were hidden here.

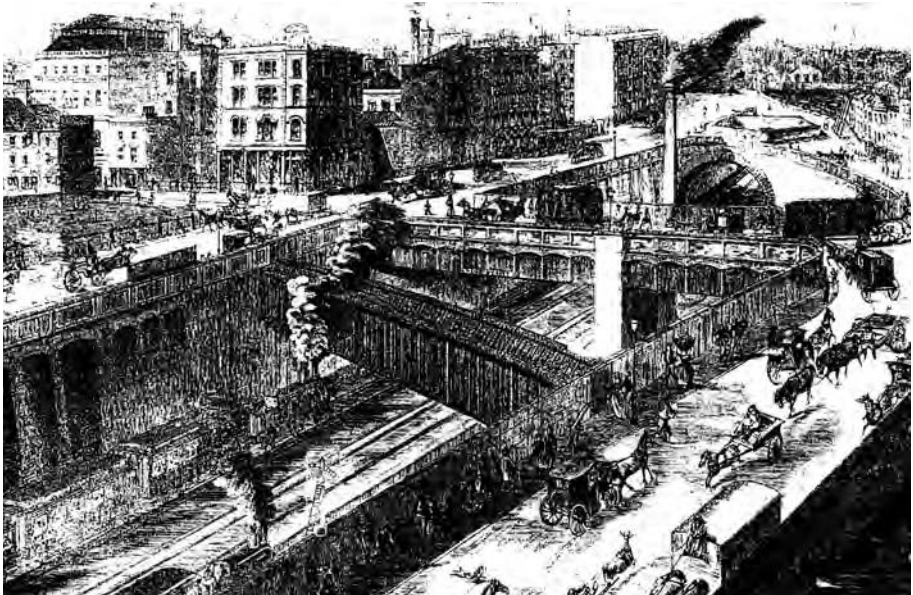
In the same house, there were other means of escape (the stairs apparently resembling those in an M. C. Escher print!): "The staircase was very peculiar, scarcely to be described; for though the pursuer and pursued might only be a few feet distant, the one would escape to the roof of the house, while the other would be descending steps, and, in a moment or two, would find himself in the room he had first left by another door. This was managed by a pivoted panel being turned between the two." (*The Rookeries of London*, Thomas Beames, 1852.)

* * *

"Immediately behind some of the best constructed houses in the fashionable districts of London are some of the worst dwellings, into which the working classes are crowded." (Chadwick.) Despite the rookeries often being so close to the rich, such was the fear of the poverty, crime and disease they contained that they were entirely another country to most respectable Victorian citizens. The reports by those few who did venture within - usually accompanied by a police escort - such as Booth collecting evidence for his social survey *'Life and Labour of the London Poor'*, various health

inspectors, adventurous journalists and novelists such as Dickens and Gissing, were considered as exotic and foreign in their descriptions as despatches from deepest Africa. As Fielding said in 1751 of the rapid development of these suburbs: *"Whoever considers... the great irregularity of the buildings, the immense number of lanes, alleys, courts and bye-places, must think that had they been intended for the very purpose of concealment, they could not have been better contrived. Upon such a view the whole appears as a vast wood or forest in which the thief may harbour with as great security as wild beasts do in the deserts of Arabia and Africa."* (London Life in the Eighteenth Century, M. Dorothy George, 1925.)

During the 1840s one room living was the norm for working class families, particularly in wealthier districts where rents were high. (As we have seen, for the poorer inhabitants housing density was much higher.) From the 1830s onwards there were large-scale slum clearances arising from road building and railway constructions. These were generally ploughed through slum areas as this would mean less compensation to be paid to property owners - in these cases slum clearance was just a convenient incidental by-product. But the laying out of Farringdon Rd in the 1840's was prompted by Acts of Parliament that combined the intention to improve transport links with the desire to physically and morally clean up the area. The Act of 1840 stated: *"the district is densely populated, and inhabited and resorted to by many persons of a vicious and immoral character, and is also intersected by a very long,*



Farringdon Station from the East, 1863.

common sewer, called Fleet Ditch, in many parts uncovered, causing malaria productive of fever and epidemics, and prejudicial to the general health of the neighbourhood." Both the construction of the new road and the building of Farringdon Station in the 1860's (that took the railway line along the former valley of the Fleet River/Ditch) went through the heart of the Clerkenwell rookery. But these slum clearances only made overcrowding worse by decreasing the housing stock - the philanthropic 'model dwellings' beginning to be built for the working class by Peabody and others were too little in number to make much difference and were also too expensive for most slum dwellers. (Many of these Victorian estates still stand and their location is often an indicator of the site of an earlier rookery.)

THE ROOKERIES, THE GORDON RIOTS AND FEAR OF REVOLUTION

Saffron Hill - from Bishops to Bill Sykes

On the west bank of the Fleet lay Saffron Hill, a rookery famous as a centre for the Victorian criminal underworld, though this reputation goes back much further; in the 18th century Jack Sheppard and friends spent time here; and as early as 1598 (when it was known as Gold Lane) it was described as *"sometime a filthy passage into the fields, now both sides built with small tenements."* (John Stow). Much of Dickens's *Oliver Twist* is set here - this is the neighbourhood of Fagin and Bill Sykes. Its long crooked reputation is probably due to the status of the area as a 'Liberty': *"The right of sanctuary, whereby a criminal or one accused of crime could escape the law for a while by taking refuge in a church or on Church property (e.g. a monastery, abbey, or Episcopal palace grounds), was considered sacrosanct in the middle ages. When the Church land became the property of others for building purposes, the right was often preserved in the creation of a Liberty, a district only loosely under the jurisdiction of local justices of the peace or manorial courts. The rights of sanctuary in Liberties ended in 1623 for criminals and for civil offenders through legislation in 1697 and 1723, but their independence from 'outside interference', in particular by officers of the parish in which they lay, continued."* (*Streets of Old Holborn*, S. Denford and D. Hellings, 1999.) This is where the phrase 'taking a liberty' is said to originate.

The land at Saffron Hill was acquired in 1272 by the powerful Bishops of Ely (Cambridgeshire) who built themselves a palace and extensive gardens here, where they grew saffron, which was used to disguise the taste of city dwellers' rancid meat. Our old acquaintance John of Gaunt, who was, remember, burnt out of his Savoy Palace during the Peasants Revolt, afterwards lived at the Palace from 1381 until his death in 1399.

Shakespeare (in *Richard II*, Act II) has Gaunt deliver-

ing here the famous lines "This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle...this blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England". In 1572 Queen Elizabeth I effectively confiscated the land from the then Bishop Cox, whom she detested, by insisting that he sign the lease over to her favourite Christopher Hatton, Queen's Manager in the House of Commons and future Lord Chancellor. The Bishop protested that, as tenant for life, he could not sign away the rights of his successor. She wrote to him in no uncertain terms; "Proud Prelate, I understand you are backward in complying with your agreement; but I would have you know that I, who made you what you are, can unmake you; and if you do not forthwith fulfil your engagement, by God I will unfrock you." (Cited in *The Rookeries of London*.) He complied. It took 125 years of dispute until the



Oliver amazed at the Dodger's Mode of 'going to work'

Bishops finally, in 1697, won some compensation for their loss. House building began in the late 17th century as suburban development for the wealthy, but its grand houses remained an island of affluence in a generally poor area.

In the 19th century many local dealers switched from watch making to become importers of precious stones, jewellers and diamond merchants, as this trade expanded. (The area has since become, and remains, an international centre for this field of commerce.)

But the rookeries remained; while at one end of the area one



FIELD LANE NEGOTIATIONS; OR, A SPECIMEN OF "FINE DRAWING."

A pickpocket at work in Field Lane

might purchase an expensive watch or item of jewellery from the grand shop fronts of Hatton Garden, the local pickpockets might later relieve you of it and quickly fence it to a Fagin-type character a matter of yards away in the hidden back alleys of Saffron Hill. And certainly it might sometimes find its way back to be later resold, identifying marks

removed, on the same respectable street of prestigious shops it first emerged from. The commodity circuits were many and varied.

Dickens in *Oliver Twist* describes the notorious Field Lane, where it was said you could have your handkerchief (a favourite target of Victorian pickpockets, the silk hanky being an expensive status symbol) dipped at one end of the Lane and buy it back at the other - a simple form of taxation, really; "Near to the spot on which

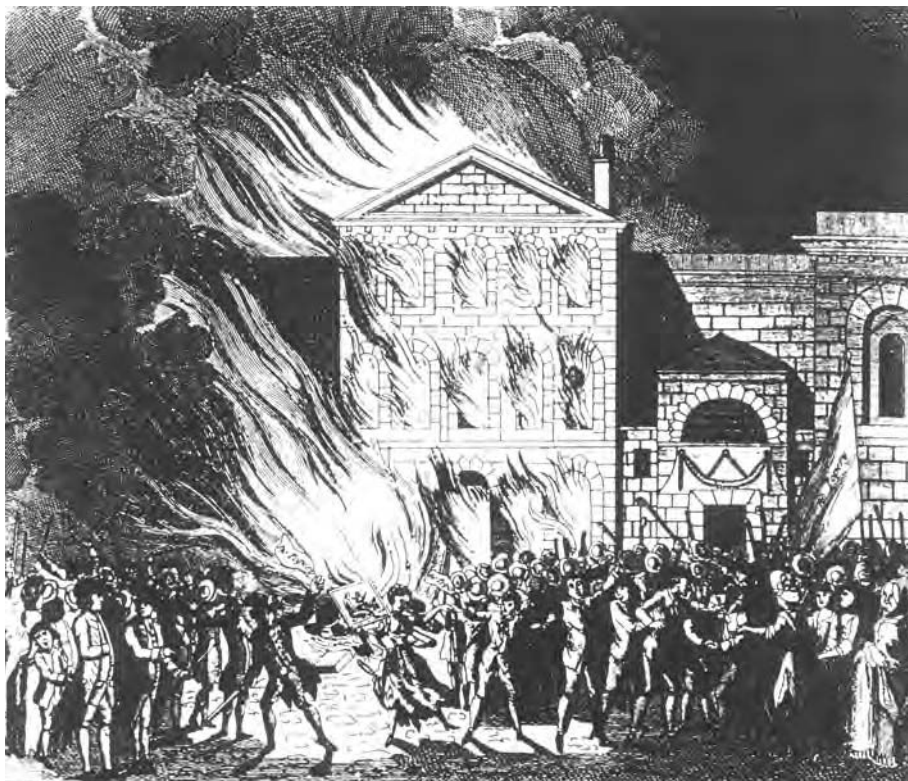
Snow Hill and Holborn Hill meet, there opens, upon the right hand as you come out of the City, a narrow and dismal alley leading to Saffron Hill. In its filthy shops are exposed for sale huge bunches of second-hand silk handkerchiefs, of all sizes and patterns; for here reside the traders who purchase them from pickpockets. Hundreds of these handkerchiefs hang dangling from pegs outside the windows or flaunting from the door-posts; and the shelves, within, are piled with them. Confined as the limits of Field Lane are, it has its barber, its coffee-shop, its beer-shop, and its fried-fish warehouse. It is a commercial colony of itself; the emporium of petty larceny: visited at early morning, and setting-in of dusk, by silent merchants, who traffic in dark back-parlours, and who go as strangely as they come. Here, the clothesman, the shoe-vamper, and the rag-merchant, display their goods, as sign-boards to the petty thief; here, stores of old iron and bones, and heaps of mildewy fragments of woollen-stuff and linen, rust and rot in the grimy cellars."

