



## Street Trading versus Street Traffic in Victorian and Edwardian London

Revest Didier

### Pour citer cet article

Revest Didier, « Street Trading versus Street Traffic in Victorian and Edwardian London », *Cycnos*, vol. 19.1 (Résistances), 2002, mis en ligne en juin 2008.

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### *Cycnos, études anglophones*

*revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice*

ISSN 1765-3118

ISSN papier 0992-1893

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# EPI-REVEL

Revue électronique de l'Université Côte d'Azur

Street Trading versus Street Traffic in  
Victorian and Edwardian London

Didier Revest

University of Nice - Sophia Antipolis, France. E-mail :  
<didier.revest@wanadoo.fr>.

As a starting point, some defining is necessary. By street trading I mean all persons — whether male or female, young or old — selling products in the streets — whether books, matches, rags, religious tracts, hardware, belts,<sup>1</sup> or edible items<sup>2</sup>: coffee, tea, oysters, soup, hot eels, meat, sweets, fruit, vegetables, etc. — from a “pitch” (*i.e.* a standing in a given part of a given street) or while on their rounds (a particular route that was followed day in day out) using either a cart, a barrow, a basket, a box, a tray, or even a pole to both display the goods and carry them around with.<sup>3</sup> Street traffic on the other hand shall imply not only vehicular traffic but also pedestrian traffic.

Although there were almost forty of them, averaging one hundred and five street traders each, in the days of journalist-turned-sociologist Henry Mayhew,<sup>4</sup> street markets (that mostly took place on Saturday nights and Sunday mornings) shall remain beyond the scope of this study for obvious reasons — they made all forms of vehicular traffic altogether impossible.

In spite of the following definition of the terms “street trading” given in section 3 of a 1911 Bill: “Selling in public of newspapers or any other articles, playing, singing, or performing in public for profit, and any other like occupation,”<sup>5</sup> I shall not deal with street musicians either, through shortage of time and space, nor with hawkers, who tended to “work the suburbs,” nor at that with prostitutes, the conclusions that would be reached being indeed completely different on account of open prostitution having been wilfully obliterated on — among others — moral grounds.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive list, see Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (New-York: Dover Publications, 1968 [1st ed. 1861–1862]), vol. I, pp. 6, 158, 241–242 and 470.

<sup>2</sup> The latter were sold by “costers” (*i.e.* costermongers); there were some 12,000 of them about 1850. See *ibid.*, vol. I, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Wynter, “The London Commissariat”, *The Quarterly Review*, vol. CXC, n° XCV (1854), in E. Royston Pike, *Human Documents of the Victorian Golden Age: 1850–1875* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967), p. 63.

<sup>4</sup> There were 27 street markets north of the Thames and 10 south of it. See Mayhew, *London Labour*, vol. I, pp. 10–11. High Street (Southwark), Petticoat Lane and Rosemary Lane were among the most famous. See George Godwin, *London Shadows: a Glance at the “Homes” of the Thousands* (London: Routledge, 1854), p. 73, and Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, (New-York: Dover, 1968 [1st ed. 1861–1862]), vol. II, p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> “A Bill to prohibit Street Trading by Children and young Persons”, in *Parliamentary Papers 1911*, vol. V, folio 565.

<sup>6</sup> Street trading actually involved many forms and instances of resistance I shall not deal with at all: shouting above the din of the streets was one of them — shouting to make yourself heard, loud enough to conquer the noise made by steel-rimmed wheels and iron-shod hooves, or by hurdy-gurdy music; shouting to overpower other street traders’ competition too. A street trading life was also fraught with other difficulties in which physical resistance played a vital

Why focus on traffic and street trading there and then? Basically because of a paradox. By the mid-nineteenth century, London was one of the very few big cities in Europe with large-scale street trading.<sup>7</sup> The 1850–1910 period even saw the number of people involved increase sharply. This in itself is quite surprising: traffic as a matter of fact had become a mind-racking issue that had taken precedence over all else in a fast-growing city where — more crucially — communications underpinned both the speedy delivery of goods necessary for the everyday lives of millions and the confirmed rise of big finance, which the local authorities looked upon as being of paramount importance. This increase also goes against some of the conclusions reached by prominent urban historians, *e.g.* Robert D. Storch in his masterly article “The Policeman as Domestic Missionary: Urban Discipline and Popular Culture in Northern England, 1850–1880” (1976)<sup>8</sup> and David R. Green in his 1982 “Street Trading in

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role. It was hard indeed to carry a basket around or push a barrow along over long distances, whatever the weather, and for a mere pittance. Here is a summary of what a street trading life was like: “They come day after day many of them to the same pitch, and stand through winter’s cold and summer’s heat, through drenching rain and biting blast, and at a certain hour they go. [...] they silently steal away [...]. They have neither luncheon hour, dinner hour, nor time for tea. And they have no holidays. They are a human fringe to the pavements of London, a fringe that only completely disappears when the first hour of a new day has struck, and the last hope of a copper has departed.” See G. R. Sims, “Kerbstone London”, in *Living London*, ed. by George Robert Sims (London: Cassell, 1901), vol. I, p. 384. The lives of the 10,000 or so children and teenagers of both sexes (see Mayhew, *London Labour*, vol. I, p. 479) who had to work as street traders were even more tedious (it must be borne in mind that in 1861, according to the *Newcastle Commission on the Present State of the Education of the People*, 20 % only of all children stayed on at school after the age of ten; see L. C. B. Seaman, *Victorian England. Aspects of English and Imperial History, 1837–1901*, London: Routledge, 1990 [1st ed. 1973], pp. 193-194). The case of the little girls was certainly the most distressing. Many of them were actually occasional street sellers and worked only when there was no food at home. See Mayhew, *London Labour*, vol. I, p. 480. Furthermore, you had to adapt and change to fend off competition, here again, and possible ruin: if fish sold relatively well throughout the year (see “The Cheap Fish of St. Giles’s”, in *Victorian London Street Life in Historic Photographs* [original title: *Street Life in London*], by John Thomson and Adolphe Smith, New-York: Dover, 1994, [1st ed. 1877], p. 79), it was however a clever move to go for strawberries, cherries, etc. in the spring and early summer than stick to oranges, nuts and apples that were more popular during the winter season. See Sims, “Kerbstone London”, p. 382. Sometimes changing trades was an absolute necessity because of diminishing profits — the collapse of “swag-selling” (*i.e.* the selling of cheap brooches, rings, combs, etc.) in the mid-1870s is but one illustration of this. See “Dealer in Fancy-Ware”, in *Victorian London Street Life*, by Thomson and Smith, pp. 39 and 41–42.

<sup>7</sup> See *e.g.* Robert Massin, *Les Cris de la ville. Commerces ambulants et petits métiers de la rue* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), p. 177.

<sup>8</sup> Robert D. Storch, “The Policeman as Domestic Missionary: Urban Discipline and Popular Culture in Northern England, 1850–1880”, *Journal of Social History*, 9 (1976), in *The Victorian City. A Reader in British Urban History (1820–1914)*, ed. by R. J. Morris and Richard Roger (London: Longman, 1993), pp. 281–306. In Storch’s view, from the late 1830s, the breaking up of congregations of men on the streets, outside pubs, and the cracking down on street entertainers and traders alike, became daily occurrences.

