

British Art Studies

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Thames River Works

**Edited by Shalini Le Gall and Justin
McCann**

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Cover image: Hew Locke, Huan Tian Xi Di, 2016, acrylic paint on C-TYPE photograph, 124.5 × 174 cm.. Digital image courtesy of DACS/Artimage 2022 (all rights reserved).

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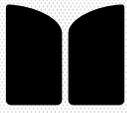
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Shalini Le Gall and Justin McCann, "Introduction: “Watery Relations”", *British Art Studies*, Issue 22, <https://dx.doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-22/intro>

In early January 1864, a “sharp frost” hit London. According to his mother, it was during this period of frigid weather that James McNeill Whistler opened the windows of his house that overlooked the Thames and painted *Chelsea in Ice* (fig. 1). In the painting, barren trees line the riverbank where pedestrians have stopped to watch a steamboat navigate the icy water. In the distance, factories on the Battersea shore loom as a solid gray mass, underscoring the wintry conditions. Along with *Battersea Reach from Lindsey House* (1864-1870) (fig. 2) and *Grey and Silver: Chelsea Wharf* (1864-1868) (fig. 3), *Chelsea in Ice* foregrounds Whistler’s interest in the industrial and commercial Thames riverscape and anticipates the more well-known nocturnes of the 1870s.



Figure 1.

James McNeill Whistler, *Chelsea in Ice*, 1864, oil on canvas, 45.09 × 60.96 cm. The Lunder Collection, Colby College Museum of Art (2013.293). Digital image courtesy of Colby College Museum of Art (all rights reserved).



Figure 2.

James McNeill Whistler, *Battersea Reach from Lindsey House*, circa 1864–1871, oil on canvas, 51.3 × 76.5 cm. Collection of The Hunterian, University of Glasgow (GLAHA_46358). Digital image courtesy of Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved).



Figure 3.

James McNeill Whistler, *Grey and Silver: Chelsea Wharf*, 1864-1868, oil on canvas, 61 × 46 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington (1942.9.99). Digital image courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Washington (public domain).

The word “atmospheric” is often used to describe these works. This poetic quality, however, provides the paintings with more than mood and feeling. As an aesthetic term, atmospheric can be taken to include both the way in which Whistler depicts Battersea Reach, for example, and the riverscape itself. It forms one line of inquiry inspired by the method set forth in Jesse Oak Taylor’s book *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* (2016). In Taylor’s analysis, focusing on the atmosphere in urban environments inverts the presumed central subject. As he puts it, “foreground becomes background and background becomes foreground”.¹ Although he famously championed the autonomy of art and its

independence from everyday life, Whistler's pictures of the Thames remain rooted in the industrial activities happening on and by the river. As environmental historian Vanessa Taylor writes,

Rivers have always been enmeshed in dominant economic and political discourses ... As unruly environments, they also overflow the banks of any single ideology or management structure. Because of the ways in which they connect involuntary neighbors, rivers are always social and political ... ²

Whistler and the Thames were neighbors for much of the second half of the nineteenth century. From Lindsey House in Chelsea, Whistler had a clear view of the river, and he spent considerable time walking alongside and rowing on it. His paintings and prints are part of the material world and web of relationships that characterize the Thames during this period.

Drawing on Vanessa Taylor's analysis of rivers as critical components of a region's cultural and environmental history, this special issue of *British Art Studies* centers the Thames—and its ships, docks, gardens, plants, and factories—in discussions of art, work, and life in nineteenth-century London. The title, "Thames River Works", signals the industrial and economic importance of the river, as well as the many ways in which the river worked (and has continued to work) as a dynamic force in the lives of those who encounter it. Throughout history, the Thames at London has been a symbol of change and the passage of time, with its shifting shorelines and extreme tides that have altered the flow of the river on a daily basis and the deterioration of bridges over the course of years. The management of the river was the major environmental issue of nineteenth-century London. As engineers sought to contain and improve the river, artists like Whistler found inspiration in it. The works of art and images produced by those working on the river speak to the myriad ways that the Thames connects seemingly disparate perspectives and time periods.

Many of the articles in this special issue reference Whistler, both because of the artist's singular importance in developing images of the river that would become fixtures in the art-historical canon, and because of the project's origins in a Whistler exhibition. In 2019, we organized the exhibition *River Works: Whistler and the Industrial Thames* at the Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine. The show drew heavily from the extraordinary prints and paintings in the Lunder Collection and was developed in partnership with students and faculty. Embedded at an academic art museum, in an institution with strong environmental studies and environmental humanities initiatives, the exhibition created a forum for class sessions and public lectures that explored the connections between art, energy, empire, and the

environment. Concurrently, the Colby Museum also presented *Hew Locke: Here's the Thing*, organized by Jonathan Watkins at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, and curated by Diana Tuite at the Colby Museum (fig. 4). Locke's work in that exhibition critically re-examined the symbols and imagery of the maritime traditions and cultures of the British Empire. In sculptural interventions that include modified busts of Queen Victoria and suspended ships laden with vegetation, Locke draws our attention to the ways that maritime activity is deeply connected to colonialism, migration, and the environment. Centering Guyana, formerly British Guiana, where Locke was raised, these works of art force consideration of the global pathways traced by British maritime activity in the nineteenth century. This activity often began, and ended, with the Thames. In the painting *Huan Tian Xi Di* (2016), Locke references a traditional Chinese vessel scheduled to participate in the Diamond Jubilee Thames procession of Elizabeth II in 2012 (fig. 5). As Tuite has written, the subject recalls "the triumphalism of invasion or military victory", while reinforcing the river's importance in securing the wealth generated by Britain's vast mercantile operations.³ We have paired two of Whistler's works depicting the Thames (figs. 6 and 7) with Locke's *Huan Tian Xi Di*, and a still from the "map of contents" at the top of this page, in a series of cover images for this issue. These covers delineate our approach to transhistorical dimensions of the Thames, with close study of specific works of art and consideration of the river's continuing legacy on the peoples and places formerly subject to British colonial power.