* * *

During the 19th century social reformers confronted the unregulated market forces of the growing economy in their attempts to improve working class housing. Many capitalists, then as now, ignored strategic social planning in their own long-term interests in favour of the immediate needs of short-term profitability gains. The more farsighted reformers recognised the moral and health dangers of slum housing to social stability (e.g. contagious disease being no respecter of class as it spread). Some also feared their political implications as a potential fermenting hotbed of dark undercurrents of subversion, ready to burst its seams and break forth over the city...

1780 and all that

In discussing slum housing Victorian reformers sometimes referred to the role of the residents of the radical St Antoine Fauborg district of Paris during the Revolution and also to London's Gordon Riots of June 1780. The Riots were provoked by Parliament's intentions to relax the discriminatory laws limiting the rights of Catholics. But the Riots quickly expanded to become a vehicle for the London Mob to attack the wealth and power of their rulers, with many having little knowledge or interest in the legal issues of Catholic rights. In the space of a week, MPs were attacked outside Parliament; Newgate, Clerkenwell House of Detention and other prisons were broken open, the inmates freed and then burnt down; houses of the wealthy, Catholics and others, were burnt - Irish slum areas were also attacked;



The Burning & Plundering of Newgate Prison by the Gordon Rioters

the toll booth on Blackfriars Bridge was ransacked and robbed; magistrates who had the power to order the Army to open fire were for several days too intimidated by the Mob to give the order (for fear that they and their property might become the next target). Only with the intervention of the Army as the Mob made repeated attempts to storm the Bank of England, and after the death and wounding of some hundreds of rioters, did the authorities begin to regain control.

* * *

The Burning of Langdale's Distillery

On a warm and breezy Wednesday evening (7th June 1780) the largest part of the Mob were beginning their assault on the Bank of England. (The little known - and free entry - Bank of England Museum devotes considerable space to an interesting display on this event.) Meanwhile, the most wildly debauched event of the whole riotous week was about to occur on Holborn Hill on the southern edge of the Saffron Hill rookery. As dusk fell another group of rioters had made a stand at the foot of Holborn Hill but

were dispersed by troops who then hurried to join the defence of the Bank. Their ranks no doubt swelled by people from the local rookeries, the Mob made their way to the top of the hill near Fetter Lane where the great Langdale's Distillery stood. "Langdale, a Roman Catholic with twelve young children, owned one of the largest distilleries in London and it was because of his trade more than because of his religion that he had been repeatedly threatened with invasion by the rioters since Monday afternoon. At last, just before dusk on Wednesday evening, at a time when his distilleries, warehouses, offices and several private houses occupied by his family and workpeople were undefended, owing to his garrison having been called off to the Bank, the assault began. It followed the usual pattern. The doors were forced, the windows smashed in, the rioters rushed into the house and the furniture, office books and equipment flew out through the broken windows. A bonfire was soon raging in the street and the premises themselves, less than half an hour later, were burning fiercely too, expertly ignited by the rioters, now thoroughly efficient as incendiaries.

As the buildings leapt with a roar into flame, a gentle wind came up. Until now the fires had not spread as the air was so calm and still, but tonight in Holborn gushes and eddies of winds took the wind this way and that, wrapping the street in fire and setting alight houses further down Holborn towards Fleet Market, until the whole district looked, as Wraxall said, 'like a volcano'.

The fire was given an added and ferocious life by a fire engine pumping through its hose not water but gin from the stills in Langdale's cellar.



Another engine, captured from its operatives by an enterprising old cobbler, was pumping up gin into buckets, while the cobbler did a good trade selling it to the spectators of the havoc at a

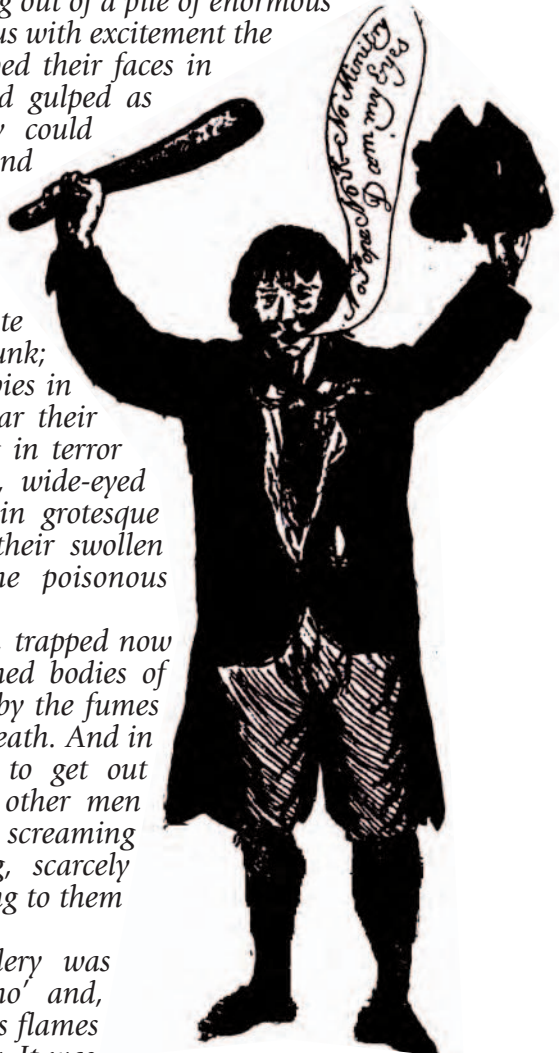
penny a mug.

Others, unwilling to pay for what they could get for nothing, ran into the raging building and down the stone steps into the cellar and came up choking with blackened faces and bloodshot eyes, carrying untapped casks of gin, or pails and jugs, bowls and even pig-troughs overflowing with this most valued anodyne. Soon, even this effort was unnecessary for as the heat below ground became intense the stills burst and overflowed and the gin came gushing up into the streets and ran in warm streams in the gutter and between the cobbles, joining a flow of rum pouring out of a pile of enormous staved-in rum casks. Delirious with excitement the people knelt down and dipped their faces in the river of fiery spirits and gulped as much of it down as they could before it made them choke and burned their throats like acid. For the gin was in its raw state, unrectified.

Wraxall saw men and women lying down prostrate in the streets incapably drunk; some of the women had babies in their arms or struggling near their insensible bodies, screaming in terror or in pain. Several staring, wide-eyed figures lay on their backs in grotesque postures, their faces blue, their swollen tongues still wet with the poisonous liquid.

Below them in the cellars, trapped now by the fire, were the scorched bodies of men and women overcome by the fumes and the smoke, burning to death. And in the warehouse, too drunk to get out when the flames leapt in, other men and women could be heard screaming and shouting and giggling, scarcely aware of what was happening to them or too drunk to care.

[The burning distillery was described as like a 'volcano' and, being perched on the Hill, its flames could be seen 30 miles away. It was the largest of several fires burning simultaneously around the city.]



Contemporary Image of a
Gordon Rioter

At length the Northumberland Militia arrived. They had come by forced march from the north and were so exhausted, one of their officers thought, that their dulled senses could not take in the full horror of the scene. They wearily obeyed an order to open fire on a group of pickpockets who had been threading their way between the prostrate bodies, picking off them anything worth stealing and shouting obscenities at the officer who had called to them to give themselves up. The shots scattered the pickpockets who ran away from a scene which when they had gone presented little life. The flames still crackled, the spirits still bubbled in the street but most of the people who remained were motionless, and the others seemed only able to crawl or stumble about in delirium.

The militiamen marched off to the Bank, where hundreds of troops were needed to repel a new and more dangerous attack." (King Mob, Christopher Hibbert, 1958.)

* * *

Charles Dickens, in his fictionalised and unsympathetic account of the Riots in *Barnaby Rudge*, places the rioters' headquarters of his main characters (led by an unhappy Clerkenwell apprentice) in an ale-house down the back lanes of nearby Kings Cross; this pub, *The Boot*, though largely rebuilt, still stands - as it has for a good 250 years - in Cromer St, WC1. In the book Dickens describes the public hangings that followed the riots. The convicted were taken by open cart from Newgate (in the City) along Holborn and Oxford St to Tyburn (near Marble Arch). As a warning to the rebellious poor the route deliberately passed through the heart of London's most notorious rookery, St Giles's, also known as the Holy Land due to the large Irish community living there. (This area was partially destroyed in the 1840s when New Oxford St was built.) The procession traditionally stopped along its route to allow the condemned a last drink. *The Bowl* pub on St Giles's High St (rebuilt in 1898 and now called *The Angel*)



was one of these last-gasp saloons. The witty Jonathan Swift commented on this custom as it passed close to the Saffron Hill rookery ('sack' is a dry white wine):

*"As clever Tom Clinch, while the rabble was bawling,
Rode stately through Holborn to die at his calling,
He stopped at the George for a bottle of sack
And promised to pay for it when he came back."*

* * *

JACK SHEPPARD, THE NEW PRISON, BRIDEWELL AND COLDBATH FIELDS HOUSE OF CORRECTION

*As he went through Coldbath Fields, he saw
A solitary cell;
And the Devil was pleased, for it gave him a hint
For improving his prisons in hell.*
- From *The Devil's Walk* by Coleridge and Southey.

In the late 16th and early 17th centuries several institutions of incarceration became concentrated in the Clerkenwell area. Bethlehem Hospital for the insane was built at Moorfields in 1676



Clerkenwell Workhouse, as rebuilt in 1790

(better known by the name that has entered common usage, Bedlam). This was to be joined by the Quaker workhouse, Clerkenwell workhouse, Bridewell House of Correction, the New Prison and a charity school.