London: a Case Study of Casual Labour (1830–1860),”<sup>9</sup> namely that attacking street trading was part of a desire to toll the knell of popular culture.

It will be my contention in this paper that the London middle classes — in the main — never really intended to resist street trading, let alone do away with it, while resistance on the part of the “lower orders” to street traffic rarely meant challenging authority as such or resisting change. First, I will show why and how traffic should have killed off street trading altogether; then, I will look into why this economic activity could hardly have been dispensed with; finally, I will explain that street traders offered all the less resistance as the authorities never really were impervious to the street traders’ lot.

The situation, in terms of traffic, was already quite bad at the beginning of the period under review. The overall number of vehicles had been on the increase since at least the late 1820s, with, for example, the number of omnibuses<sup>10</sup> increasing from 600 in 1839 to 1,300 in 1850,<sup>11</sup> and that of hansoms<sup>12</sup> rocketing from 12 in 1823 to over 4,400 in the 1840s.<sup>13</sup> Hence, by mid-century, the 800 hourly vehicles in Pall Mall and the 5,000 that drove through Regent Street daily for example.<sup>14</sup>

There was no putting the clock back — the cab strike of July 1853, when life in London ground to a halt, was proof enough of this: “There was not only a dearth, but an absolute famine of locomotion, and never since the days of Charles II, when Hackney-coaches were first invented, have the sight-seeing and outgoing public been reduced to such an extremity of helplessness as by the cabmen’s strike of yesterday.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> David R. Green, “Street Trading in London: a Case Study of Casual Labour (1830–1860)”, in *The Structure of Nineteenth Century Cities*, ed. by James H. Johnson and Colin G. Pooley (London: Croom Helm, 1982), pp. 129–151. To Green, see pp. 130 and 139, the increase in the number of street traders led to a series of middle-class attempts at control and repression, through “vestry opposition to street markets [...]; the movement to abolish Sunday trading; and a more general and diffuse interference with street traders both in the markets and on the streets.” Street traders constituted foci of disorder and annoyance; legal marginality (*i.e.* the move-on system) was in no small way responsible for the traders’ increasing spatial marginality in the 1850s. See *ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>10</sup> Which carried up to twelve passengers.

<sup>11</sup> Goulven Guilcher, “Les tramways britanniques”, in *Urbanisme et société en Grande-Bretagne (19e–20e siècles). Clermont-Ferrand symposium, 13–14 January 1984*, ed. by Jacques Carré and Monique Curcurù (Clermont-Ferrand: ADOSA, 1987), p. 161.

<sup>12</sup> For two passengers only.

<sup>13</sup> James Grant, *Lights and Shadows of London Life* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1842), vol. 1, p. 260. More popular still, the clarences (for up to four passengers) made their first appearance in the streets of the capital in the early 1850s. See Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (New-York: Dover Publications, 1968 [1st ed. 1861–1862], vol. III, p. 351.

<sup>14</sup> Mayhew, *London Labour*, vol. II, pp. 201 and 185.

<sup>15</sup> “London without Cabs”, *The Times* (28 July 1853), in *Nineteenth Century Britain, Home Affairs. Key Documents, 1815–1901*, ed. by Claire Charlot (Gap: Ophrys / Paris: Ploton, 1995), p. 22.

The price to pay however was “frequently impassable”<sup>16</sup> streets, Cheapside in the 1840s being a case in point; hence Henry Mayhew’s comment: “[...] the evil of our present street-life — an evil which is increasing every day, and which threatens, ere long, almost to overwhelm us with its abominations.”<sup>17</sup>

In 1855, a Parliamentary Committee insisted that new thoroughfares should be built and existing ones widened. Indeed, London as a whole was wanting in wide streets. Like most commercial streets in fact, Fleet Street was considered too narrow for the business conducted there;<sup>18</sup> High Street (Wapping), where trade was brisk, was only a little over 7 feet wide.<sup>19</sup>

As could have been expected, things went from bad to worse. From the mid-1860s, William Haywood, chief engineer, warned the Commissioners of the City of London of how serious the situation was: Lower Thames Street was full of vehicles 16 hours a day;<sup>20</sup> numerous by-streets could no longer cope with their own traffic, let alone with traffic from outside;<sup>21</sup> on average, Cannon Street West would receive 6,000 vehicles daily in 1865, as against 5,200 “only” two years earlier.<sup>22</sup> The rest of London suffered from the same ills. In Park Lane, the archetype of the non-commercial street, traffic-jams and slow traffic were frequent occurrences.<sup>23</sup> Unsurprisingly, average speed was quite low

<sup>16</sup> W. H. Smith, *London not as it is, but as it should be* (London: Waterlow and Sons, 1851), p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Mayhew, *London Labour*, vol. II, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> According to Mayhew, Cheapside was “a narrow, business street, with its traffic often choked with vehicles [...]” See Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, (New-York: Dover Publications, 1968 [1st ed. 1861-1862], vol IV, p. 295. The average number of vehicles entering the Square Mile daily through its eight main entry points, between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m., soared from some 49,000 in 1850 to over 76,000 fifteen years later. See A. W. [sic], “How our Millions Circulate”, in *Once a Week*, vol. II: *June-December 1866* (London and Bradbury: Evans, September 1st, 1866), p. 236. For the City of London, see also: “Report from the Select Committee on the London (City) Traffic Regulation Bills (Lords)”, in *Parliamentary Papers 1863*, vol. X, folios 1 ff.

<sup>19</sup> J. W. Bazalgette, *Report to the Metropolitan Board of Works in Answer to Objections to their proposed Scheme of Metropolitan Street Improvements raised by Mr. Haywood in his Report to the City Commissioners of Sewers upon the same Subject* (London: Judd, March 1872), p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> William Haywood, *Report to the Special Committee upon Improvements of the Honourable the Commissioners of Sewers of the City of London on the Traffic and Improvements in the public Ways of the City of London* (London: Lownds, 1866), p. 64.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62. Over the 1850–1865 period, the number of vehicles in Aldgate High Street increased by over 75 % and by very nearly 80 % in Bishopsgate Street Without. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>23</sup> “Minutes of Evidence taken before the Select Committee on the Piccadilly and Park Lane New Road Bill”, in *Parliamentary Papers 1865*, vol. VIII, folios 655 and 657. The photographs taken during the second half of the nineteenth century show particularly well how dense the traffic was, not to mention the confusion consequent upon this in the absence of a coherent highway code. See e.g. “The Strand looking East, circa 1860”, photograph n° 70, in *The Changing Metropolis. Earliest Photographs of London: 1839–1879*, by Gavin Stamp (Harmondsworth: Viking, 1984), p. 96. The *Once a Week* magazine, although stressing how proud Londoners were on account of the capital’s heavy traffic, which, they believed, was

everywhere. Between Liverpool Street and Southwark Street, it was almost never over 3.5 mph.<sup>24</sup> For the whole of London it was to fall by around 25 % between 1876 and 1906.<sup>25</sup>

Some people then began coming up with bold plans. Forbidding delivery vehicles from loading or unloading in the streets themselves was put forward.<sup>26</sup> The building of an underground road network was also suggested,<sup>27</sup> while the authorities pressed for adequate measures to be adopted.