Figure 4.

Installation view, *Hew Locke: Here's the Thing*, 8 March–2 June 2019, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham. Digital image courtesy of the artist and Ikon Gallery. Photo: Stuart Whipps (all rights reserved).



Figure 5.

Hew Locke, Huan Tian Xi Di, 2016, acrylic paint on C-TYPE photograph, 124.5 × 174 cm. Digital image courtesy of DACS/Artimage 2022 (all rights reserved).



Figure 6.

James McNeill Whistler, *Brown and Silver: Old Battersea Bridge*, 1862-1865, oil on canvas mounted on masonite, 63.8 × 76 cm. Collection of the Addison Gallery of American Art (1928.55). Digital image courtesy of the Addison Gallery of American Art / Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved).



Figure 7.

James McNeill Whistler, *Troopships*, 1887, etching and drypoint, second (final) state, 13.1 × 17.6 cm. Collection of The Lunder Collection, Colby College Museum of Art (2013.490). Digital image courtesy of The Lunder Collection, Colby College Museum of Art (all rights reserved).

This special issue, initially organized around Whistler's art, evolved to consider the Thames as a waterway that connected London to the world, and a marker of cultural and environmental history in the industrial period. For many of the authors, Whistler remains a point of departure, but the questions raised in these analyses extend beyond biographical modes of inquiry. The articles included here are methodologically grounded in the processes, vistas, and ecologies of the Thames and fundamentally ask what it might mean to think with water. From rural villages in the British countryside to the North Sea opening into wider waters, the Thames transported priceless cargo, nurtured botanical specimens, collected industrial waste, and was admired (and at times avoided) by pleasure seekers. As the articles in this issue reveal, thinking with water, and specifically Thames water, asks that we center the river as an object of study and as a cultural element in the lives of those who engaged with it.

In their articles for this issue, Patricia de Montfort looks closely at the lives of women depicted by Whistler in modern urban landscapes, Jon Newman contextualizes Whistler's Battersea scenes in an analysis of the aesthetics of erasure and redevelopment, and Shalini Le Gall situates Tilbury as a launching point for the study of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. Sarah Mead Leonard examines plant motifs and botany in the development of William Morris's pastoral subjects, and Nancy Rose Marshall explores the visual

imagery and violence of the Tooley Street fire, and the risks associated with merchandise held in dock warehouses. The immateriality of gas, and the emergence of a visual gas field critical to the development of the manufacturing and ballooning industries are the focus of Jennifer Tucker's article. Aleema Gray and Danielle Thom study the colonialist legacy of the West India Docks, and the challenges of decolonizing culturally contested public spaces. Gray and Thom pose the critical question: If the river works, for whom and what does it work?

The objects and materials at the center of these studies are varied. They include prints, maps, paintings, illustrations, periodicals, monuments, photographs, wallpaper, and decorative art objects. Aesthetic questions, when asked, are grounded in studies of the Thames. The articles share an understanding of nineteenth-century London as a “watery place” filled with “watery relations”, as described by Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis in *Thinking with Water* (2013). Chen writes,

Unlike thinking with land, thinking with water asks that we deterritorialize how we understand where we live and that we consider ongoing relations with others—whether these relations join us to other locations, other beings, or other events and spacetimes.⁴

Chen's approach helps us understand the Thames as a living historical archive, prompting questions about art, environment, empire, and industry. Our access to this living archive, and many other more conventional research centers, was drastically impacted by the restrictions related to the global pandemic that began in 2020. Although many of the articles in this publication benefited from primary source research in a number of archives, including the Museum of London, Docklands, and the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, the pandemic required us all to pivot toward digital research methods. In the process, we discovered collaborators and information portals that profoundly shaped the nature of our papers. As our work moved into Zoom meetings over the period of 12–18 months, the phrase “I'll drop the link in the chat” became a common refrain. Our discussions centered on considerations of the materiality of the archives, while our ongoing research uncovered the ways in which digital archives and scholarship are especially well suited to the study of a living subject like the Thames.

As an object of study, the Thames is a transhistorical specimen. In his project *Tate Thames Dig* (1999), contemporary artist Mark Dion worked with a team to collect objects on the foreshore of the Thames, and later displayed them in a cabinet at the Tate Gallery (figs. 8 and 9). Roman coins, medieval

artifacts, and plastic refuse all combined to narrate the history of human interaction with the river. Although many of the articles in this issue focus on the long nineteenth century, several of the studies also adopt a transhistorical framework, examining, for example, real estate development in Battersea or decolonial approaches to the West India Docks. As our research shifted primarily to web-based formats during the pandemic, we also explored community-led archival efforts, such as the *Barter Archive* led by artist Pat Wingshan Wong. Wong trades her sketches of the Billingsgate fish market with fishmongers in exchange for physical memorabilia and recorded oral histories (figs. 10–13). With this archival project, Wong aims to provide “visibility, respect and compassion to the invisible or marginalised communities”, working in the market.



Figure 8.

Mark Dion, Tate Thames Dig: Mark Dion and Collaborators with Cleaned and Classified Artifacts, South Lawn of the Tate at Millbank, 1999, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Mark Dion (all rights reserved).



Figure 9.

Mark Dion, Tate Thames Dig, 1999, wooden cabinet, porcelain, earthenware, metal, animal bones, glass, 27 prints and 2 maps, 266 × 370 × 126 cm. Collection of Tate (T07669). Digital image courtesy of Mark Dion / Tate (all rights reserved).



Figure 10.

Pat Wingshan Wong, Fawsitt Fish: Tony, 6 October 2020, carbon transfer drawing on paper, 13.5 × 21 cm. Digital image courtesy of barter_archive, <https://www.barter-archive.com/>, drawn by Pat WingShan Wong (all rights reserved).



Figure 11.