By this time the area was "a part of town through which livestock passed to the city and through which the Quality [i.e. the wealthy] passed to the country" (or at least rural suburbia) to visit the entertain-

ment and leisure attractions of Sadler's Wells, Bagnigge Wells, the London Spa and Merlin's Cave. (*The London Hanged*, P. Linebaugh, 1991.). (Linebaugh claims in his excellent book that the concentration of such institutions of social control in Clerkenwell "amidst the pleasure haunts of the bourgeoisie defined it as an upper-class zone of the city hostile to the labouring poor." [Linebaugh, op. cit.] But this is wrong; it ignores the social mix of the area which included some wealthy residents, but also many artisan craftsmen and slum dwellers of the rookeries. Contemporary maps and other evidence confirm this.)



FRIENDS VISITING PRISONERS AT THE HOUSE OF CLERKENWELL DETENTION, 1870S.

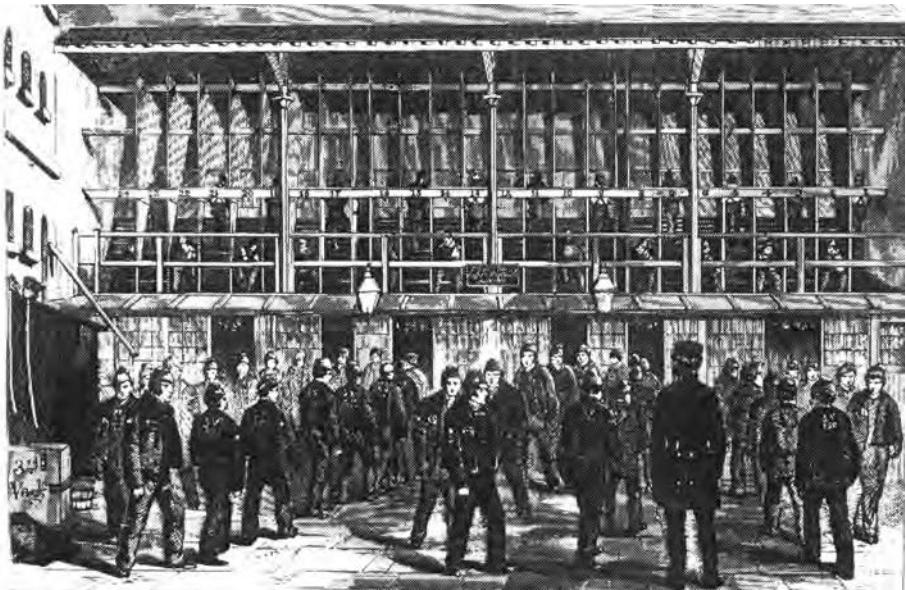
There had been a prison on the Clerkenwell site since around 1615, the first being the Clerkenwell Bridewell. Named after Bridewell Palace, built near the junction of the Fleet and the Thames rivers for Henry VIII. The Palace "had quickly decayed and been handed over by Edward VI to the City, which used it as a combination of short-term lock-up and industrial training school where vagabonds of both sexes could be taught the error of their ways, trained in some skill and then either discharged

onto the labour market or shipped off to the labour-starved colonies of America." (Clerkenwell and Finsbury Past, Richard Tames, 1999.)

Within a couple of years Clerkenwell New Prison, a house of detention or remand prison for those awaiting trial, was built next to Bridewell. In 1794 Bridewell was closed and replaced by the more modern Coldbath Fields House of Correction, on what is today the site of Mount Pleasant Royal Mail sorting office. The New Prison was rebuilt in 1773 and then burnt down by the Gordon Rioters in 1780. Rebuilt again in 1818, taking over the vacant site of the demolished Bridewell, finally rebuilt yet again in 1847 as the Clerkenwell House of Detention - this time on the model of the recently opened Pentonville Prison (1842) on Caledonian Rd.

"As one reads history, not in the expurgated editions written for schoolboys and passmen, but in the original authorities of each time, one is absolutely sickened, not by the crimes that the wicked have committed, but by the punishments that the good have inflicted." (Oscar Wilde, former prisoner of Pentonville.)

The Pentonville regime, considered the most sophisticated and up-to-date form of penal design and discipline, was a mixture of the 'Silent System' regime already operating at Coldbath Fields and the newer 'Separate System' now being promoted by prison administrators. The Silent System banned all communication by word, gesture or sign and any resistance to these rules was



Prisoners working at the Coldbath Fields treadwheel, while others exercise in a circle.

punished with the wearing of leg-irons, bread and water diets, solitary confinement and floggings. But the inmates resisted nonetheless; "A prison semaphore of winks, hand signs and tapping through the pipes emerged, its secret alphabet becoming one of the cultural inheritances of the London underworld." The prison administration "resigned themselves to policing a silence that actually hummed with a secret language." (Criminal Islington, op. cit.)

Work was considered mainly as punishment and for this purpose the treadmill was provided; prisoners marched aimlessly round the six huge treadmills in silence, 15 minutes on and 15 minutes off. "The treadmill was a huge revolving cylinder with steps on it like the slats of a paddle wheel. Prisoners mounted the steps of the wheel, making it turn with their feet while gripping a bar to keep themselves upright. While some wheels were geared to grind corn or raise water, most, including the one at Coldbath Fields did nothing more than 'grind the air'." (Criminal Islington, op. cit.) Other pointless tasks were turning a handcrank,

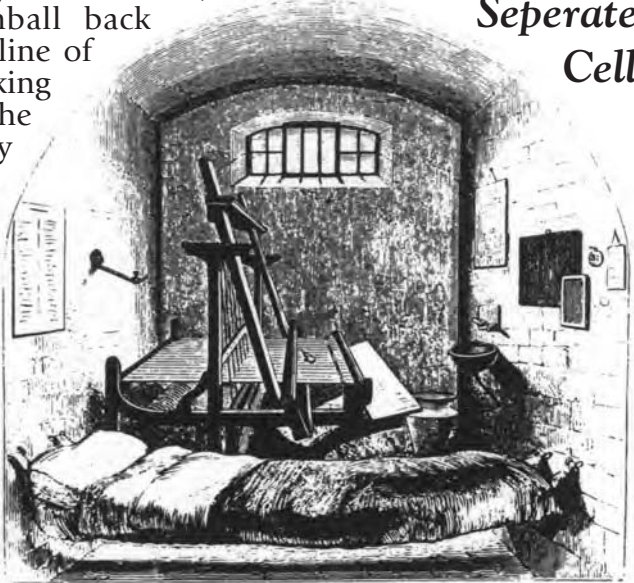
passing a cannonball back and forth along a line of prisoners and picking oakum. This was the tedious and dirty task of unpicking old tarred ships' ropes, to be re-used for caulking the wooden hulls of ships or re-spun into rope.

The Separate System was pioneered in America. The idea was to avoid the 'contamination' that arose from

prisoners associating with each other and to instill a more long-lasting discipline and influence; "The whip inflicts immediate pain, but solitude inspires permanent terror." (W. Crawford, prison inspector.) Work was to be a solitary activity, such as loom-weaving alone in one's cell and even religious worship was segregated, each prisoner silently isolated in individual cubicles.

These regimes continued to be resisted; not surprisingly, they also led to a rise in prison suicides, depression and madness. After some years they were modified to deal with this and to introduce

Seperate Cell



'productive labour' and other more social activities as the philosophy of prison as a form of rehabilitation gained popularity.

These regimes were the basis for the prison system we know today, and many of the same Victorian gaols are still in use - though overcrowding is sometimes now even worse than in the past.

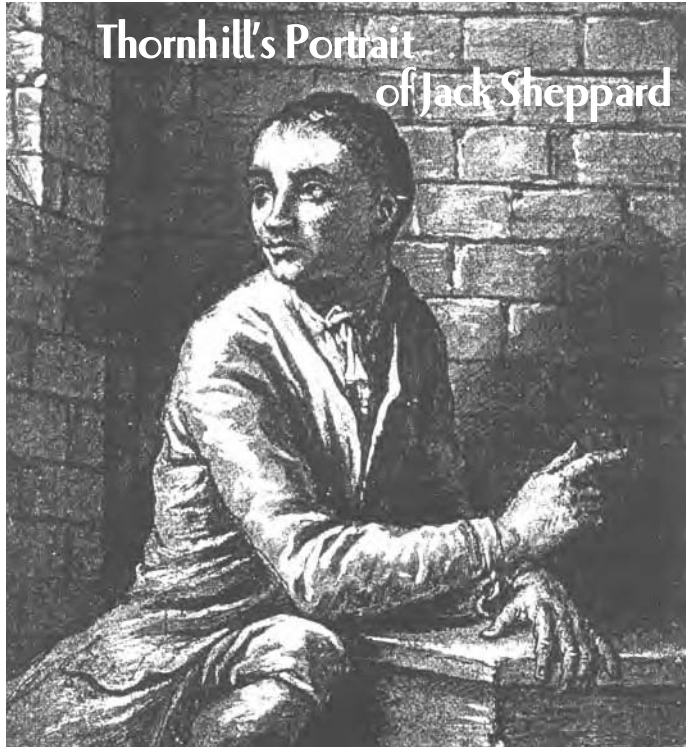
Jack Sheppard: From Workhouse to Apprenticeship to Master of escape

Jack Sheppard was the most famous inmate of Clerkenwell's prisons - in his day he became the most famous name in England and he remained a folk-hero to the poor for over a century after his death. (In the 1840s plays based on his life were still regularly being performed for working class audiences; in the first publication of Dickens' *Oliver Twist* in 1838/39,

serialised in the *Miscellany* magazine, it shared the pages with a fictionalised account of Sheppard's life; in the 1840s his name was said to be better known amongst many of the poor than that of Queen Victoria.)

Born in Spitalfields in 1702, his carpenter father died during Jack's childhood. His mother was

forced by circumstance to place him in Bishopsgate workhouse where he remained for one and a half years. He then began a



carpenter's apprenticeship. He also picked up some locksmithing skills along the way that would stand him in good stead in later years.

*"...I did not like my master, he did not treat me well
So I took a resolution, not long with him to dwell
Unknown to my poor parents, from him I ran away
I made my course for London, cursed be that day..."*

- The Sheffield Apprentice

"The apprenticeship system was still controlled by an Act passed under Queen Elizabeth, the Statute of Artificers. The system provided young people with a vocational education, in another household.... they were 'bound apprentice' between twelve and sixteen. Parish children might begin their apprenticeship as early as eleven, and continue in it until they were twenty-four. (Remember that the expectation of life at birth was then about 36 years.) The contract would continue for seven years or more, until the master was satisfied that the apprentice knew his trade. Apart from some public holidays, no home leave was given. The boy's parents might not see him again until his time was up. Imagine the child of twelve leaving his home to live in strange surroundings with no parental love, withstanding the storms of adolescence and reaching physical maturity with only the recollection of his childhood and what support his master gave him to sustain him, and perhaps occasional letters from home if his parents could write." (Restoration London, Liza Picard, 1997.)