However, as late as February 1901, the London County Council was still calling for stricter regulations in an attempt to relieve the streets of London.<sup>28</sup> Traffic remained such a mind-racking issue that Royal Commissions in 1903, 1905 and 1907 went so far as to suggest that a new administrative unit be set up — the *London Traffic Board* (which shall in fact never come into existence).<sup>29</sup>

In the meantime, omnibuses, except in the heart of the West End, had become a decidedly common sight; in the late 1890s, there were 400 taking Edgware Road daily, the figures being 774 and 439 for Bank and the Strand respectively.<sup>30</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century, London cabs amounted to some 12,000,<sup>31</sup> up from about 3,300 in 1865.<sup>32</sup>

In other words, George Gissing's phrase about London, which he called "the great Whirlpool," had never been more appropriate.<sup>33</sup> In 1905, delays in Prince's Street (on the western side of the Bank of England) amounted to over six hours a

nothing but a logical reflection of the nation's high degree of opulence, put it in a nutshell: "[...] we have too much of a good thing." See *Once a Week* (September 1st, 1866), vol. II, p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> William Haywood, *Report to the Special Committee upon Improvements...*, p. 50.

<sup>25</sup> James Winter, *London's Teeming Streets, 1830–1914* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 49.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Brierley, "Access to London Warehouses", *The Builder* (December 1st, 1866), p. 891.

<sup>27</sup> Peter W. Barlow, *On the Relief of London Street Traffic, etc.* (London: E. and F. N. Spon, 1867), p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> "Further Report of the General Purposes Committee", 19 February 1901, in *Minutes of Proceedings*, January-April 1901 (London County Council, 1901), p. 232.

<sup>29</sup> Edward Carter, *The Future of London* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962), p. 148.

<sup>30</sup> *London Statistics*. vol. VII: 1896-1897 (London County Council, March 1898), pp. 192-201.

<sup>31</sup> W. F. Brand, *London Life seen with German Eyes* (London: A. Siegle, 1902 [2nd ed., revised and updated]), p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> *The Whip, and Cab and Omnibus Guardian*, 1 (13 April 1867), p. 5. Furthermore, from 1870 (*Tramway Act*), trams won popularity: they carried over 308 million passengers in 1899, up from 190 million in 1890. The figure for 1908 will be over 597 million. See W. J. Gordon, *The Horse World of London* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1893), p. 26; *Statistical Abstract for London*. vol. III: 1899 (London County Council, February 1900), p. 99; Goulven Guilcher, "Les Tramways britanniques", p. 170; and "Select Committee on Motor Traffic", in *Parliamentary Papers 1913*, vol. VIII, folio 147.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in *A Pictorial and Descriptive Guide to London and its Environs* (London: Ward, Lock, 1909), p. 71.

day while some 23,000 vehicles would drive through Ludgate Circus daily between 8 a.m and 8 p.m.<sup>34</sup>

Most importantly, wasting one's time also meant wasting one's money: calculations made in the early 1890s showed that traffic jams cost Londoners £ 5,000 a day.<sup>35</sup> What with a corresponding rise in the number of pedestrians, the streets of Central London looked increasingly like a huge beehive.

The increase in the number of pedestrians indeed had kept pace with that of the vehicles. The figures for those entering the City of London between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. in 1860 were nearly double those for 1848<sup>36</sup>; and on average, there will enter into the City of London daily some 1,077,000 foot passengers in 1911, *i.e.* about 225,000 more than in 1891.<sup>37</sup>

This raised another issue — that of the number of people being killed, which rose from 114 in 1864 to over 300 forty years later,<sup>38</sup> or injured, which increased even more sharply, in street accidents.<sup>39</sup> Obstructions on the footway often caused pedestrians to walk on to the carriageway, doing so at the risk of their lives.<sup>40</sup>

Because of the coming of the motor-car, -'bus, and -cab,<sup>41</sup> -cycle, the late 1890s and the early 1900s, street users were even more at risk since average speed had increased. The number of street accidents rose by 60 % between 1904 and 1908.<sup>42</sup>

Street widening, and to a greater extent the building of new large streets, both carried out on a large scale, would certainly have been the most appropriate

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<sup>34</sup> "Royal Commission on London Traffic (1905). Report", vol. I, in *The Genesis of Modern British Town Planning*, by William Ashworth (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954), p. 114.

<sup>35</sup> Arthur Cawston, *A Comprehensive Scheme for Street Improvements in London* (London: Edward Stanford, 1893), p. 6. Time lost between Holborn and the Strand before the opening of Aldwych (1905) on account of the slowness of the traffic amounted to a permanent tax of a farthing to a pound on the rateable value of the whole county. See Percy J. Edwards, *History of London Street Improvements: 1855–1897* (London County Council, 1898), p. 259.

<sup>36</sup> Haywood, *Report to the Special Committee upon Improvements...*, pp. 31 and 32.

<sup>37</sup> "Select Committee on Motor Traffic", folio 173.

<sup>38</sup> "Special Report from the Select Committee on the London (City) Traffic Regulation Bill", in *Parliamentary Papers 1866*, vol. XII, folio 57, and *Statistical Abstract for London*, vol. VII: 1904 (London County Council, November 1904), p. 51.

<sup>39</sup> From about 1,700 in the mid-1860s to over 14,000 in 1906. See "Report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Traffic Regulation (Metropolis) Bill", in *Parliamentary Papers 1867*, vol. XI, folio 665, and "Report of the Commissioners of Police of the Metropolis for the Year 1906", in *Parliamentary Papers 1908*, vol. LI, folio 799.

<sup>40</sup> Pedestrians brought it all upon themselves quite often though, crossing streets wherever they pleased. See "Select Committee on Motor Traffic", folio 107.

<sup>41</sup> Motor cabs appeared in the spring of 1907. See *A Pictorial and Descriptive Guide to London and its Environs*, p. 4. There were 8,000 of them by 1912. See "Select Committee on Motor Traffic", folio 5.

<sup>42</sup> That motor vehicles — motor 'buses to begin with — were responsible for the rise in the number of street deaths seemed obvious to the 1912–1913 *Select Committee on Motor Traffic*. See "Select Committee on Motor Traffic", folio 3. For the committee members things had taken a turn for the worse as early as 1905.

answer to these traffic / security problems. Acts to that end in fact had been, and were, passed. From August 1844 and the passing of a Building Act,<sup>43</sup> the London parishes (outside the City) were given the opportunity to embark on widening and building projects. The City of London itself followed suit in 1847 with the *London (City) Improvement Act*.