Pat Wingshan Wong, C&A Seafood, 21 January 2021, carbon transfer drawing on paper, 13.5 x 21 cm. Digital image courtesy of barter_archive, <https://www.barter-archive.com/>, drawn by Pat WingShan Wong (all rights reserved).

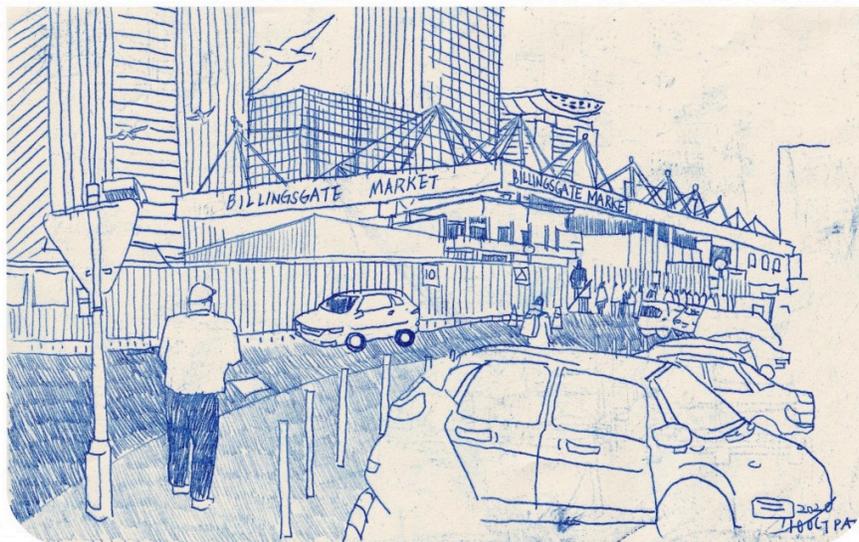


Figure 12.

Pat Wingshan Wong, Billingsgate Fish Market (Outdoor), 10 October 2020, carbon transfer drawing on paper, 13.5 x 21 cm. Digital image courtesy of barter_archive, <https://www.barter-archive.com/>, drawn by Pat WingShan Wong (all rights reserved).



Figure 13.

Pat Wingshan Wong, Mick's Eel Supply, 21 May 2021, carbon transfer drawing on paper, 13.5 × 21 cm. Digital image courtesy of barter_archive, <https://www.barter-archive.com/>, drawn by Pat WingShan Wong (all rights reserved).

More than a century-and-a-half earlier, Whistler had etched laborers outside of the Billingsgate fish market waiting to be hired for the day (see [fig. 6](#)). Wong's work helps us connect the present with the past and reconsider the long tradition and culture of riverside employment. A desire to make and visualize connections between different historical periods and academic disciplines inspired us to approach this project from the very beginning as a web-based publication. The faces, places, and objects depicted in Whistler's, Wong's, and Locke's works each carry a history that is complex and multilayered, at once personal and collective. A river's nature to flow, connect, and network—to form “watery relations”—makes its histories non-linear and expansive. It requires us to excavate its past at specific points, as these articles and the works of art they examine do, and study its layers to see how they connect to one another and to a world we have inherited from the past.

The river's “watery relations” have fostered connections between people and places and necessitated the flow and exchange of materials and ideas. At the outset of this project, we considered how we might work with the team at *BAS* to map these relations. We were especially interested in how digital methodologies might show both the historical character and the connective and relational essence of the Thames. Inspired by folding river maps, whose format approximates the long scroll of a webpage, we ultimately landed on a

“map of contents” interface, designed by Lizzie Malcolm at Rectangle, which marks each article in this issue at a relevant point along the Thames. The river’s outline illustrates the tension between the natural contours of the river and the crisp angles of man-made structures. Our hope is that this engaging feature, and the art-historical research presented across the seven articles in this issue, allow readers to trace unexpected connections in their study of the Thames, and identify topics for further research and inquiry.

Footnotes

- 1 Jesse Oak Taylor, *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog and British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 14–15.
- 2 Vanessa Taylor, “London’s River? The Thames as Contested Environmental Space”, *The London Journal: A Review of Metropolitan Society Past and Present* 40, no. 3 (2015): 184, DOI:[10.1179/1749632215Y.0000000010](https://doi.org/10.1179/1749632215Y.0000000010).
- 3 Diana Tuite, “Pretenders to the Throne: Imperialism, Authenticity and Excess”, in *Hew Locke: Here’s the Thing* (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery; Kansas City, MO: Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art; Waterville, ME: Colby College Museum of Art, 2019), 58.
- 4 Cecilia Chen, “Mapping Waters: Thinking with Watery Places”, in *Thinking with Water: An Aqueous Imaginary and An Epistemology of Unknowability*, ed. Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013), 275.

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“The Surrounding Great Work”: Memory, Erasure, and Curating the Built Environment of the West India Docks, 1802–2022

Aleema Gray and Danielle Thom

Abstract

The development of London’s West India Docks, opened in 1802, made manifest the contemporary connections between culture, capitalism, and colonialism. A liminal space, the docks existed as a secure conduit for the importation of goods from the West Indies, most of which were produced by enslaved Africans. As such, they functioned as a threshold between the brutal realities of the plantation-based slave economy, and the polite world of the London merchant whose wealth derived from that economy. This collaborative article, which we wrote as two curators at the Museum of London, explores the lasting effects of that liminality, focusing on the aesthetic and spatial implications of the West India Docks’s environment, and the ways in which these persist in influencing the site and its communities today.