With just ten months of his apprenticeship left to serve, Sheppard left his master and the narrow confines of the apprentice life. He joined the swelling ranks of the 'idle apprentices' - a group that invoked fear and suspicion in the 18th century. The London trades were undergoing a series of transformations as a result of new technologies and the expanding economy. New machinery was deskilling some, factory methods of organisation were making the protective practices of the Craft guilds obsolete and these were changing the relationship between apprentices and their masters. Depending on their trade and circumstances some masters began to fulfil one or more roles simultaneously - they might be working craftsmen, workshop overseers, shopkeepers, or wholesale suppliers. Equally they might be expanding into factory ownership or begin farming out piecework to home workers - or they could be in the process of declining into deskilled casual labour. So the artisan class was fragmenting and reforming in both upwardly and downwardly mobile directions.

"The crisis of apprenticeship was part of a deeper, structural

recomposition of the London proletariat. There existed a tension between, on the one hand, those journeymen, small masters and apprentices in trades that no longer enjoyed the protection of guild organization and thus were exposed to the ravaging shocks of divisions of labour and experimentations in industrial organization, and, on the other, all those whose social existence was defined by their refusal to accept the new conditions of exploitation. The circulation of experience between those two poles was characteristic of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. Many apprentices, journeymen and small masters would have experienced substantial periods in which they were without wage work and would therefore have sought out other expedients, such as the sea, gaming, the tramp, 'going on the Account'. Similarly, those who lived from day to day as paupers, sharpers, footpads or beggars will almost surely have had some direct acquaintance with the structures of production, such as apprenticeship to a trade or service to a rich family. The zone of circulation between these two poles is what new institutions of Queen Anne's reign - the workhouse, the charity school, the Society for the Reformation of manners, the new punishments of the penal code - sought to demarcate and control." (Linebaugh, op. cit.)

After deserting his apprenticeship Jack took with enthusiasm to



Jack & Edgeworth Bess escaping from the New Prison, May 1724. From an engraving by Cruikshank.

a life of robbery; he was imprisoned five times and escaped four. It was these technically brilliant and daring escapades, as well as his taunting attitude to authority that secured his long reputation among the working class.

In the spring of 1723 he aided the escape of his girlfriend Edgeworth Bess from St Giles's Roundhouse. In April he ended up there himself; betrayed by his brother Tom (who was hoping to bargain his own release from a burglary charge) and his friend James Sykes, he was lured into a trap and delivered to a Justice Parry.

It took him less than three hours to escape. "He

was confined in the top floor. He cut through the ceiling, untiled the roof, and with the aid of a sheet and blanket lowered himself into the churchyard, climbed a wall, and joined a gathering throng which had been attracted to the scene by the falling roof tiles. That was in April 1724. From then until the end of November the saga of his escapes grew, astounding ever-increasing numbers of people for their daring and dexterity." (Linebaugh, op. cit.)

Arrested again for pickpocketing a gentleman's watch, Jack was now taken to Clerkenwell's New Prison. As his common law wife, Edgworth Bess was allowed to join him from her confinement in the Roundhouse. They were locked in the most secure area, 'Newgate Ward', and Jack was weighed down with 28lb of shackles and chains. He soon set to work sawing through these and then through an iron bar. Boring through a

nine-inch-thick oak bar, then fastening sheets, gowns and petticoats together, they descended 25ft to ground level; only to find they had landed themselves in the neighbouring prison of Clerkenwell Bridewell!

U n d a u n t e d , driving his gimblets and piercers into the 22ft wall, Jack and Bess used them as steps and hand-holds and made their way over the wall to freedom in the early morning of Whit Monday 1724.

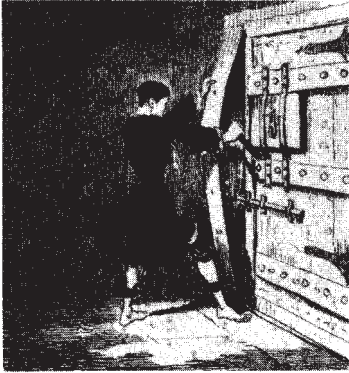
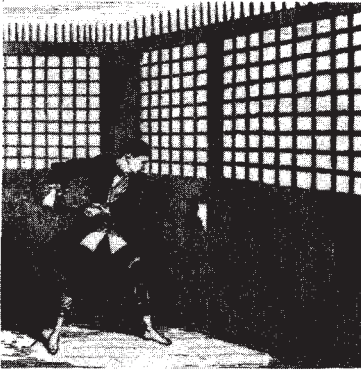
While Sheppard's later "escape from the condemned hold of Newgate made 'a far greater Noise in the World', the London gaolkeepers regarded the New Prison escape as the most 'miraculous' ever performed in England, so they preserved the broken chains and bars 'to Testifie, and Preserve the memory of this extraordinary Event and Villian.'"



Almost all-powerful in the underworld of the time, Jonathan Wild was widely hated by the poor thieves he made his profits from... When he was finally sent to Tyburn to be hanged, this ironical ticket was made inviting "Thieves, Whores and Pick-pockets" to watch his 'Turning Off'.



Scenes from Jack's final epic escape from Newgate



(Linebaugh, op. cit.)

Jack spent the next three months of freedom engaging in highway robbery and burglary. He was recaptured after he robbed his old master, Mr Kneebone. Kneebone contacted Jonathan Wild, 'the thief-taker General'. Wild was both a trainer of thieves and a deliverer of them to the courts, a fence of stolen goods and returner of them to rightful owners; "*a complex and parasitic system*" that "*had in these years become a system of municipal policing.*" (Linebaugh, op. cit.) Sheppard always refused to compromise himself by having any dealings with Wild, either for fencing goods or in attempt to gain more lenient sentences in court.

Edgeworth Bess was pressured to reveal Jack's hideaway, and, after an exchange of pistol fire, he was captured and taken to Newgate prison. In August he was tried and sentenced to hang. On the day his death-warrant arrived he implemented his escape plan; dislodging a spike, he inserted himself into a small hole he had worked in a wall and with the help of visitors was pulled through to freedom. He walked through the City to Spitalfields where he spent the night with Edgeworth Bess.

Sheppard's latest escape threw the shopkeepers of Drury Lane and the Strand into a panic; Jack took up robbing again, this time from a watchmaker's shop in Fleet St. But

he and his accomplice were recognised so they left London for Finchley Common. They were pursued and soon apprehended - Jack was taken to Newgate once again.

By this time Sheppard was a celebrity and folk hero of the labouring classes; visited by the famous and interviewed by

journalists and ballad makers. He offered some lucid comments; when urged by a prison official to concentrate on preparing himself for the afterlife rather than attempting to escape, he replied "*One file's worth all the Bibles in the world.*" He also condemned the corruption and hypocrisy of the criminal justice system.

As his trial approached Jack implemented his escape plan on the 14th October. This amazing flight from Newgate was to make him an enduring legend amongst the working class for over a century afterwards. Freeing himself from his shackles he then worked his way up the chimney, through several locked rooms and eventually on to the roof and over the wall to freedom.

On 29th October Sheppard robbed a pawnshop for some spending money and began a triumphant tour, a defiant spree through his old haunts and hunting grounds. He hired a coach and, with some female companions, toured his own native Spitalfields - he also drove through Newgate! Defiantly parading himself around the ale-houses and gin-shops, he was recaptured after fifteen days of glorious liberty.

Jack Sheppard was hanged on 16th November 1724 at Tyburn; a cheering crowd, said to number 200,000, lined the route to salute him.

THE FENIANS

Throughout the 19th century the question of national independence for Ireland was a major issue in British politics. There was considerable support shown for this cause amongst the British working class; but this was to be severely dented by the events of 1867 in Clerkenwell.

1867 was a major year for the Fenians (otherwise known as the Irish Republican Brotherhood) in Britain - there was an unsuccessful attempt to seize Chester Castle. As *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* put it: "*Who can doubt, had the attack on Chester Castle succeeded, but that in St Giles [the rookery - with a large Irish community], perhaps at Islington, not less than in Kerry disturbances would have broken out.*"

During November there were two demonstrations on Clerkenwell Green to protest against the forthcoming executions of three Fenians in Manchester. On the 23rd the three were hanged at Strangeways Prison.

On the 20th two men had been arrested in London; one, Richard O'Sullivan Burke, was a leading member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. He was charged with treason-felony while his

companion Casey was only charged with obstruction. They were remanded to the Middlesex House of Detention at Clerkenwell.

An escape plan was organised with outside supporters via smuggled notes written in invisible ink. A first attempt on 12th December was aborted when the fuse failed to ignite and was postponed to the following day. Meanwhile British intelligence had learned of the plan; Burke and Casey were moved to a more secure area and plain-clothes police began to patrol the outer walls of the prison.

At noon on 13th December plain-clothes police observed three men and a woman of 'suspicious appearance' surveying the area. At about 3.30pm three people were seen in the fading light wheeling a large beer cask covered with a tarpaulin into Corporation Lane and placing it at the foot of the prison wall. Obtaining a light from one of the kids playing in the street, they



lit the fuse. The consequences of the explosion that followed were a great hole in the prison wall - 16 feet wide at the bottom and 60 feet at the top - and the virtual demolition of the tenements on the opposite side of the street. Three people died instantly, six later and forty were injured, some seriously.

The damage was spread across the surrounding streets. Some staves of the barrel were found and their size indicated it had been a 30 gallon cask. A Fenian who claimed later to have lit the fuse said it had held a massive 548lb of gunpowder - enough to kill any prisoners on the other side of the wall had they been waiting to be rescued.

Three people were arrested at the scene, one of whom turned out to be a police spy. Another four were later arrested but the cases against all but one collapsed. Michael Barrett alone was convicted and sentenced to death.

The explosion caused a temporary panic in London - the Police Commissioner hysterically claimed there were 10,000 armed Fenians at large in London! 50,000 special constables were sworn in to deal with this perceived threat. This event has been seen by some as the birth of the image of the coldly calculating terrorist figure in popular consciousness (though usage of the word 'terrorist' did not become common until the Fenian bombing campaign of the 1880s) and the panic caused by the accidental damage of the explosion possibly encouraged Fenians in their chosen tactics of later campaigns. Marx described the explosion as "*a colossal stupidity*" as it "*infuriated*" the London masses who had, like Marx, shown much sympathy with the Fenian struggle. He continued "*The last exploit of the Fenians in Clerkenwell was a very stupid thing. The London masses, who have shown great sympathy for Ireland, will be made wild by it and driven into the arms of the government party. One cannot expect the London proletariat to allow themselves to be blown up in honour of the Fenian emissaries. There is always a kind of fatality about such a secret, melodramatic sort of conspiracy.*" (Marx obviously had illusions as to how much consideration Irish republicanism would ever, then or later, show for the physical well-being of London proletarians.)