In the early 1840s, it was decided that the width of all new streets would be 52 feet.<sup>44</sup> Over the following years, projects and works in progress were so numerous that, according to *The Builder*, it was difficult to keep up with them all.<sup>45</sup> In 1859 alone, almost 40 improvements were put forward by the Metropolitan Board of Works, which included the widening of Aldgate and the building of Thames Embankment, 11.5 miles of new or widened streets in all.<sup>46</sup>

In fact, widening existing streets was soon looked upon as the cheaper solution. Such was the case in the City of London, where almost no new street was built between 1860 and 1900. There were 604 more or less important improvements in the Square Mile between 1851 and 1888, with a sharp increase from the 1870s — 29 in 1878 and 47 in 1884 *e.g.*<sup>47</sup>

Improvements by the Metropolitan Board of Works between 1855 and 1889, 60 of which were large-scale (they were called “Metropolitan Improvements”),<sup>48</sup> cost more than £ 10 million. Overall, by 1900, the some 2,000 miles of London’s public highways were 39 feet wide on average.<sup>49</sup>

These achievements however could hardly conceal the fact that they were only a drop in the ocean. The reason for this was that money for widening and building streets never came from the state,<sup>50</sup> but had to be borrowed instead, which raised the question of the returns, of the recouping of the original investment, a

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<sup>43</sup> Which reinforced a previous Act of Parliament passed in 1817, the *General Paving (Metropolis) Act* (57 Geo. III, c. 29), better known as the *Michael Angelo Taylor’s Act*, that had applied to both the City of London and that of Westminster, but had allowed widening alone; there were penalties for those wilfully obstructing pavements and streets with their goods. See Charles Dupin, *Voyages dans la Grande-Bretagne entrepris relativement aux Services Publics de la Guerre, de la Marine, et des Ponts et Chaussées, au Commerce, et à l’Industrie, depuis 1816*, vol. 1: *Voies Publiques, Places, Rues, Routes, Canaux, Ponts et Chaussées* (Paris: Bachelier, 2nd ed., 1826), p. 4.

<sup>44</sup> *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, third Series, vol. LXV, 12 July–12 August 1842 (London: Th. C. Hansard, 1842), col. 895.

<sup>45</sup> “On Metropolitan Improvements”, *The Builder*, XXIII, 1167 (17 June 1865), p. 427.

<sup>46</sup> Metropolitan Board of Works, *List of Street Improvements* (London: Reed and Pardon, 1859), p. 3 in particular.

<sup>47</sup> William Haywood, *Report of the Works executed by the Honourable the Commissioners of Sewers of the City of London during the Year 1888* (London: Milton Smith, 1889), pp. 27–53.

<sup>48</sup> Edwards, *History of London Street Improvements*, pp. 23–24.

<sup>49</sup> *London Statistics*, vol. X: 1899–1900 (London County Council, Statistical Department, October 1901), p. xli.

<sup>50</sup> Most MPs. indeed opposed any attempt at using tax-money to serve particular projects in London alone. See “A Quarter of a Century of London Street Improvements”, *The Builder*, XXIV, 1243 (1st December 1866), pp. 877–878.



dangerous path few dared tread,<sup>51</sup> while the London Coal and Wine Duties<sup>52</sup> only benefitted the City of London.<sup>53</sup> The idea of widening Shoreditch High Street — deemed an absolute necessity in 1839 by a Parliamentary Committee — was finally abandoned.<sup>54</sup> Building a new street between Piccadilly and Bloomsbury (the future Shaftesbury Avenue) had first been suggested in 1838, but not before 1886 will the said street be officially opened to traffic. Widening the Strand between St. Clement's Dane and St. Mary-le-Strand, a move suggested twice (in 1836 and 1838), was shelved by Parliament for more than 30 years.<sup>55</sup> The building of Kingsway — opened in 1905 between Holborn and the Strand — had been postponed for some 40 or 50 years.<sup>56</sup>

Over 1850–1900, only a handful of new thoroughfares were built: Victoria Embankment (100 feet wide), Northumberland Avenue (90) and Shaftesbury Avenue (80) for instance.<sup>57</sup> Around 1900, there were only 9 between 60<sup>58</sup> and 80 feet wide for a total length of about twelve miles.<sup>59</sup>

Last but not least, in most cases, relieving traffic had not been uppermost in the improvers' minds. What mattered above all was to demolish as many poor districts — seen as criminals' nests — as possible,<sup>60</sup> or somehow erect some sort of bulwark between the squares of the wealthy and the courts and crooked lanes inhabited by the lower classes (*e.g.* Regent Street, built by Nash in the 1820s).

In these circumstances, forbidding, *i.e.* clearing the streets of whatever obstructed (or may have obstructed) them, because it was far less costly, was the most popular option among rate-payers and decision-makers. The authorities decided that costermongers' stalls and barrows were not to exceed nine feet in length;<sup>61</sup> they also came up with the idea of imposing it upon street traders to stand only where the footway meets the carriageway so that their activities

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<sup>51</sup> Harold J. Dyos, "The Objects of Street Improvement in Regency and Early Victorian London", in *Exploring the Urban Past. Essays in Urban History*, ed. by David Cannadine and David Reeder (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 85.

<sup>52</sup> *I.e.* taxes paid on coal and alcohol.

<sup>53</sup> Edwards, *History of London Street Improvements*, p. 15.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 219 and 59.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259.

<sup>57</sup> Southampton Row was only exceptionally wide (90 feet, and not 70 as originally planned) because it had been calculated that surplus land would yield heftier returns if there was less after completion. *Ibid.*, p. 235.

<sup>58</sup> Which after the 1666 Great Fire had already been the kind of maximum width the planners in charge of rebuilding London had had in mind for the new streets.

<sup>59</sup> Cawston, *A Comprehensive Scheme for Street Improvements in London*, p. 57. Parts of Knightsbridge, Fleet Street, Borough High Street, all of them vital for the economy, were under 50 feet wide. See *ibid.* Lombard Street, sometimes referred to as the Park Lane of the City of London, was by 1900 as narrow as ever; cab-drivers used Leadenhall and King William Streets instead. See "Rambles round London. A Visit to the City", *The London and Continental Visitor* (20 April 1898), p. 3.

<sup>60</sup> Builder James Pennethorne when building Victoria Street from 1845 had taken great care to cut through a particularly poor district, the Old Pye Street area (Duck Lane, New Tothill Street, New Pye Street, etc.).

<sup>61</sup> *Duty Hints for Constables and Section Sergeants* (Metropolitan Police, 1907), p. 12.

would obstruct neither vehicular traffic nor pedestrian traffic. With their backs to the street for most, so as to face the only potential customers — the pedestrians, they would stand by the kerb (both feet in the gutter, or one foot on the footway and the other on the carriageway), displaying their goods on trays if the goods on sale were not heavy (campher, dolls, needles, mechanical toys, etc.), or else in baskets or boxes put in the gutter<sup>62</sup> for the heavier sort of items (umbrellas, old clothes and boots, bagfuls of nuts, fruit, etc.). In some streets, such as Cheapside,<sup>63</sup> all these people would stand side by side, in a most orderly way, hours on end. Paradoxically however, street trading did live on and thrive.