Authors

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Aleema Gray and Danielle Thom, ““The Surrounding Great Work”: Memory, Erasure, and Curating the Built Environment of the West India Docks, 1802–2022”, *British Art Studies*, Issue 22, <https://dx.doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-22/graythom>

Introduction

“Of this Range of BUILDINGS
Constructed together with the Adjacent DOCKS At the Expence of
public spirited Individuals
Under the Sanction of a provident Legislature
And with the liberal Co-operation of the Corporate Body of the
CITY of LONDON
For the distinct Purpose
Of complete SECURITY and ample ACCOMMODATION
(hitherto not afforded)
To the SHIPPING and PRODUCE of the WEST INDIES at this wealthy
PORT
THE FIRST STONE WAS LAID
On Saturday the Twelfth Day of July, ad 1800”

This, the opening inscription upon the foundation stone of the West India Docks, obscures the purpose of the docks, even as it purports to offer a clear explanation for their development. The connection between the new docks’s physical security (as a storage facility for commodities) and the financial security occasioned by the regulation of those commodities is made clear; as is the docks’s geographical specificity, dedicated as they were to commodities travelling between Britain and the West Indies. Framed in the language of public service and civic participation, the inscription nonetheless elides two key, interrelated facts: the ultimate dependency of all “SHIPPING and PRODUCE of the WEST INDIES” upon the labour of enslaved Africans; and the physical confinement and control of that “produce” in order to protect the profits of individual private investors.

This article is a collaborative one, produced by two curators at the Museum of London. While Danielle Thom concentrates on visual culture in the long eighteenth century, Aleema Gray researches Black community histories, contested heritage, and decolonial methodologies; together, our respective areas of expertise have enabled us to reflect upon the docks as a site of empire making and imperial memory. In building on recent calls to decolonise museum practices, we position the West India Docks as an embodiment of the entangled histories of colonisation and denial. We consider the spatial histories and contemporary experiences around the docks that put into question the fragility of heritage, citizenship, and nationhood.

Located on the Isle of Dogs in East London, the original West India Docks complex was formally opened in 1802. The Museum of London Docklands’s site now inhabits this physical environment, occupying Number One Warehouse, a building originally constructed as a commodity warehouse

within the docks complex. Until June 2020, a bronze statue of the slave trader Robert Milligan, who was one of the merchants instrumental in establishing the docks as a commercially viable concern, stood on the quayside in front of the Museum's entrance. By reading this statue in relation to "the surrounding great work" (the docks) referenced in its accompanying inscription, this article goes on to position the docks as an architectural and spatial expression of the relationship between colonialism, capitalism, and white supremacy—a relationship which underpinned the entire economy of Britain and the Atlantic world in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the first instance, a brief history of the docks and their built environment will establish the means by which the site perpetuated hierarchies of race and wealth. Crucial to this process was the fact that, in its design, location, and the demarcation of its boundaries, the site was fundamentally liminal. It acted as a threshold between the City of London (to which it was connected by the purpose-built Commercial Road) and the colonised world: both geographically as a gateway to the ocean and a point of exchange whereby commodities entered and exited the city; and in the imagination, buffering the elegant and idealised world of the elite mercantile class from the labour exploitation and physical hardship on which their wealth was built. It embodied the dichotomy of "rude" versus "refined", as established by Kay Dian Kriz, whereby "refining the forced labour of African slaves into metropolitan ornaments involved suppressing the subject of empire, slavery and colonial trade altogether".¹ Built to process slave-grown commodities such as sugar, which was refined in more than one sense of the word, the docks and their visual representations constituted an aesthetic intervention, as much as a commercial one.

This quality of liminality has persisted, and continues to shape contemporary encounters with the locale in its incarnation as "Docklands" (or, synecdochically, "Canary Wharf"): a centre of global finance positioned within Tower Hamlets—the borough with the highest rate of child poverty in London—and still a highly securitised space with controlled points of entry and exit.² We consider the concept of liminality as it relates to the staging and experience of urban space, by exploring the daily encounters between Londoners of African and Caribbean heritage, and memorial sites upholding the colonial iconography of the West India Docks.³ We argue that remembering often invokes forgetting, particularly for individuals who occupy a liminal space within Britain's colonial history. Drawing on the curatorial practices that shaped the Museum of London Docklands's "London, Sugar & Slavery" gallery, we highlight a number of community interventions that have recently drawn on reparative history as a way to transform the possibilities of sites fraught with colonial violence. In this way, we examine the ways in which today's iteration of the West India Docks's locale has been imagined into being, by commercial and governmental forces; with the contested histories of slavery, empire, and commerce instrumentalised for

the purposes of authenticity and cultural prestige. Referencing contestations over heritage and the lived interactions along the docks, we pose the question in this special issue of *British Art Studies*: if the “Thames River Works”, for whom and what does it work?

Sugar and Security: The Building of the Docks

The West India Docks was the first “wet dock” complex to be completed during the London dock-building boom of about 1800–1815, and by far the largest. Located on the northern part of the Isle of Dogs, it enabled large ships to avoid the bend of the Thames towards Greenwich, and provided a convenient, efficient alternative to the system of crowded “legal quays” and “sufferance wharves” that had previously been the only legitimate points of entry and exit for dutiable goods. The eventual construction of the West India Docks was the result of planning and lobbying by commercial interests throughout the 1790s, resulting in the passage of the West India Docks Act in 1799, and they were developed alongside the rival London Docks upriver at Wapping. ⁴

This dock-building boom must be understood in the context of two important architectural shifts during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. First, the Thames was reorganised to facilitate London’s pre-eminent status as national and imperial capital, through the construction of additional bridges and public buildings along the river frontage as well as commercial docks; notably Westminster and Blackfriars bridges (1750 and 1769), and William Chambers’s rebuilt government offices at Somerset House (1776–1786). Second, in Britain, an austere iteration of the then-fashionable neoclassical style, which we call “carceral classicism”, was developed and deployed to protect the socio-economic interests of a mercantile elite. Viewed this way, London dock architecture exists in the same aesthetic and functional sphere as, say, George Dance’s Newgate ([fig. 1](#)) and Whitecross Street prisons (1779 and 1813, respectively), Sir John Soane’s Bank of England (1788–1833), and Jeremy Bentham’s hypothetical panopticon which influenced the design of Millbank Prison (1819). The prescriptive, regular, and hierarchical nature of neoclassical architecture rendered it ideal for the projection of authority—not only judicial or financial authority, but also cultural and aesthetic. ⁵