The hanging of Michael Barrett at Newgate Prison on 26th May 1868 before 2,000 people was the last public execution in England.

How Irishmen became Micks

For a time the term 'Mick Barretts' became an unpleasant way of referring to Irish Fenian nationalists - this was later shortened to 'Micks' and this is the origin of the term 'Mick' that has commonly been applied to Irishmen.

Fenian activities in Clerkenwell did not end; in 1882 a large arms cache was found in St John St. And from 1906 to 1910 a young Michael Collins - future commander-in-chief of the military forces of the Irish Free State (Eire) - worked in Mount Pleasant post office on the site of the old House of Correction. In 1909 he took the secret oath of allegiance to a local cell of the Irish Republican Brotherhood.

* * *

THE KILLING OF PC CULLEY AND THE CALTHORPE ARMS INQUEST

In 1833 a meeting was called by the National Union of the Working Classes for Monday 13th May to take place on Coldbath



Fields, now the site of Mount Pleasant sorting office. While the NUWC committee sat in the Union Tavern [still a pub today on King's Cross Rd], people began assembling outside in Coldbath fields, including a body from the NUWC with a banner reading 'Death or Liberty'. Meanwhile large numbers of police were assembling in Grays Inn Rd from where they were deployed in stables around Coldbath Fields. At around 3pm the committee left the tavern to address the assembly, by now between one and two thousand strong. The chairman had barely started speaking when the cry of 'Police' went up from the crowd. The police, between 1700 and 3000 in number, had formed up across Calthorpe Street before advancing on the meeting, while others came up another side street. In the words of the *Gentleman's Magazine* the police having "completely surrounded the actors and spectators of the scene...commenced a general and indiscriminate attack

on the populace inflicting broken heads alike on those who stood and parleyed and those who endeavoured to retreat". New Bell's Weekly Messenger also writes of the police attacking those assembled: "The Police came on and used their staves pretty freely...many heads were broken."

During the assault three policeman were stabbed; PC Culley *"ran about thirty yards and upon reaching the Calthorpe Arms [still a pub today on Gray's Inn Rd] he seized the barmaid by the wrist and exclaimed "Oh, I am very ill"*. These were his dying words. One man, George Fursey, was sent for trial on the charge of murdering PC Culley and wounding PC Brooks. The jury returned a verdict of not guilty.

There then followed a local inquest on the death of PC Culley; it was convened in an upstairs room of the Calthorpe Arms, close to the site of the demonstration. The inquest jury of seventeen men consisted largely of bakers from the Grays Inn neighbourhood. Summing up, the coroner called upon the jury to return a verdict of wilful murder. The jury retired and after half an hour sent a message to the coroner saying that sixteen of them were agreed on a verdict condemnatory of the police. The coroner protested and urged them to reconsider. A short while later their final verdict was delivered:

"We find a verdict of justifiable homicide on these grounds; that no riot act was read, nor any proclamation advising the people to disperse, that the Government did not take the proper precautions to prevent the meeting from assembling; and we moreover express our anxious hope that the Government will in future take better precautions to prevent the recurrence of such disgraceful transactions in the metropolis."

Reading between the lines, it appears that the jury's view was that the demonstrators were deliberately penned in and ambushed by the police. Sir Robert Peel had only recently introduced his Act for policing the Metropolis in 1829 and the new police force were still generally disliked and distrusted, not yet generally seen to have a legitimate presence in society.

Again the coroner protested, but the jury remained firm and insisted on their verdict; he could dismiss them and appoint another jury but their verdict would stand. They said that they were neither in favour of the meeting nor against the police, just the way the police behaved. As the foreman put it: *"Mr Coroner we are firmly of the opinion that if they had acted with moderation the deceased would not have been stabbed."*

Local people evidently thought no expense should be spared in celebrating this popular victory: *"When the inquest ended small impromptu torchlit processions carried the jurors to their respective homes. The Milton Street Committee arranged a free trip up the Thames*

to Twickenham for them. In July it was a free trip to the London Bridge Theatre to see *A Rowland for Oliver*. Each member of the jury was presented with a pewter medallion which bore the inscription 'In honour of men who nobly withstood the dictation of a coroner; and by the judicious, independent and conscientious discharge of their duty promoted a continued reliance upon the laws under the protection of a British jury'. Funds were raised for a memorial. On the first anniversary of the verdict a procession took place from the Calthorpe Arms to St Katherine's Dock. It was led by a specially commissioned banner, the funds for which had been raised by a Mr Ritchie, the landlord of the Marquess of Wellesley in Cromer Street, Grays Inn Lane. After reaching St Katherine's Dock the procession boarded the Royal Sovereign for a return trip to Rochester, complete with free food and drink. A pewter cup was presented to the foreman of the jury with the inscription '...as a perpetual memorial of their glorious verdict of justifiable homicide on the body of Robert Culley, a policeman, who was slain while brutally attacking the people when peacefully assembled in Calthorpe Street on 13th May 1833.'" (Criminal Islington, op. cit.)

* * *

CHARTISM

Chartism, the world's first mass political working class movement, demanded universal suffrage for all; i.e. the extension of the vote to all workingmen (there was a small female element within Chartism). There were two wings of Chartism: physical force Chartism, which was ready to use insurrection if all else failed to achieve its goals; and the moral force wing, which put its trust in the fact of having right on its side and advocated the peaceful use of political activity as its preferred method.

The Industrial Revolution

Chartism emerged at a time when the labouring classes were still in the process of being formed into an industrial proletariat; the combination of artisan craftsmen and a mass of un- and semi-skilled labour were all being reshaped by forces such as de-skilling, an increased division of labour and factory production methods. From its emergence in the 1830s, Chartism inherited the problems of earlier artisan activists and organisations. As E.P. Thompson put it: "It was the dilemma of all Radical reformers to the time of Chartism and beyond. How were the unrepresented, their organizations face with persecution and repression, to effect their

objects? As the Chartists termed it, 'moral' or 'physical' force?... Again and again, between 1792 and 1848, this dilemma was to recur. The Jacobin or Chartist, who implied the threat of

**CHARTIST
DEMONSTRATION!!**

"PEACE and ORDER" is our MOTTO!

TO THE WORKING MEN OF LONDON.

Fellow Men,—The Press having misrepresented and vilified us and our intentions, the Demonstration Committee therefore consider it to be their duty to state that the grievances of us (the Working Classes) are deep and our demands just. We and our families are pining in misery, want, and starvation! We demand a fair day's wages for a fair day's work! We are the slaves of capital—we demand protection to our labour. We are political serfs—we demand to be free. We therefore invite all well disposed to join in our peaceful procession on

MONDAY NEXT, April 10,

As it is for the good of all that we seek to remove the evils under which we groan.

The following are the places of Meeting of THE CHARTISTS, THE TRADES, THE IRISH CONFEDERATE & REPEAL BODIES:

East Division on Stepney Green at 8 o'clock; City and Finsbury Division on Clerkenwell Green at 9 o'clock; West Division in Russell Square at 9 o'clock; and the South Division in Peckham Fields at 9 o'clock, and proceed from thence to Kennington Common.

Signed on behalf of the Committee, JOHN DICKSON, Sec.

overwhelming numbers but who held back from actual revolutionary preparation, was always exposed, at some critical moment, both to the loss of confidence of his own supporters and the ridicule of his opponents." (*The Making of the English Working Class*, E.P. Thompson, 1963.) (It could be added that whenever the Chartists did prepare for insurrection they were so consistently inept and sloppy in their planning and security that the authorities were inevitably forewarned of their intentions.)

The two wings of Chartism reflected changes in the earlier and later periods

of working class formation, self-organisation and political expression. In the earlier period, from the 1780s to the 1830s, the physical force aspects were to the fore. As previously described, in the Gordon Riots of 1780 the London Mob of slum dwellers and dissatisfied apprentices ruled the city for several days, finally defeated by Army guns and blades as the Mob attempted to storm the Bank of England. Clerkenwell's New Prison was stormed, the prisoners released and it was then burned to the ground, as was Newgate. There were numerous riots, violent strikes and attempted insurrections throughout this period, strongly influenced by the 1789 French Revolution.

From the 1830s onwards, independent working class political organisation began to replace the earlier spontaneous violent outbreaks and became the dominant form of struggle. The failed great syndicalist union movement of the 1830s had revolutionary goals to abolish (or at least 'level') class society through workers mass action but it was intended to be achieved through an entirely peaceful withdrawal of labour. This domestication corresponded more to the moral force philosophy of the other wing of Chartism, but Chartism itself was by the 1840s a spent

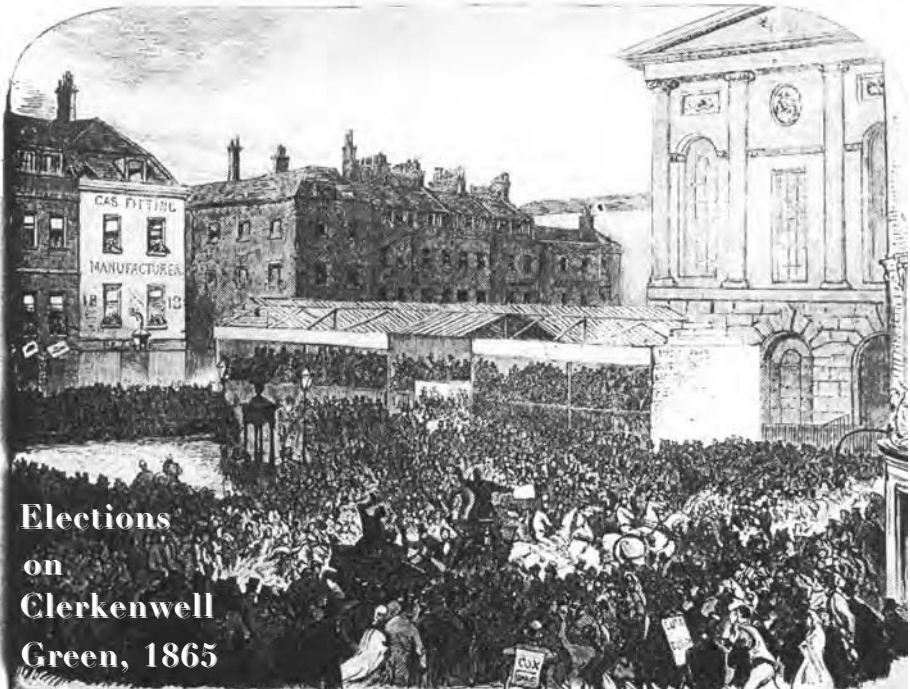
force and the new working class representative and social organisations - unions, workingmen's clubs and debating societies - moved centre stage.