The proportion of street traders to central-city population increased by something like 25 % between 1851 and 1901.<sup>64</sup> The main reason for this was that poverty was still widespread, as witnessed by Charles Booth in Bermondsey (1899–1900): “The haunting faces one often sees in the streets show that many adults as well as children, despite all the mission meals, do suffer from insufficient food.”<sup>65</sup> In 1887, over one-third of the population of Tower Hamlets, Hackney, etc., had lived in poverty.<sup>66</sup> From 1893, the capital as a whole even had a higher proportion of poor than the rest of England.<sup>67</sup>

Some local school boards, after the 1870 Foster’s Act,<sup>68</sup> scrupled to impose it upon some children to attend school on a full-time basis<sup>69</sup>: their contribution (however meagre) to their families’ earnings was crucial. That is why there was a myriad of fusee vendors, newspaper boys, etc., all over the city. Although street selling after 9 p.m. had been made illegal for boys under 14 and girls under 16, it was estimated at the very beginning of the twentieth century that

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<sup>62</sup> Very shortly after the passing of the *Metropolitan Streets Act* of 1867, a Bill to amend section 6 (which had deprived street sellers of the right they had so far enjoyed to put their belongings on the ground) was drafted. See “A Bill for The Amendment of *The Metropolitan Streets Act, 1867*”, in *Parliamentary Papers 1867–1868*, vol. III, folio 495.

<sup>63</sup> See pictures in Sims, “Kerbstone London”, pp. 378–384.

<sup>64</sup> Winter, *London’s Teeming Streets*, p. 109. The increase is estimated to have been 20 % between 1871 and 1891. See Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London*. Second Series: *Industry*, vol. III: *Dress, Food, Drink, Dealers, Clerks, Locomotion and Labour* (New-York: AMS Press, 1970 [1902–1904]), p. 246. After 1860, the upward trend seems to have been general, what with the few thousand broken-down silk-weavers who then became street sellers. See “Black Jack”, in *Victorian London Street Life*, by Thomson and Smith, p. 75, and John Hollingshead, *Ragged London in 1861* (London: Dent, 1986 [1st ed. 1861]), pp. 39–40.

<sup>65</sup> Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London*. First Series: *Poverty*, vol. I: *East, Central and South London* (New-York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1969 [1st ed. 1889, revised and updated in 1902]), pp. 119–120.

<sup>66</sup> William J. Fishman, *The Streets of East London* (London, Duckworth, 1979), p. 42, and Booth, First Series, vol. I, p. 35. Poverty here means they earned (*per* “moderate family”) no more than between 18 to 21 shillings a week.

<sup>67</sup> Jack London, *The People of the Abyss* (London: The Journeyman Press, 1992 [1st ed. 1903]), p. 101.

<sup>68</sup> The act had made school compulsory for all under-14s.

<sup>69</sup> The half-time attendance system disappeared after 1900. See Anna Davin, *Growing up Poor. Home, School and Street in London: 1870–1914* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1996), pp. 98–99.

between 12,000 and 20,000 children worked as street traders in London.<sup>70</sup> Hence the ambiguous, and yet perfectly coherent, nature of street selling as understood by C. Booth around 1890: “In every poor quarter of London it is to be met with — the flaring lights, the piles of cheap comestibles, and the urgent cries of the sellers.”<sup>71</sup>

Obstructions and disorder in the streets were thought to be a small price to pay for a system which gave useful and self-supporting work to people who would otherwise have become paupers and gone on the rates if their livelihoods had been taken away. Indeed, “In the absence of any solution to failure, sickness, or old age, except the workhouse, the London streets abounded with the most pathetic and gratuitous forms of economic activity.”<sup>72</sup>

Street-selling was equally resorted to by many because of inescapable facts of another nature; as David Green writes: “[...] small-scale production carried on in the workshop or in the home, coupled with the relative absence of the factory,<sup>[73]</sup> meant that the social character of London’s labouring population was peculiarly individual.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> There was even mention in a 1902 parliamentary report of a ten-year-old little girl in Hackney who spent fifty hours a week watching over her mother’s vegetable stall. See Davin, *Growing up Poor*, p. 190.

<sup>71</sup> Booth, First Series, vol. I, p. 68. See also Second Series, vol. III, p. 268.

<sup>72</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London. A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 63.

<sup>73</sup> In the 1880s *e.g.*, two of London’s staple industries — shipbuilding and the book industry — relocated in Edinburgh and Aberdeen. See Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London – Second Series: Industry*, vol. V: *Comparisons, Survey and Conclusions* (New-York: AMS Press, 1970 [based on 1902–1904 ed.]), p. 84.

<sup>74</sup> Green, “Street Trading in London”, p. 130. Green goes on to say that because of the unique character of London’s labour market, street trading did not appear elsewhere on the scale at which it occurred in the capital. See *ibid.*, p. 147. “Victorian London as a manufacturing centre concentrated as it had for centuries more on the provision of luxuries than of necessities, on consumer rather than on capital goods: silks rather than woollens; watches, pianos, jewellery, fine furniture, beer, spirits, sugar, tobacco rather than steel rails. Even more important to its economy were the service industries: hairdressing, education, tailoring, music, drama, domestic service, prostitution.” See Donald J. Olsen, *The Growth of Victorian London* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1976), p. 325. See also Booth, First Series, vol. I, pp. 227–228; Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, p. 67; and Anthony Sutcliffe, “In Search of the Urban Variable: Britain in the Later Nineteenth Century”, in *The Pursuit of Urban History*, ed. by Derek Fraser and Anthony Sutcliffe (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), p. 248. Temporary jobs abounded; May–June for the London Season and around Christmas time were peak periods: cab-drivers and flower girls for instance were in particularly great demand then. See Tables II, 1, and II, 2, in Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, pp. 376–377, and Raphael Samuel, “Comers and Goers”, in *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, ed. by H. J. Dyos and Michael Wolff (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), vol. I, p. 150. This attracted men and women from the neighbouring counties, from the colonies or foreign countries — see Arnold White, *The Problems of a Great City* (London: Remington, 1886), p. 226, and E. Armfelt, “Cosmopolitan London”, in *Edwardian London*, 4 vol., ed. by George Robert Sims (London: The Village Press, 1990 [1st ed., 3 vol. entitled *Living London*, 1902]), vol. I, p. 245 — former soldiers, etc., who, when they could find nothing else, turned to street selling, selling matches for example being a popular option with those who slept rough (see General Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way out*, London: International Headquarters of the Salvation Army, 1890?), pp. 26 and 28–29).

Moreover, of course, street trading was not just a source of income and employment for the urban poor, but also a system of supply within the urban service sector. Conversely indeed, street traders were an absolute necessity not just for themselves but also for a large section of the population. This was emphasized in an 1893 report commissioned by the London County Council. The unauthorized street markets of London undoubtedly fulfilled a most useful purpose: they were practically confined to poor and crowded neighbourhoods, and were largely the means by which the surplus produce remaining unsold in the authorized markets was distributed amongst the poorer classes. By this means the humble consumer was frequently able to purchase food at a lower price than it had been quoted wholesale at the authorized markets.<sup>75</sup> In other words, “[The street-seller’s] rôle [was] to save his customers the trouble of going to market by taking the market to them [...]”<sup>76</sup>

That street traders catered for a particularly poor population is obvious from the items sold. A large proportion of sellers of non-perishable goods sold second-hand items: old clothes, gloves, umbrellas, tawdry jewellery and so on.<sup>77</sup> Typically, about 1895, 26 street market stands sold second-hand items (notably “ol’ clo”) in Wentworth Street (Whitechapel) and 14 in Hoxton Street (Shoreditch), while there were none in Berwick Street (St. James, Soho).<sup>78</sup>

Another equally decisive reason however why street selling went on thriving is that, as such, it was actually little resisted, which may well, in turn, account for the little resistance offered to traffic by the street traders themselves.