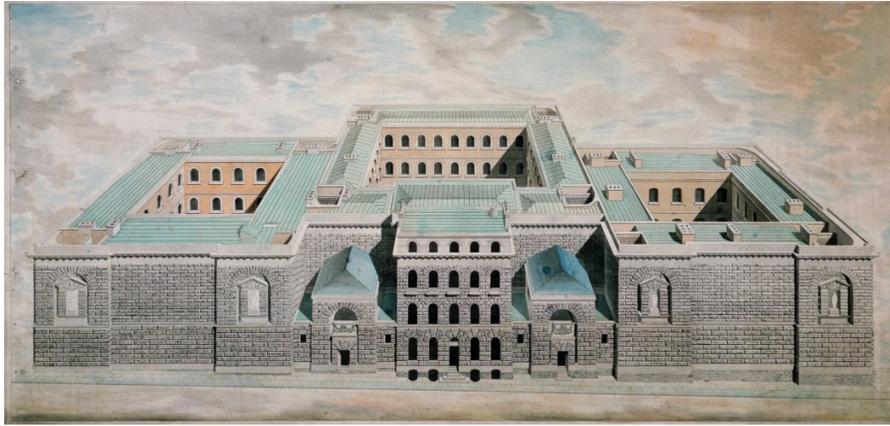


Figure 1.

George Dance, Newgate Gaol, Contract Drawings & Designs, 1769–circa 1813, drawing. Collection of Sir John Soane's Museum, London (D4/4/16). Digital image courtesy of Sir John Soane's Museum, London (all rights reserved).

While the privileged world of the English country house might seem geographically and culturally distant from the utilitarian labouring space of the docks, or the punitive environment of the prison, neoclassicism connects them all. Notable among the many country houses built (or rebuilt) in the neoclassical style in the second half of the eighteenth century are those funded by the profits of the slave economy: Harewood House, Stratton Park, and Dodington House, to name just three.⁶ The imposition of this style upon the vast stretch of commodity warehouses that ranged along the quaysides reified their role as a protective compound serving the financial interests of a social elite, again highlighting the liminal function of the site as both a labouring space and monumental representation of “civilised” (imperialist) British culture.

It is worth noting that, as Architect and Surveyor to the Corporation of London, George Dance played a significant role in drafting the first plans for the West India Docks, including the warehouses. Like so many of the individuals connected with this project, he was at least tangentially connected to (and benefitted from) the slave trade. His sister Hester, married to the MP and senior East India Company official, Nathaniel Smith, was the creditor of a plantation on St Vincent, deriving a portion of familial wealth from interest charged on the debt.⁷ Dance himself was an investor in the West India Dock Company, thus profiting from the infrastructure supporting the slave economy.⁸ This symbiotic relationship was not a coincidence, but rather a typical occurrence, highlighting the degree to which the slave economy was entirely integrated within the wider British socio-economic context, and not confined to those who directly dealt in enslaved people and slave-grown goods.⁹

The plans for warehousing and other dock buildings were later refined and completed by the father-and-son team of George and George Gwilt (who, likewise, had previous experience in the design of secure buildings, notably Horsemonger Lane Gaol in Southwark). The specific purpose of these warehouses was to receive and protect commodities imported from the West Indies, most of which were directly produced by the labour of enslaved Africans: sugar, rum, mahogany, cocoa, coffee, and ginger.¹⁰ A secondary purpose, after the opening of a separate Export Dock in 1807, was to manage goods travelling out to the West Indies—primarily luxury goods for the use of white plantation owners and colonial officials, as well as staple goods intended for the maintenance of enslaved people. These “polite” commodities underpinned modes of intellectual and aesthetic exchange among the elite and “middling” classes in Britain—coffee and cocoa for social drinking, mahogany for the production of fashionable furniture, sugar and ginger for dining. In receiving these goods, the liminality of the docks was further entrenched, positioning the site between the immediate lived experiences of the labouring classes who handled goods (and, at a remove, the experiences of the enslaved producers), and those wealthier individuals who consumed them. Therefore, the deployment of neoclassicism as an architectural logic for the docks’s warehouses and other structures was entirely consistent with, and supportive of, their function as a secure space that buffered the conditions of consumption from those of production.

This process of physical securitisation, as far as it applied to the Thames waterfront, was complemented by an increased emphasis on organisational and institutional change. Most significant was the establishment of a Marine Police force, in 1798, under the guidance of Patrick Colquhoun. Colquhoun, a merchant and magistrate with vested commercial interests in the “West Indian trade”, was a pioneer of preventive policing. Actuated by what Peter Linebaugh has dubbed a “combination of law, economics, flattery and class hatred”, the worldview of Colquhoun and his peers pivoted upon the dialectical belief that “property and acts of pillage are logically and necessarily connected”.¹¹ Anticipating the opening of the West India Docks by four years, the Marine Police constituted a body that was designed both by and for the mercantile class whose commercial activities were enmeshed with the exploitation of enslaved people in the West Indies.¹² Furthermore, Colquhoun’s endeavours were a reaction to the ways in which labour was traditionally organised along the river, where the unloading, portering, and storage of incoming goods was subcontracted by shipowners to teams of semi-casual “lumpers”, “gangsmen”, and other labourers with specialised roles. One of the effects of enclosed dock development in the early nineteenth century was to disrupt this practice, instead introducing a system by which labour was employed directly by the dock companies, and thus brought under greater scrutiny and control.¹³

Robert Milligan and George Hibbert: *genius loci*

What Patrick Colquhoun was to the Marine Police, Robert Milligan and George Hibbert were to the West India Docks: founders, fundraisers, lobbyists, and public champions. Milligan, a Scottish merchant, established himself as a slave trader in Jamaica, returning to London in 1779 as an investor in several plantations.¹⁴ He became a prominent member of the Society of West India Planters and Merchants, on whose behalf he lobbied parliament for the establishment of secure docks to receive their goods. Hibbert, whose family had existing financial interests in the slave trade, was not only active in the family firm of Hibbert, Purrier and Horton, but was also an Alderman of the City of London (from 1798) and an MP (from 1806).¹⁵ From this public platform, he advocated against the abolition of the slave trade, and amassed a collection of art, rare books, and plants from the proceeds of his fortune.¹⁶