Clerkenwell Green and the Chartists

Clerkenwell was the heart of the radical political scene in Victorian London and Clerkenwell Green was a central venue for public meetings, demonstrations and frequent clashes between Chartists and the recently formed Metropolitan Police Force. (Dan Chatterton, who we will hear more of later, participated in these events in his youth; he was badly injured during these clashes.)

The London Democratic Association was established in 1837 with its main strength in North and East London. They held regular meetings in the area. Though part of the broader Chartist movement they were closest to the physical force Chartists of the North; their membership cards bore the motto 'Our rights - peaceably if we may, forcibly if we must'. A major period of Chartist activity was in 1848, in Clerkenwell as elsewhere. Here is an account by James Cornish, a local policeman:

"The Metropolitan policeman of the 1840s was a strange-looking individual. I wore a swallow tailed-coated suit with bright buttons and a tall hat. The hat was a fine protection for the head and saved me from



many a Chartist's bludgeon. It had a rim of stout leather round the top and a strip of covered steel each side. Then I had a truncheon, a weapon that was capable of doing a lot of execution and gave a good account of itself in those rough and dangerous times...When the Chartist agitation was at its worst I was stationed at Clerkenwell...in those days there were fields about and many open spaces. Clerkenwell was generally a rustic sort of suburb. There were of course great numbers of the working classes who listened readily enough to what agitators had to say about wrongs of which a lot of people knew nothing until attention was drawn to their existence. Stormy meetings were held everywhere and the police were nearly run off their legs in trying to keep order...Those were rougher, harder and coarser times and where in these days many arrests would be made, we in the '40s used to brush the mob off the streets and out of the way, the chief thing was to get rid of them...The rioting in London took the form of running fights between the Chartists and the Guardians of the Law, and the man who wanted excitement could get plenty of it at a very cheap rate. Every policeman became a target, and the way some of us got struck proved what first rate shots the Chartists were.



Chartists & police battle on Clerkenwell rooves, 1848.

The weapons that were mostly used in the beginning were bludgeons and stone and bricks...as for the Chartists' bludgeons they got them easily enough from trees and fences...a stake of this kind was about the only stake most of the rioters had in the country!

A famous battleground was Clerkenwell Green and another place I

remember well was Cowcross Street. There was plenty of open space on the Green for fighting and many houses in which the Chartists could hide and throw things at us. Day after day we came into collision with them...One day the Chartists seemed to have vanished mysteriously and only two or three police were left to guard the Green. But that was merely a blind. They swooped down on us. By the time reinforcements arrived...the Chartists were giving us a thoroughly bad time.

It turned into a massive battle that extended to neighbouring streets, into houses and onto roofs.

Truncheons were useless against the defenders of the roofs but we made good use of them in clearing the streets...there was a terrible to-do that day and I have often thought that I should like to see a picture of the street as it looked when sticks and stones and bricks were flying and police and Chartists were struggling furiously for mastery...we cleared the streets at last leaving many an aching bone and sore head.

Then a message was received to go to Victoria Park "to the relief and rescue of 'N' Division' who were besieged in the church there." A busy day for Clerkenwell's coppers.

On one occasion these clashes led to the occupying of the Green by a contingent of the Horse Guards with 5000 police in support, followed by Police Commissioner Robert Peel banning further meetings for a time.

* * *

REDS ON THE GREEN

Clerkenwell - the hub of the radical wheel

Every major political struggle of the 19th century held demonstrations on the Green. When the Tolpuddle Martyrs returned from their transportation to Australia after being pardoned some of them were welcomed there by a large demonstration. As mentioned, the Chartists were a regular presence. During the 1860s there were renewed demands for reform of the voting system and enfranchisement of workingmen. In 1866 the Reform League called a demonstration in Hyde Park - the government banned the demonstration but marchers from different areas converged there anyway, despite the presence of 10,000 police and military. It was the Clerkenwell branch of the Reform League that led the way into the Park, carrying the red flag topped by the liberty cap, and the Park was soon filled with 150,000 demonstrators. In 1871 meetings supported the Paris Commune and for its duration a red flag hung from a lamp-post

on the Green. 1884 saw the Social Democratic Federation meet there. The City Press called the Green the "*headquarters of republicanism, revolution and ultra-nonconformity*". In 1890 London's first full May Day March (following 2 years of various activities across the capital) started on the Green, organised by the London Trades Council in conjunction with 28 Radical Clubs and many trade unionists. Since that date many trade union marches have begun from the Green, including those by postal workers from Mount Pleasant Sorting Office just up the road or by print workers from Fleet Street. Many May Days have either begun from or ended at the Green.

In 1864 the International Working Men's Association, the First International, was formed in London by trade unionists with the help of Marx and Engels. It eventually collapsed due to internal disagreements (represented by the two poles of Marx and Bakunin) in 1872, but was never truly representative of the great mass of the non-unionised working class. The emergence in the 1880s of political groups such as the SDF, the Socialist League and various anarchist groups has been called by historians the 'revival of socialism'; it was in fact the first time that revolutionary Marxist and anarchist class struggle theory established itself as a part of working class culture in the form of political parties and groups calling themselves communist, socialist or anarchist. It could be seen as the beginning of the 'institutional left'. For many working class militants the incubator for this development had been the theist/secularist/freethought movement of the 1860s. At that time the working-men's clubs were mostly freethought and radical, which meant republican, rather than socialist, although socialism was emerging. This is brought out by Stan Shipley in his *Club Life and Socialism in mid-Victorian London* (p. 40). He quotes Thomas Okey, *A Basketful of Memories* (1930):

"...during the seventies and eighties of last century, indications were obvious, both on the platform and in the audience of the Hall of Science,



Unemployed Meeting, Clerkenwell Green, October 1887.

that the Marxian bible, or, rather, the earlier Communist Manifesto (1848) of Marx and Engels - the first volume of *Das Kapital* did not appear till 1867 - had begun to leaven English democratic thought. It quickly made a more potent appeal than mere republicanism and negative freethought to the working and labouring classes of East London."

Shipley comments: "The socialist turn was thus already well under way within Secularism in the later 1870s, and the process was a continuing one; down to the days of Guy Aldred and beyond, the Secularist movement served as the nursery of London Socialists." (See *Come Dungeons Dark*, J.T. Caldwell, 1988, a biography of Aldred by a longtime comrade and friend.)

Clerkenwell Green was by now a major centre for regular soap-box street speakers as well as a venue for open air radical meetings and demonstrations. In his novel *The Nether World* George Gissing describes a Sunday evening on the Green;

"...stood, as so often, listening to the eloquence, the wit, the wisdom, that give proud distinction to the name of Clerkenwell Green. Towards sundown, that modern Agora rang with the voices of orators, swarmed with listeners, with disputants, with mockers, with indifferent loungers. The circle closing about an agnostic lecturer intersected with one gathered for a prayer-meeting; the roar of an enthusiastic total-abstainer blended with the shriek of a Radical politician. Innumerable were the little groups which had broken away from the larger ones to hold semi-private debate on matters which demanded calm consideration and the finer intellect. From the doctrine of the Trinity to the question of cabbage versus beef; from Neo-Malthusianism to the grievance of compulsory vaccination; not a subject which modernism has thrown out to the multitude but here received its sufficient mauling. Above the crowd floated wreaths of rank tobacco smoke."

"Yet at length something stirred him to a more pronounced interest. He was on the edge of a dense throng which had just been delighted by the rhetoric of a well-known Clerkenwell Radical; the topic under discussion was Rent, and the last speaker had, in truth, put before them certain noteworthy views of the subject as it affected the poor of London. What attracted Mr. Snowdon's attention was the voice of the speaker who next rose. Pressing a little nearer, he got a glimpse of a lean, haggard, grey-headed man, shabbily dressed, no bad example of a sufferer from the hardships he was beginning to denounce. 'That's old Hewett,' remarked somebody close by. 'He's the feller to let 'em 'ave it!' Yes, it was John Hewett, much older, much more broken, yet much fiercer than when we last saw him. Though it was evident that he spoke often at these meetings, he had no command of his voice and no coherence of style; after the first few words he seemed to be overcome by rage that was little short of frenzy. Inarticulate screams and yells interrupted the torrent of his invective; he raised both hands above his head and

clenched them in a gesture of frantic passion; his visage was frightfully distorted, and in a few minutes there actually fell drops of blood from his bitten lip. Rent! -- it was a subject on which the poor fellow could speak to some purpose. What was the root of the difficulty a London workman found in making both ends meet? Wasn't it that accursed law by which the owner of property can make him pay a half, and often more, of his earnings or permission to put his wife and children under a roof? And what sort of dwellings were they, these in which the men who made the wealth of the country were born and lived and died? What would happen to the landlords of Clerkenwell if they got their due? Ay, what shall happen, my boys, and that before so very long? For fifteen or twenty minutes John expended his fury, until, in fact, he was speechless. It was terrible to look at him when at length he made his way out of the crowd; his face was livid, his eyes bloodshot, a red slaver covered his lips and beard; you might have taken him for a drunken man, so feebly did his limbs support him, so shattered was he by the fit through which he had passed."

It seems most likely that Gissing based the above character of 'John Hewett' on a Clerkenwell native, Dan Chatterton; this would seem to be a dramatic exaggeration of other descriptions of Chatterton's fiery public speaking. (The novelist Richard Whiteing also based his character 'Old 48' in the best-seller *No. 5 John St* (1899) partly on Chatterton.) In his paper *The Scorcher* Chatterton had often written on the problems of working class rents and slum housing conditions - he lived most of his life in the slums of Clerkenwell, King's Cross and Drury Lane.

CLERKENWELL MAVERICKS: DAN CHATTERTON AND GUY ALDRED

"The history of the left has conventionally been written as the story of movements and organisations. Those who left no institutional legacy, who were not pioneers of party or union, whose pamphlets have not been collected by libraries, have been more-or-less neglected. There's an injustice in this - not so much a personal injustice, as an injustice to the generations that follow who are deprived of a proper sense of the complexity of the past. Those mavericks who kept aloof from organised politics and struggled alone to preach and to persuade according to their own idiosyncratic values could have quite as much importance in transmitting ideas, in however vulgarised a form, to a popular audience as the closely-printed journals and the in-house political rallies."