In a frequently quoted passage, Mayhew wrote that street traders resented the new order the police were trying to impose in the streets of mid-nineteenth century London: “Can you wonder at it, sir,” said a costermonger to me, “that I hate the police? They drive us about, we must move on, we can’t stand here, and we can’t pitch there.” For Mayhew, these were words to be taken seriously; he

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<sup>75</sup> Booth, Second Series, vol. III, p. 264. See also Johnson and Pooley (eds.), *The Structure of Nineteenth Century Cities*, p. 126; P. J. Waller, *Town, City, and Nation. England 1850–1914* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1991 [1st ed. 1983]), p. 158; and Winter, *London’s Teeming Streets*, p. 109: “[...] street selling supplied a real social need. So long as a large proportion of the population lived by casual labor and had highly unreliable family incomes there would be a demand for the services street sellers were particularly equipped to offer: the breaking up of bulk shipments into small quantities and distributing half-pint measures of periwinkles or a single cabbage to customers who needed to shop frequently without leaving their neighborhoods.” The vestries of St. James’s (Westminster), St. George’s in the East, Poplar, Limehouse, and those of the City, not to mention the press, were among the very first to point out how true this was. See Green, “Street Trading in London”, p. 140, and *The Illustrated London News*, CI (23 July 1892), p. 99.

<sup>76</sup> Booth, Second Series, vol. III, p. 260. In some districts of the capital there were almost no shops for people to shop at. Such was the case, even in the late 1890s, on the Isle of Dogs, along the Thames, between Limehouse and Blackwall, where many shipyard workers lived. See Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London. Third Series: Religious Influences*, vol. I: *London North of the Thames: the Outer Ring* (London: Macmillan, 1902), p. 19.

<sup>77</sup> William J. Fishman, *East End 1888. A Year in a London Borough among the Labouring Poor* (London: Duckworth, 1988), p. 84.

<sup>78</sup> Booth, Second Series, vol. III, p. 263.

therefore went on to say: “I am assured that in the case of a political riot every ‘coster’ would seize his policeman.”<sup>79</sup>

Assaulting constables was rather common indeed in the 1830s and 1840s. Hence the fact that 5 / 6<sup>ths</sup> of the original police force had resigned by 1833, four years only after the creation of the Metropolitan Police.<sup>80</sup> Assaults in London went on to increase by about a 100 % between 1842 and 1859<sup>81</sup> “for such reasons as interfering too closely in family or neighbourhood affairs or public house proceedings, providing escort for strike breakers, engaging in brutality, or moving people on too forcefully, especially in times of high unemployment.”<sup>82</sup> According to a primary source, the police was still, by the 1900s, the arch-enemy (or rival at the best of times): “The police who guard the great City by night want neither boot-laces nor evening papers.”<sup>83</sup>

Does it follow that London street vendors were bent on challenging authority and change, which they saw as the expression of middle-class hegemony?

Confrontation there certainly was. As far as some — within the better-off classes — were concerned, this may have been part of a desire to “civilize” the poor by simply blotting out whatever was believed to belong to popular culture. Hence their attempt at abolishing Sunday street markets. In 1858-1859, the parish commissioners of St. Pancras targeted the traders who attended The Brill Sunday street market (Somers Town). Although the police refused to intervene, the local authority did succeed in suppressing the market in November 1859.<sup>84</sup>

In some places, street traders had to bear the brunt of legislation: under no circumstances could they obstruct traffic, whether on the pavement or on the carriageway itself, nor “pitch” where they wished. In 1850–1851, such measures were being implemented in Holborn and Southwark, a district in which shopkeepers managed to have the street traders dealing in oranges removed from the streets and where constables tolerated no obstruction on the pavement, laxity on their part being punished by dismissal. In 1856, the parish of Lambeth embarked on an identical crusade in its largest streets. In 1859, as in the early 1850s, the City Police — on behalf of the Court of Aldermen who regretted that the evil “ha[d] increased considerably” — controlled street trading so ruthlessly that street traders eventually sent a petition to the Commissioners to complain formally about their being ill-treated.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Mayhew, *London Labour*, vol. I, p. 20.

<sup>80</sup> The same applied to the City Police: 136 constables only out of the 1,815 originally recruited in 1839 were still members of the force ten years later. See John Wilkes, *The London Police in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 26.

<sup>81</sup> Green, “Street Trading in London”, p. 145.

<sup>82</sup> Robert D. Storch, “The Policeman as Domestic Missionary”, pp. 301–302.

<sup>83</sup> Sims, “Kerbstone London”, p. 384.

<sup>84</sup> That street-sellers were quite unwelcome in some particular streets is beyond doubt. In late 1899 *e.g.*, the crusade against the costermongers in The Broadway (Wimbledon) was intended to prevent the local “Regent Street” becoming its “Petticoat Lane” or “Watney Street.” See *The Wimbledon Herald*, 23 December 1899, in *Public Records Office / Home Office Papers 45 / 9734 / A53794*.

<sup>85</sup> Green, “Street Trading in London”, pp. 139–141, 143 and 146.

Still, it seems that the police focused their attention on economic activities, which included street trading, only because of their impact on traffic.<sup>86</sup> That is why *all* forms of obstruction were duly reported by constables and denounced vigorously by R. Mayne, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, who thought it an absolute necessity to fine all those who obstructed traffic, whoever they may have been.<sup>87</sup> The attack on street trading was merely part of this wider picture. Traffic rules and regulations were imposed on all Londoners. The 1839 *Metropolitan Police Act* (2 and 3 Vict., c. 47) enabled the Commissioner of the Metropolis to divert vehicles whenever it was deemed necessary.<sup>88</sup> After Parliament had passed the *Metropolitan Streets Act* (30 and 31 Vict., c. 134) on August 20, 1867,<sup>89</sup> the delivery of coal was banned from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. in forty-five streets, Piccadilly, Long Acre, The Strand, etc.<sup>90</sup> So was street cleaning. Delivering goods was to take as little time as possible.<sup>91</sup> Under the

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<sup>86</sup> It does not mean of course that there was no attack at all upon the lower classes' way of life by the police. The ban on drinking during hours of divine service was enforced during the 1860s *e.g.*, and raiding penny-gaffs and suppressing them did from time to time happen (*e.g.* in 1838 and 1859). See Storch, "The Policeman as Domestic Missionary", pp. 285 and 290. Gambling in the street however, as long as this involved two persons only, was not to be interfered with under the 1867 Act.