As Deputy Chairman and Chairman of the West India Dock Company respectively, Milligan and Hibbert were commemorated and celebrated in architectural forms commensurate with the nature of the site—the *genius loci* of colonial theft and white supremacist exploitation. That process of physical commemoration, and the forms that it adopted, enabled the docks to exist as a space that simultaneously celebrated and obfuscated the ties between city, commerce, and slavery. Celebratory representations of the newly opened West India Docks depict it as a kind of industrial spectacle, of the type celebrated by domestic tourism literature of the period.¹⁷ An 1802 aquatint represents the patriotic pomp of the West India Docks's ceremonial opening, in which the entrance of the first ship, bedecked in "the flags of all Nations" is observed by crowds of men, women, and children (fig. 2). Likewise, an undated etching titled *West India Docks in the Isle of Dogs* shows the warehouses seemingly under construction in about 1800 (fig. 3). In this image, a gentleman in riding dress gestures for the benefit of two fashionably attired women, while labourers work around them. While possibly a fictionalised or embellished scene, this latter print nonetheless frames the new docks as a focus of legitimate bourgeois public interest, even as the spatial and aesthetic qualities of the site reinforce its role as a secure enclosure; again, private commerce is repackaged as a public, civic spectacle. This contradictory sense of place, in which the docks functioned both as an imperialist celebration and an enclosed warehouse, was prompted by specific physical interventions commemorating Hibbert and Milligan: the west entrance gate to the West India Docks complex, known as the Hibbert Gate; and the bronze statue of Milligan erected shortly after his death in 1809.



Figure 2.

P.W. Tomkins, West India Docks, View of the Opening of the Grand Dock with the Ship the Henry Addington, Decorated with the Flags of all Nations, 27 August 1802, 1802, coloured aquatint, 17 × 13 cm. Collection of the London Metropolitan Archives / London Picture Archive. Digital image courtesy of London Picture Archive (all rights reserved).



Figure 3.

West India Docks in the Isle of Dogs, undated, engraving, 13 × 11 cm.
Collection of the London Metropolitan Archives / London Picture Archive.
Digital image courtesy of London Picture Archive (all rights reserved).

Commissioned by the West India Dock Company from the noted sculptor Sir Richard Westmacott, this statue was unveiled in 1813 on the north quay of the Import Dock, in the vicinity of Number One Warehouse. While statues of merchant-philanthropists were not previously unknown in Britain (such as that dedicated to Sir Thomas Guy by Peter Scheemakers), Westmacott's figure is unusual in that it depicts its subject in contemporary dress, unencumbered by classicising draperies or institutional regalia.¹⁸ Milligan is the epitome of the prosperous and confident merchant, the buttons of his fashionable waistcoat slightly strained by a paunch, as he leans one arm on a truncated Doric column. This mimetic quality, representing Milligan as he would have appeared to contemporaries rather than in an idealised guise, situates the statue as an instrument of surveillance and control. Located, as it originally was, within sight of the main entrance gate and in proximity to the principal dock offices, the figure of Milligan watched over the commercial activity on which his fortune, and that of his fellow investors, was founded. Indeed, the inscribed panel placed on the statue's plinth refers explicitly to Milligan in relation to the immediate environment:

To perpetuate the memory of Robert Milligan a Merchant of London, to whose genius, perseverance and guardian care the surrounding great work principally owes it's [sic] design, accomplishment and regulation. The Directors and Proprietors, deprived by his death on the 21st May, 1809 on the continuance of his invaluable services, by their unanimous vote have caused this statue to be erected.

An anonymous etching, published in the year of the statue's unveiling, depicts it in situ, foregrounding a bustling commercial scene of sugar hogsheads being transported into the warehouse complex on the left (fig. 4). Here, Milligan's posthumous avatar is raised above (and by means of) the process and proceeds of exploitation: the enslaved Africans who harvested the sugar, the land and natural resources of colonised territories, and the heavily policed and ill-paid labourers within the docks themselves. This image was echoed eighty years later during the London Dock Workers strike of 1889. By then relocated to the main, or northern gateway, the Milligan statue stood high above the central stone pier. It appeared in illustrated newspapers reporting on the strike, shown towering over the workers and trade unionists who continued to labour in the docks for poor and unreliable wages (fig. 5).



Figure 4. Anonymous, Robert Milligan, 1813, ink drawing. Collection of the Museum of London (81.620). Digital image courtesy of Museum of London (all rights reserved).

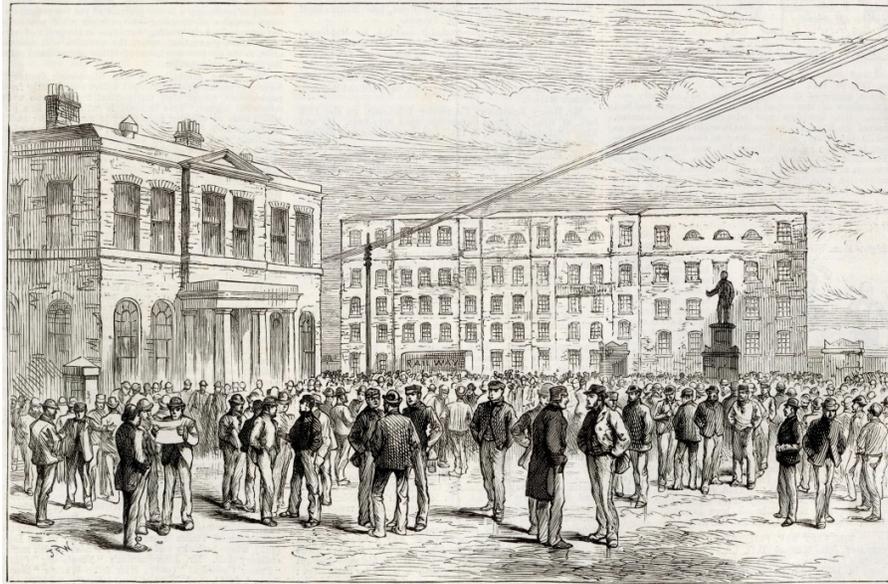


Figure 5.