Citizen Chatterton

Dan Chatterton was born in Clerkenwell in August 1820 into a



relatively prosperous artisan family. His father was a japanner, or furniture lacquerer, in an area then full of small workshops devoted to various trades such as watch making, jewellery and precious metals, bookbinding, printing and cabinet making. The artisan workforce had a long tradition of radicalism dating back to the 18th century and Chatterton was taken as a boy by his atheist father to radical and freethought meetings at Richard Carlile's Rotunda in nearby Blackfriars Rd.

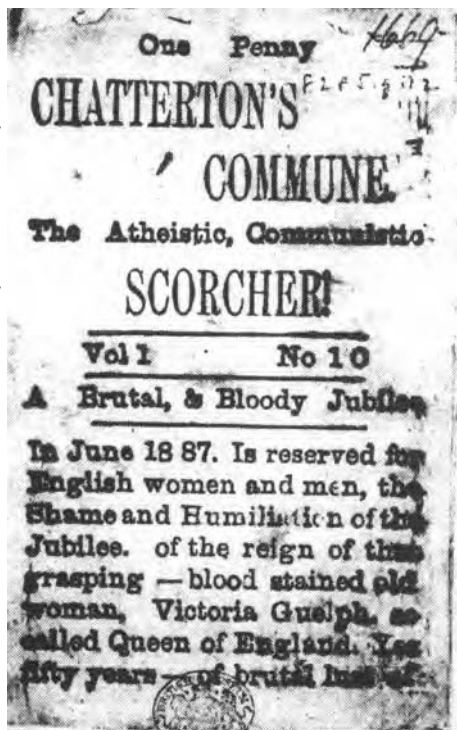
Chatterton grew up at a time and in a place of great social ferment. The first explicitly Socialist, Communist or Anarchist political organisations were yet to emerge on British soil, but there were great struggles being fought as the working class developed a sense of its potential collective power. Chartism was at its height during his youth, the organisation of strikes and trade unionism was growing, and Clerkenwell was a centre for these movements. His enduring political influences appear to have been Richard Carlile, Chartism and the Paris Commune.

Apprenticed to a bootmaker, Chatterton acknowledged the

influence on his political development of these craftsmen he described as "*proverbial... thinkers*". Like many of his time, however, he was a downwardly-mobile artisan, suffering at the hands of new economic forces; also troubled with health problems, Chatterton was destined to spend the rest of his life as a poverty stricken slum dweller, a casualised worker and a political activist denouncing the conditions of his class. In his later years he made his income from billsticking (flyposting) and selling his own and others' radical publications in the streets, pubs and at meetings.

An old Chartist and founder member of the Clerkenwell-based London Patriotic Club, a workers socialist and republican club of the 1870s, he was revitalised in his later years by the emergence of Marxist and Anarchist groups in the 1880s. Well known as a seller of radical pamphlets and papers at meetings and for his uncompromising contributions to debates, he is mentioned in several novels, political journals, newspapers and reminiscences of the period. One of his memorable explosive interventions was at a meeting organised by the Social Democratic Federation in January 1887. As described by the organiser of the meeting, the SDF had invited Lord Brabazon as their guest speaker, "*and old Chatterton who, for all his diatribes against the aristocracy had never got the chance to give one of its members 'a bit of his mind', was naturally on hand. The noble philanthropist had just been round the world and was full of emigration as a panacea for the congested poverty of the old country. He discoursed on the subject for an hour, to the amusement of an audience of which no member could have raised the price of a railway ticket to Clacton-on Sea, much less the fare to Canada.*

Then Chatterton struggled on to the platform and poured out his indignation. Gaunt, ragged, almost blind he stood, the embodiment of helpless, furious poverty, and shaking his palsied fist in Brabazon's face, denounced him and his efforts to plaster over social sores, winding up with a



lurid account of the Uprising of the People and the procession in which the prominent feature would be the head of the noble lecturer on a pike. I shall never forget Lady Brabazon's face while this harangue was delivered." (H.H. Champion, cited in Dan Chatterton and his 'Atheistic Communistic Scorcher', Andrew Whitehead, *History Workshop Journal* 25, 1988.)

Chatterton was a militant atheist and even had an exchange of letters with the Archbishop of Canterbury published in *The Times*! The *Observer* reprimanded the Archbishop for being foolish enough to be drawn into public discussion with "an itinerant spouter of blasphemy." "One of his pamphlets - *The Fruits of a Philosophical Research* (1877) - consisted of quotes from a work described as 'a cesspool of filthy and immoral language, of foul deeds, of incest, of whoredom, of theft, of murder, and every vile and unnatural crime that disgraces our humanity', viz. the Bible." (Whitehead, op. cit.)

Chatterton produced several pamphlets on subjects such as atheism, women's issues and birth control, but from the mid-1880s he concentrated on the *Scorcher*. Chatterton's paper, *The Atheistic Communistic Scorcher*, was produced for 12 years by hand in the most primitive fashion, and in layout and writing style is probably the most unusual radical publication ever produced in the UK, or anywhere else. Typeset by the nearly-blind Chatterton with a mismatched old compositor's alphabet of print blocks (rumoured to have been found in printers' dustbins), as he reportedly said "My old eyes no longer see anything. So I must ... use large letters which I can feel, with my fingertips, one after the other ... Set it with my fingers, without eyes - and without manuscript, out of my head, - printed without a press, always one side at a time, stitched and published." (Cited in J.H. Mackay, *The Anarchists*, 1891.) Spontaneously composed while setting the type, in a stream-of-consciousness style, consisting of a mixed content of humorous ridiculing of royalty, politicians and the wealthy, autobiography, some sharp critique of do-gooding reformism and calls for immediate bloody uprising of the poor to establish the 'Glorious Commune' as a basis for a classless society, the paper is a unique document of a life of uncompromising struggle - and surprisingly, thanks to Chatterton's pride and foresight, a full set of his works can still be read in the British Library. (Any enterprising publishers who might like to consider producing a collection of Chatterton's edited works...?)



Guy Aldred

Guy Aldred was of a younger generation than Chatterton but led a similar political life, though his political expression was more conventionally articulate, and was also from a radical Clerkenwell background. His grandfather, with whom Guy and his mother lived for most of his childhood, had sponsored in 1892 the first Asian to be elected to the Westminster parliament. He was selected as the Liberal Party candidate for the overwhelmingly white working class area of Clerkenwell. Dadabhai Naoroji was an anti-colonialist and was friendly

Guy Aldred in the 1930s

with many radical figures of the day. Despite his opponents and those within the Liberal Party itself attempting to play the race card during the campaign, he was elected. Because he had won by only three votes Mr Naoroji became known locally as 'Mr Narrow Majority'.

Aldred progressed from being a religious boy preacher, through secularism to become an Anarchist Communist, taking the best of Marx and Bakunin as his influences. Both Chatterton and Aldred were temperamentally unsuited to long-term membership of political organisations and pursued their own paths alongside the radical scene. They were both uncompromising anti-parliamentary anti-statist communists, critical of professional representatives of the working class (both as union bosses and labour politicians), looking forwards to a self-organised class taking revolutionary action to abolish class society. Their political outlook stands up today better than most others of their time and place, and particularly in comparison to the dull compromises of the Official Organisations - promoters of the miserable political failures of the past 150 years - who were often so dismissive and patronising towards them.

Though their circulation would have been small, Chatterton's

publications, being hawked around the streets and pubs, would have reached an audience beyond most political journals; and they may have helped popularise certain radical attitudes and notions. Like Chatterton, Aldred had a reputation as an eccentric self-publisher; he was also well known as a soap-box public speaker for many years in the parks and streets of his adopted home of Glasgow, where he sold his various pamphlets. Their background in the melting pot of Clerkenwell radicalism gave them an independence of thought and activity that, combined with their maverick eccentricities, has led to them being ignored or dismissed by historians of the official organisational left. But while they can't be so easily researched, categorised and evaluated as the political Parties, that in no way diminishes their importance - it only makes them more potentially intriguing and interesting.

'THE HOUSE ON THE GREEN'

THE MARX MEMORIAL LIBRARY

The House (no. 37 Clerkenwell Green) was built in 1738 as the Welch Charity School and educated Children of poor Welsh artisans living in Clerkenwell. The school later expanded and in 1772 moved to Grays Inn Rd where a Welsh social centre still functions.

The building was then used as workshops by a variety of trades including cabinet makers, upholsterers, grocers, bootmakers, chemists, a tea urn manufacturer and a mattress maker. Between 1782 and 1838 part of the building was the *Northumberland Arms* pub and until 1880 also housed Coffee Rooms. Both the pub and coffee rooms were in effect workmen's clubs. Coffee houses were common meeting places for working class radicals where newspapers and journals were provided for reading. The minutes of the International Working Men's Association (the 1st International) note that "*the next meeting is to be at Clerkenwell Coffee House*". William Morris and Eleanor Marx addressed crowds from the balconies of this building.

The Marx Memorial Library was established in this building in 1933 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Marx's death and also as a counter-response to the burning of books then taking place in Nazi Germany.

Lenin

Lenin first came to London from Geneva in April 1902 with his wife Krupskaya and two members of the board of *Iskra*, the Russian Social Democratic Party's paper. The Swiss authorities were making it difficult to continue publication there so production was moved to London. The RSDP had contacted The Social Democratic Federation in London for help and Harry Quelch, director of the SDF's Twentieth Century Press, offered the use of office space in their headquarters on Clerkenwell Green. This is where Lenin edited the paper until he and Krupskaya left to return to Geneva.

The next time Lenin came to London was in 1903 for the RSDP's 2nd Congress, which was moved to London from Brussels due to Government pressure.

The upstairs room of the *Crown and Woolpack* pub [now gone, though the disused building remains] in St John St was used for the planning of the event and is where an amusing incident occurred; the police sent a spy to hide in a cupboard and gather information on the Party's planning. Unfortunately he could only report back to his superiors that he had learnt nothing useful as the whole meeting had been conducted in Russian. It was at this conference that the historic split between the Bolshevik and Menshevik factions occurred, though it was some time before the complete separation into two different parties was made. Lenin made three other trips to London; for the 3rd Congress in 1905 when he and other delegates lodged in rented rooms off Grays Inn Rd, in 1907 for the 5th Congress and a final lecture visit in 1911.

"I am Lenin on a lamppost at the
corner of the Green
Until a certain Guy
Aldred comes by..."