<sup>87</sup> In his letters to prominent politicians (see *e.g.* his letters to H. Waddington, 14 April 1862, in *Public Records Office / Home Office Papers 45 / OS. 7215 / 3*; 14 May 1861, in *Public Records Office / Home Office Papers 45 / OS. 7215 / 2*; and 23 December 1865, in *Public Records Office / Home Office Papers 45 / OS. 7215 / 5*), Mayne repeatedly wrote against the worst offenders: shopkeepers, industrialists, and — most of all — railway companies, outside whose premises one found piles upon piles of boxes, parcels, etc., in such streets as Tooley Street, Bermondsey Wall, Oxford Street, Regent Street, the Strand, High Holborn. See "Abstracts of Reports Relating to Obstruction by Vans, Waggons, etc., Loading and Unloading in Public Thoroughfares", 1862?, in *Public Records Office / Home Office Papers 45 / OS. 7215 / 3*, and "Abstract Return of the Number of Places where Obstruction is caused by Vans, etc., stopping for Loading or Unloading, also the Number of Places where Obstruction is caused by Placing Packages on Footway (not for Sale) for Loading or Unloading Vans", Metropolitan Police Office, 18 May 1863, in *Public Records Office / Home Office Papers 45 / OS. 7215 / 4*.

<sup>88</sup> Chapter 54 prohibited any form of obstruction and any sort of game, including football, in all streets whatever their nature. See "The Regulation of Street Traffic", in *The Justice of the Peace*, LXIV (7 July 1900), p. 419, in *Public Records Office / Home Office Papers 45 / 9726 / A52563 / 2*, and Document A, in *Public Records Office / Home Office Papers 45 / 9960 / X2772 / 5*. Punch was the only form of entertainment for which the act did not apply. See Mayhew, *London Labour*, vol. III, p. 46.

<sup>89</sup> The text applied for the area within a 4-mile radius from Charing-Cross (section 4). Beyond it, it was the Local Boards' duty to ensure that traffic was not obstructed. See *The Times* (1st October 1884), in *Public Records Office / Home Office Papers 45 / 9960 / X2772 / 5*.

<sup>90</sup> "A Bill intituled An Act for Regulating the Traffic in the Metropolis, and for Making Provision for the greater Security of Persons passing through the Streets; and for other Purposes", in *Parliamentary Papers 1867*, vol. VI, folios 425, 427 and 435.

<sup>91</sup> In 1868, under the *Metropolitan Streets Act Amendment Act*, the police were allowed to make rules and regulations in some particular cases to avoid traffic jams, if thought appropriate. See *Public Records Office / Home Office Papers 45 / 9960 / X2772 / 5*. Sections 11 and 12 of the 1867 Act had already enabled the City Police to do just the same. See "Regulation made the thirtieth Day of January 1891, by the Commissioner of the Police Force of the City of London", in *Public Records Office / Home Office Papers 45 / 9726 / A52563*.

1870 *Tramway Act* (33 and 34 Vict., c. 78), the Metropolitan Board of Works set the speed limit at 9 mph. for trams in 1873 and 1874.<sup>92</sup> Turnpikes — profitable businesses on the whole, not in the hands of the lower classes but in those of the land-owners and professional people — were gradually suppressed in the last decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>93</sup> Even parishes were asked to contribute directly towards making streets safer and less congested: the Metropolitan Board of Works under the 1862 *Metropolis Management Amendment Act* (25 and 26 Vict., c. 102, sections 98, 99, and 112), could impose it upon parish councils to build streets at least 40 feet wide.<sup>94</sup>

The police also had to control street preaching. In the early years, constables tended to close their eyes to it, except if traffic was affected or if a home owner complained about the presence of a crowd. But with the rise, among others, of the Salvation Army and their huge street processions, in the late 1870s, street preaching became as closely watched and controlled as street trading.<sup>95</sup>

The police did not fine street traders systematically either. The power of each constable was basically discretionary; whenever he thought traders obstructed a street he could choose between the following: cautioning, summoning, or arresting (which rarely took place). As a matter of fact, it had been Police Commissioner Richard Mayne's policy to insist on his men being "too easy rather than too exacting."<sup>96</sup> In the spring of 1888, the police managed to have some of the street traders of some East End streets (in Poplar particularly) condemned only because their belongings had rendered the said streets impassable. However, the police had been broad-minded enough to — in the

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<sup>92</sup> "Bye-Laws made by the Metropolitan Board of Works under the Provisions of the *Tramways Act, 1870* on 12<sup>th</sup> December 1873, as amended on 27<sup>th</sup> March 1874", in *Abstract of Laws Relating to Proprietors, Drivers, and Conductors of Public Carriages within the Metropolitan Police District and the City of London and its Liberties* (London: Darling, 1910), p. 167.

<sup>93</sup> Over 11 miles of streets and roads (including Commercial Road East and Edgware Road) were disturnpiked between December 31, 1870 and December 31, 1897. See *London Statistics*, vol. VII: 1896–1897, p. 572. See also P. J. Waller, *Town, City, and Nation*, p. 252. 1879 saw the beginning of the destruction of street barriers on the Aristocratic Estates — no fewer than 150 in London at that time; these barriers had been used to prevent undesirable traffic (omnibuses, carts, cattle, etc.) from entering the quiet retreats of the wealthy. See Donald J. Olsen, *Town Planning in London. The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982 [1st ed. 1964]), p. 145.

<sup>94</sup> From 1855, the Metropolitan Board of Works had been able to use bye-laws to that end, bye-laws which also applied, like sections 7 and 8 of *Metropolis Management and Building Acts Amendment Act, 1882*, in the case of the newly-built streets on London's Aristocratic Estates.

<sup>95</sup> Winter, *London's Teeming Streets*, pp. 148–152. Policemen were also requested to report those who rode or wheeled on footways and to "caution children trundling on footways or along electric tram lines". See *Duty Hints*, pp. 7 and 21.

<sup>96</sup> Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, Final Volume: *Notes on Social Influences and Conclusion* (London: Macmillan, 1903), p. 137. See also Winter, *London's Teeming Streets*, p. 55.

first place — warn all the vendors that they ran the risk of being fined if they refused to comply with the rules.<sup>97</sup>

In fact, by the 1880s, the street vendor's situation had actually improved (from the legal point of view at least!): while 50 years before any trader could be moved on whether he had caused an obstruction or not (under the *Michael Angelo Taylor's Act, 1817*, section 65), under the rules set by the police on December 28, 1869,<sup>98</sup> adopted under the provisions of the *Metropolitan Streets Act Amendment Act* of 1868, it was no longer possible to do so if the street vendor was not causing an obstruction.<sup>99</sup> This had nullified part of the 1867 Act, which had made it illegal to put down goods on the carriageway, except when loading and unloading, a clause that would simply have wiped out street commerce, which is hardly conceivable without a barrow or at least a tray or a basket.

Reconciling street selling with traffic was not just desirable; it was, according to an 1884 Home Office document, quite possible: "These regulations while they give necessary protection to the traffic of the streets do not destroy the means of livelihood of a poor and deserving class."<sup>100</sup>

There was naturally resistance of a sort on the part of street traders, but nothing, I think, to write at length about. When caught, some simply refused to pay the fine and went to prison instead, while the clause against putting baskets and the like on the carriageway in the 1867 Act was vigorously protested against; the threat even caused the better-off costermongers to form a union in order to protect themselves.<sup>101</sup>

Complying with traffic and police regulations was the rule, not least because, quite often, street sellers were rather old,<sup>102</sup> and, here again, too intent on earning the few shillings that would help them find a bed for the night and/or food for their families. But what primarily mattered to them all was to be allowed to remain in the street, however difficult this may have been, and despite an ever-increasing traffic, because they knew that it was there only that they could hope to secure as large a custom as possible. Which is actually why

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<sup>97</sup> "Street Stalls in East London", *The Times* (13 April 1888), in *Public Records Office / Home Office Papers 45 / 9687 / A48675 / 1*. In Seven Sisters Road (Holloway), in early 1904, the eight costermongers that had been summoned for obstructions in the streets had all been cautioned in the first place, but to no avail. See "Special Report" (Holloway Station – Y Division, 5 February 1904), in *Public Records Office / Metropolitan Police 2 / 657*.