The unemployed of London outside the West India Docks, with the statue of Robert Milligan, in *The Illustrated London News* 80, issue 2444, 20th February 1886. Digital image courtesy of Illustrated London News Ltd/ Mary Evans (all rights reserved).

Despite the use of contemporary dress, Westmacott's statue retains classicising elements—the column, the pose modelled loosely after the antique, and the bas-relief frieze at the base of the plinth—which tie Milligan, and Milligan's milieu, to the Eurocentric construction of "civilisation" as fundamentally Graeco-Roman in origin.¹⁹ Eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century European portrait sculpture, which derived its basic formal framework from antique precedents, was understood through a lens of racial difference, in which whiteness and civilisation were conflated and elevated.²⁰ To represent an individual in sculptural form was to associate them with a public culture of civic virtue, which was implicitly masculine, white, and wealthy.²¹ The inscription at the base of this statue reinforces such a connection, referring to Milligan's "genius, perseverance and guardian care" in advocating for the West India Docks's construction. Viewed in this light, the representation of Milligan as a public, civic figure renders the space around him a public space of sorts. Similar to other prominent works by Westmacott, including two bronze statues of Horatio Nelson erected in Birmingham (1809) and in Bridgetown, Barbados (1813), the presence of a figure associated with empire codes the space around it as inherently imperial.²² As with the early involvement of Dance in designing the dock buildings, the choice of Westmacott to execute this particular statue typifies the tightly integrated relationship between the slave economy and seemingly unrelated forms of cultural and economic activity—as well as the coexistence of slavery as a socially accepted fact, and abolitionist sentiment.²³

Westmacott is not known to have directly benefitted from the sale, purchase, or labour of enslaved Africans, and yet his sculptural practice was undoubtedly entwined with the proceeds and promotion of colonial exploitation, both in terms of his social status and his list of clients.²⁴

If the Milligan statue was the symbolic centre of the West India Docks complex, the Hibbert Gate marked the threshold between that complex and the external world; a break in the massive walls which surrounded the West India Docks for the purposes of security (fig. 6). Aesthetically and conceptually, the gate was adjacent to that other securitised space of empire, the plantation, in both instances uniting physical control of commodities with the cultural authority of neoclassicism (fig. 7). As in the Gwilt's warehouses and dock offices, the gate was designed according to austere neoclassical principles, with an unadorned pediment surmounting an arch of Portland stone. At the apex of the pediment sat a Coade stone model of the ship *Hibberts*—this ship, a West Indiaman built to carry valuable commodities from the West Indies to Britain in the fastest possible time, was one of a small fleet commissioned and owned by the firm of Hibbert & Co.²⁵ The placement of this model, and its eponymous identification with George Hibbert, ensured that anyone entering the docks would be greeted by a symbol of their purpose. The choice of a West Indiaman spoke to the idea of global commerce under the control of British mercantile interests; specifically, of trade with the West Indies and all that was implied in terms of slave-grown commodities. As with the figure of Milligan, and the inscribed foundation stone, the Hibbert Gate presented a cultural and economic argument for chattel slavery without ever explicitly referring to the practice. Thanks to these elisions, the built environment of the West India Docks has been reframed, often uncritically, as a locus of “heritage”. The Hibbert Gate has proved particularly apposite to this process, being co-opted into the seal of the newly formed Borough of Poplar in 1855, and reproduced as a temporary structure on the nearby East India Dock Road during the Diamond Jubilee of 1897 (fig. 8). As recently as 2000, Canary Wharf Group commissioned a scale replica of the original gate—which had been demolished in 1932—and at present this structure stands near to the location of the original on West India Quay (fig. 9).



Figure 6.

Albert Gravely Linney, West India Docks: View through the Hibbert Gate, Through to the Outer Gateway and the Cannon Workshop Beyond, 1929, photograph. Collection of the Museum of London (2012.28/440). Digital image courtesy of Museum of London (all rights reserved).



Figure 7.

James Hakewill, Rose Hall Great House, in James Hakewill, *Picturesque Tour of the Island of Jamaica* (London: Hurst and Robinson, 1825), 1825, watercolour. Collection of the Boston Public Library. Digital image courtesy of Internet Archive (public domain).



Figure 8.

Anonymous, Diamond Jubilee Archway over East India Dock Road, 1897, photograph. Collection of the London Metropolitan Archives. Digital image courtesy of London Picture Archive (all rights reserved).



Figure 9.

Leo Stevenson, The Hibbert Gate, 2000, bronze and stone. Digital image courtesy of Canary Wharf Group (all rights reserved).

Living History: Contemporary Reflections

The West India Docks complex reproduced, and continues to reproduce, an *idea* of Britain that had accompanied the company's imperialist agenda. The idea was twofold; on the one hand, situated neatly along the Thames, the docks stood as a national symbol of Britain's industrial and financial protection. This protection was not only espoused in the liminal location of the docks, but was also depicted in the imperial iconography of the Hibbert Gate. On the other hand, the statue of Robert Milligan invoked a notion of a *benevolent* Britain and imagined a certain form of citizenship. This sense of benevolence was reinforced in the notion that Britain had fostered the sensibilities of democracy. In other words, the Robert Milligan statue was erected, and subsequently protected, because of his role in the civic project of expanding the Docklands area and thus driving the city's financial growth,

regardless of the fact that he owed this position to the labour of Africans forced to work on his family's plantation in Jamaica. The honouring of Milligan and the protection surrounding the docks has left a lasting reminder of what is publicly valued as heritage and citizenship.