Lenin drank at several pubs in the area, including The Crown in Clerkenwell Green next to his office. The Crown was a venue for the music hall acts that were a part of the new emerging 20th century working class leisure culture. It seems likely that this influenced one of Lenin's more interesting comments where he perhaps sees something dialectical in the music hall performance: "*In the London music halls there is a certain satirical or sceptical attitude towards the common-place, there is an attempt to turn it inside-out, to distrust it somewhat, to point up the illogicality of the everyday.*" (London - A History, F. Sheppard, 1998.) He evidently had the dialectic on his mind - it was in this period that Lenin was preparing to write his philosophical work '*Marxism and Empirio-Criticism*' (published 1908). (Anton Pannekoek's "*Lenin as Philosopher*" was an excellent critique of Lenin's philosophy and its relation to Lenin's state-capitalist dictatorship over the proletariat, which has remained the greatest false solution for the poor and dispossessed of this world.)

* * *

AN AFTERWORD

Gentrification

In the late nineteenth century the first social housing in Clerkenwell was built, the rookeries were cleared away and the twentieth century saw some large council estates appear; in general - the more modern, the more ugly looking. The small artisan workshops declined, but a handful have survived. And the changes continue...

Clerkenwell has, since the 1990's, experienced a wave of gentrification with some of the fastest rising property prices in London. But unlike other areas, this has mainly been gentrification of commercial property, offices and shops, with even the little residential development being predominantly conversions; of warehouses, schools etc. Most of the residential property remains, for the moment, social housing. (Though this may change if present government policies for social housing continue, and are extended, as a blatant means of changing the social composition of poorer areas ripe for gentrification.) The atmosphere of the area has changed with some pubs being ruined by trendy refurbishment, shops and restaurants being geared towards the tastes and spending power of the incoming dot-commer and fashion industry gentrifiers. For those who

A View up Clerkenwell Green from Farringdon Road, then...



cannot afford to join in this colonisation the watch-word is dislocation, dislocation, dislocation. A walk down Exmouth Market illustrates the present schizophrenic, divided nature of the area. The once thriving fruit 'n' veg and cheap household goods stalls are gone with the rest of the market, though some of the old shops still useful to the working class sector remain. But many of the outlets are now selling trendy cultural commodities to the new yuppie gentry; or are trendy 'gastro-experience'-type eateries selling wildly overpriced slops to people who appear to take pride in defining themselves only by how they look, where they are seen, how they make their money and how they spend it. Conspicuous consumption constructed around an empty core – much like their housing...

There are other, more historical, examples of this schizophrenia; such as the yuppie development on the site of the Clerkenwell New Prison/House of Detention. While the cells remain underground (and were until recently open to the public as a tourist attraction), above ground the yuppies have built their own self-imposed prison - commonly known as a modern 'gated community', complete with original prison walls, CCTV and security guard.

Similarly, an expensive hotel/conference centre for business executives and rich tourists is named *The Rookery*, without a trace

of irony. (But this is at least historically accurate, as the building is located in and does date from the period of the old rookery slums.)

The most popular, best-selling and influential historian of London at present is Peter Ackroyd. He has a pet theory - 'the territorial imperative': *"Of all capital cities, London is by common consent the most echoic. It has been continually inhabited for many thousands of years, and has relics of Druidic worship as well as of Roman and Saxon occupation. But it is not merely its longevity that is important. In my investigations of London I have been struck many times by what I call the territorial imperative at work in its streets and*



alleys, by which I mean that a certain area seems actively to guide or to determine the lives of those who live within its bounds. In that sense all its previous existences exist simultaneously, engendering a power that links the present with the past." He applies this specifically to Clerkenwell:

"It's just not something one can either prove or disprove," he says, "it's just something one believes by instinct or doesn't. It first came to me when I was doing my book on London, which suggested that the territorial imperative worked in various areas. In Clerkenwell, Bloomsbury and other places, the same sort of activity has taken place in the same territory for, in some cases, a thousand years."

The radical activity of Clerkenwell, for example, has been an



From Rookery to Plush Office Development: Saffron Hill today...

“aspect of that area from at least Wat Tyler up until the May Day riots of last year.” But his example of a recent May Day in Clerkenwell is unconvincing - the riots were not in Clerkenwell, all that happened there was an assembly point for another boring orderly leftist party and trade union march organised by the most tame and unradical, anti-rioting, bureaucratic elements - not remotely fit to be mentioned in the same breath as Wat Tyler and his insurrectionary Peasant Army. But while his ‘territorial imperative’ may hold a partial truth - as we ourselves have been moved to try and connect with the submerged past to gain a sense of the roots of our present - it ignores completely the processes of contestation, including the defeat and loss of territory that are fundamental to real lived history in class society. If we look across Clerkenwell towards the Strand today, its not a Peasant Army destroying the property of the rich coming up the hill we see, but an army of the homeless sleeping in doorways - an inevitable consequence of the property market and property relations that fuel the gentrification process. Gentrification has no apparent place in the concept of ‘territorial imperative’.

Ackroyd gets things the wrong way round; his history tries to

portray the environment as a force with a greater determining influence on us than we have on it, all driven by semi-mystical forces of 'essential presence' that perpetuate the 'territorial imperative' and supposedly give neat little continuities to locations. But it's not the buildings and streets, but our use (and



...and
as it was:
the Saffron
Hill Rookery.

construction) of them that gives life to the city and determines the content of that life. True, the capitalist organisation of territory constantly attempts to restrain behaviour to only what is profitable for them, but the history of Clerkenwell and its people is a history of the changing victories and defeats within that process and the possibilities for its transcendence. In an environment where, for the moment, history is often portrayed as a mere gentrified cosmetic marketing exercise, we sometimes need to remind ourselves that our history is not over yet.

As the old saying goes:

*He who keeps one eye on the past is blind in one eye
But he who keeps no eye on the past is blind in both eyes.*

The (provisional) End

* * *

APPENDIX

Recommended pubs to visit

Both the pubs mentioned are historically interesting in different ways; but they are frequented mostly by office workers and professionals for after-work drinking, so are not your average back-street local pub servicing local people. Those few local pubs of that type that have so far survived the ruinous gentrification and/or brewery theming processes are too rare and valuable to be casually exposed here. But if you want good ale, these two can provide for the thirsty explore.

Ye Old Mitre is in Ely Court, which is a narrow alley that runs between Hatton Garden and Ely Place. It serves some fine real ales. It has been a tavern since 1546, though rebuilt in Georgian times. Originally built by the Bishop of Ely Palace for the use of his servants, the present building dates from the 18th century. (The pub's name derives from the mitre headware worn by Bishops.) *"The graceful sweep of Ely Place was built in 1773 on a very ancient and historic site. Ely House had been the London palace and estate of the Bishops of Ely. It became the Spanish Embassy in the 1620s; and when it was demolished the first building to go up in its place was almost certainly - if usual practice is anything to go by - the little mews pub which would first serve the builders as a canteen and would then become a modest place of refreshment for the servant population of the new houses."* (London by Pub - Pub Walks Around Historic London, Ted Bruning, 2001.)

Close by and well worth visiting is St Etheldreda's Church in Ely Place; it dates from 1298, though the crypt is even older. It was the first church in London to hear a Catholic mass after the Reformation. *"St Etheldreda (630-679) was a Saxon Abbess of Ely, daughter of Anna, King of East Angles. She is sometimes known as Audry... At the fair of St Audry in Ely cheap necklaces made of worthless glass beads used to be sold under the name tawdry laces, which gives us the adjective tawdry."*

"During the Middle Ages, the part of modern Cambridgeshire known as the Isle of Ely was subject to the authority of the Bishops of Ely. When the bishops established their London base in Holborn in the late 13th century, they secured the agreement of the Crown to treat their palace similarly. This, and its grounds, were thus exempt from the jurisdiction of both the king's sheriff and the local Church hierarchy. In the 16th century, the bishops lost much of their property to the Hatton family. In 1772, they sold to the Crown what remained of their land, by then

amounting to little more than the present Ely Place and adjoining Mitre Court. After these were built in 1773, their inhabitants claimed independence from the adjacent Liberty of Saffron Hill, as occupants of both Crown land and of what they alleged to be still part of the See of Ely (and thus part of what had now become Cambridgeshire). The licensing and opening hours of the Mitre tavern long remained under the control of the Cambridgeshire justices, and the (claimed) exemption of Ely Place residents from payment of the Liberty poor rate was ended only in 1835. In other respects Place and Court continued to enjoy a special status. The Ely Place Improvements Act of 1842 provided for its government by elected commissioners with powers to levy rates and see to the "paving, lighting, watching, cleaning and improving" of the area. This arrangement lasted until 1901, when most of the powers of the commissioners were transferred to Holborn Borough Council. But the Act is still on the statute book, the commissioners still meet, and Ely Place remains one of the last private roads in Inner London." (Streets of Old Holborn, op. Cit.)

The *Jerusalem Tavern* in Britton St is owned by the small St Peter's Brewery of Suffolk and carries a full range of their very fine ales. They acquired the building in 1996 and named it after earlier Taverns that had existed nearby in the 14th and 18th centuries. Built in the 1720s, originally as a residential house, it later became a watchmakers' workshop. The shopfront was added in 1810. It was a café for many years until the Brewery made it a pub in 1996.

The décor is an attempt to recreate an 18th century tavern; it's debatable whether this qualifies as an over-the-top Theme Pub or a working museum, but it's more interesting than most and its saving grace is its superb beer selection.

CHEERS!

The text of 'Reds On The Green' is available
on the web at

www.endangeredphoenix.com

along with lots of other interesting
theoretical & historical texts.

Much of the content of this pamphlet was explored in a walking tour around Clerkenwell in June 2003, organised by the author as a South London Radical History Group event.

Despite its name, the South London Radical History Group is not confined or only concerned with South London! It is a self-organised, anti-hierarchical open forum. We organise talks, walks and discussions, invite speakers & take occasional trips to other parts of London. History is a living stream not a closed book, it is about our own struggles & experiences as much as the movements and events of the past. Our discussions have ranged from the past to the present and the future, from what is 'real' to speculation, dreams and possibilities.

If you want to join the mailing list, want more info, want or to come and speak, get in touch.

South London Radical History Group
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Past Tense publishes glimpses of London radical history
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REDS ON THE GREEN

This pamphlet attempts to fill a gap by providing a short sketch of the radical history of the Clerkenwell area, its characters and events. There has been little easily available to read concentrating specifically on the long and rich history of the politics and struggles of the area. It charts the changing fortunes and developments of the communities, classes and individuals involved. It also offers some passing comments on the Clerkenwell of today.

“It has been said that the history of Clerkenwell is a microcosm of the larger history of London. It’s certainly true that whenever there has been major social change and/or unrest in London it has been reflected by events in Clerkenwell, and the unrest often manifested and organised itself here throughout its long history as a radical centre. National and international issues have also found their expression here.”

past tense

£2.00