<sup>98</sup> These rules applied only within a 4-mile radius from Charing Cross.

<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, they were entitled to defend themselves in front of a judge if the police had charged them with obstructing the traffic. In other words, a magistrate now had to be convinced that a nuisance or an act of obstruction had actually taken place. See Winter, *London's Teeming Streets*, p. 109.

<sup>100</sup> *Public Records Office / Home Office Papers 45 / 9960 / X2772 / 5*.

<sup>101</sup> Winter, *London's Teeming Streets*, p. 109.

<sup>102</sup> According to Booth in the 1890s, the older you were, the more likely you were to become a street seller. There were indeed proportionally more of them within the 36-and-over age-group than there were at an earlier age. See Table, in Booth, *Second Series*, vol. III, p. 258. See also Mayhew, *London Labour*, vol. I, p. 463, on widows for whom street trading was the only means of livelihood.



indoor markets failed (Columbia Market, Shoreditch, in 1869, and Randall's Market, Poplar, in the 1870s, *e.g.*).<sup>103</sup>

The 1830–1910 period saw the rise, the golden age and the decline of street trading. But it seems that in the same way as street traders never saw beyond the defence of their daily bread, the London police and local authorities in the main never intended to blot out their particular way of life. Which is all the more remarkable since, as Mayhew put it, street trading existed by “sufferance”; neither common law nor statute bestowed the right to set up a stall or put down a basket on the public way (at least until the 1868 *Amendment Act*).<sup>104</sup> This is most certainly the principal reason why street selling lasted for so long on such a large scale in a traffic-flooded capital. True to say though that, unlike prostitution, vagrancy and most popular amusements, street trading was about the only exception along with — maybe — street music.<sup>105</sup> The exceptional nature of street trading was reaffirmed again and again; in instructions published in 1888, it was reminded to all that any street-seller of food or coal (not being a hawkler) was allowed to work without an Excise Licence (a right that had already been reaffirmed twice under George III and once under Victoria<sup>106</sup>).

The various policies carried out by the authorities with relation to the activities of street traders never precipitated their final downfall in the early twentieth century. In fact, this eventually came about because of:

- • changes in the nature of the London labour market, with relatively better wages and increasing job-prospects for women in the corporate sector, which gathered speed with the Great War,
- • the rapid development of large-scale retailing operations in the last quarter of the century, that involved not only the leafier streets but also the poorer districts (in 1914 *e.g.*, one house only in Lower Road — Rotherhithe — as compared with 33 in 1894, out of 205 numbers, was not a shop. All the other premises catered for a typically poor working-class population, the local eel-pie house for example being a witness to it).<sup>107</sup>

<sup>103</sup> Alan Palmer, *The East End. Four Centuries of London Life* (London: John Murray, 1989), p. 79; P. Villars, *L'Angleterre, l'Ecosse et l'Irlande* (Paris: A. Quantin, 1881?), p. 70; and Booth, Second Series, vol. III, p. 265.

<sup>104</sup> Winter, *London's Teeming Streets*, p. 108.

<sup>105</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 79, on street entertainers.

<sup>106</sup> 50 Geo. 3, c. 41, s. 23; 55 Geo. 3, c. 71, s. 16; and 22 and 23 Vict., c. 36, s. 3. See “Instructions relative to Licences and the Survey of licensed and cautionary Traders” (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1888), p. 63, in *Public Records Office / Home Office Papers 45 / 9967 / X22903 / 5*.

<sup>107</sup> Directory, in Bernard Nurse, *Rotherhithe, 1894, London Sheet 78, Old Ordnance Survey Maps* (Gateshead: The Godfrey Edition, 1986). There were plenty of bustling streets in these districts. High Street for example, a tributary to The Angel, had stores, a theater, a music-hall, and even an Agriculture Hall. See Booth, First Series, vol. I, p. 249. The same applied to Old Kent Road in 1894, and to Waterloo Road in 1914, with a baker, a flower-shop and shops selling second-hand clothes and fried fish. Smaller streets also offered a whole range of services. Back Church Lane (Whitechapel), a street winding through a relatively poor district, where many Jews lived and worked, boasted a baker, a shoe-smith, a fried-fish shop, nine general stores.

These were changes which even the most experienced and resilient of street-traders could not resist. As a contemporary wrote about 1900: “Streets that a century ago were sacred to chaffering hucksters and small tradesmen are now the humming centres of a world’s commerce.”<sup>108</sup> Their shouting was nothing more than a memory by 1920, except in some by-streets (*e.g.* the sellers of muffins would by the end of World War I only turn up on Sunday evenings in quiet, off-the-beaten-track streets).

More fundamentally, it was the whole of society that had changed:

[It was not] that the street [was] less used — street congestion is a characteristic of all of urban history — but rather that the street [was now] used for less. [...] the replacement of the street as a system of access and movement by other channels of communication, the alteration of the street by the superimposition of modes of communication requiring various scales of operation, and the development of configurations of streets that rely on mechanized movement [...] constitute[d] a metamorphosis and a narrowing of the role of the street as a locus for communication.<sup>109</sup>

What was in the making was a new world where “The main transactions of society take place behind the closed doors of offices and shops. The street is not to stay in but to pass hurriedly through.”<sup>110</sup>

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Middlesex Street, on the other side of Whitechapel High Street, was as diverse. See Jeremy Smith, *Whitechapel, Spitalfields and The Bank, 1894, London Sheet 63, Old Ordnance Survey Maps* (Gateshead: The Godfrey Edition, 1985).

<sup>108</sup> Edwin Pugh, “Representative London Streets”, in *Living London*, ed. by Sims, vol. I, p. 363.

<sup>109</sup> Thomas V. Czarnowski, “The Street as a Communications Artifact”, in *On Streets*, ed. by Stanford Anderson (Cambridge, Mass., and London: The M.I.T. Press, 1978), pp. 209–210.

<sup>110</sup> Peter Jukes (ed.), *A Shout in the Street* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 47. Unsurprisingly, with the number of street traders plummeting, the authorities adopted tougher laws. With the adoption of the *City of London (Street Traffic) Act* (9 Edw. 7, c. 67) in 1909 — section 4 applied to each and everyone: “Every person who shall in any way wilfully obstruct the free passage of any street within the City shall for each and every such offence be liable to a penalty not exceeding 40 shillings [...]” See *Abstract of Laws Relating to Proprietors, Drivers...* pp. 436–437 — and the *City of London Various Powers Act* in 1911 (see “Select Committee on Motor Traffic”, folios 13 and 15), the City of London for example had full powers to make any highway street-trader-free.