Today, the spatial context from which Docklands was born bridges these two ideas of Britain in a way that demands sober reflection. Boarding the Docklands Light Railway, for example, it is all too easy not to think twice about the naming of stations such as West India Quay and East India, even though they are obvious reminders of the city's connection to a history of colonial violence. Indeed, the glassy towers of London's contemporary financial district of Canary Wharf seem to protrude from the remaining two of the nine original dock warehouses. Financed largely by the West Indian merchants, the warehouses were once sites designed to store produce from plantations in the Caribbean. Representing one of the largest civil engineering projects directly built to facilitate colonial profit, the sheer scale of the docks is testament to the huge wealth generated by the sugarcane economy in the Caribbean through the suffering of slave labourers. Today, though, these warehouses are often reinscribed with colonial iconography for marketing purposes: for example, a worker leaving their office at one of the financial institutions based at Canary Wharf might visit the "Rum and Sugar" bar—located in one of these very warehouses—and choose from cocktails such as "The Walking Dead" or "The Cane Field". ²⁶

Contestations concerning collective memory, nationhood and civil identity were brought to the fore in the lead up to the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, in 2007. The occasion provided a timely opportunity to carve out new ways to think about the relationship between the past and the present around the docks. How can we acknowledge the memory and legacies of slavery within a public realm? How can we commemorate Britain's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade? What and who should we commemorate? And who should be involved in the processes of commemoration?

Following the commemoration campaigns to mark the bicentenary, it was widely accepted that there was an urgent need to highlight London's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade in a way that could critically engage with the docks's local histories. Along with communities of African and Caribbean heritage, the responsibility fell, to a large extent, to the Museum of London Docklands, formerly known as the Museum in Docklands. The site is located in the Grade I listed building that formed part of the West India Quay warehouses and is managed by the City of London Corporation and the Greater London Authority. As part of the commemorative efforts, an

advisory board—consisting of academics and community activists—was brought in to co-curate the gallery, and, after fifteen months, the “London, Sugar & Slavery” gallery opened its doors in November 2007.

The gallery itself can be seen as the product of what Catherine Hall has described as a “reparative” moment.²⁷ Reparative work, as Hall notes, is less about documenting the politics of struggle and survival, but rather looks at the past to “develop a different understanding here of Britain’s involvement in the slavery business and our responsibilities, as beneficiaries, of the gross inequalities associated with slavery and colonialism”.²⁸ Reparative work offers museums a kind of practice that looks into the past to consider the possibilities of repair. While the recent calls to decolonise museums position heritage sites as important spaces to engage critically with colonialism, reparative curation situates the past, present, and future in constant conversation with each other. Such were the ambitions of the “London, Sugar & Slavery” gallery. The gallery allows visitors to critically examine the physical, cultural, and economic legacies of London’s involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. Although it documents a two-hundred-year history, the gallery moves beyond chronological analysis to situate the histories of African and Caribbean people within a context of place—London. The colonial geographies it considers, from the personal and local histories of individuals such as abolitionist, Mary Prince, who lived in Hatton Garden, to life on the plantations in St Kitts as seen through the archives of British slave owner, Thomas Mills, puts into question the spatial histories between people, power, and place.

Moreover, the gallery is positioned as a vehicle for community engagement. Its reparative framework not only considers the colonial histories around the docks as it *is*, but also as it *could be*. Many of the objects centring “white saviours”—such as the Buxton Table, a table on which the Abolition Bill in 1833 had been drawn up by white abolitionists Thomas Fowell Buxton, Zachary Macaulay, and William Wilberforce—are counterbalanced with creative interventions that show Black Londoners as agents of change.²⁹ This “balancing act” provided an important way for the advisory panel to negotiate their position as “outsiders from within”, in that it provided an opportunity to repair and build something new.³⁰ As noted by Colin Prescod, a member of the panel, “my experience [of] Museum of London Docklands was good in that advisors were permitted to define something new of the tone and content of the gallery wall-text narrative”.³¹ At the centre of the gallery, for example, stand two large, competing portraits: George Hibbert, painted by Sir Thomas Lawrence in 1812, pitched against a contemporary photographic recreation of Robert Wedderburn by artist Paul Howard (figs. 10 and 11). The latter was commissioned by the museum as part of an effort to embed more critical responses that could centre the actions of abolitionists

of African and Caribbean heritage. Wedderburn, the son of an enslaved woman and a Scottish merchant, was born in Jamaica and arrived in London in 1779. Influenced by utopian political ideals, he published an abolitionist book titled *The Horrors of Slavery*, and soon formed part of the city's radical anti-slavery movement. ³²



Figure 10.

Thomas Lawrence, George Hibbert, 1811, oil on canvas, 244 × 147 cm. Collection of the Museum of London (PLA2). Digital image courtesy of Museum of London (all rights reserved).



Figure 11.

Paul Howard, Portrait of Lloyd Gordon as Robert Wedderburn, 2017, laminated diasec print on paper, 210 × 125 cm. Collection of PLA Collection/Museum of London. Digital image courtesy of Paul Howard (all rights reserved).

However, despite these attempts to highlight suppressed histories, the statue of Robert Milligan, which had remained in front of the Museum of London Docklands, reinforced a sense of forgetting—particularly for those who have the lived experiences of existing in the margins of white dominant historical narratives. Prior to his death, Milligan had claimed ownership of 526 enslaved Africans on his plantations in Clarendon, Jamaica. Following his death, the West India Committee commended his “intelligent mind” for designing the “great and useful establishment” of the docks.³³ This sentiment was eventually encompassed in the inscription to Westmacott’s statue outlining his “invaluable services”. The statue of Milligan remained at the entrance of the gate of the docks from 1813 to 1875, at which point it was removed to improve the flow of traffic. It then stood at the West India

Dock Road entrance until 1943 when the pier was demolished. In 1997, as part of the area's regeneration work led by the London Docklands Development Corporation, the statue was reinstated close to its original location.

The re-erection and repositioning of the statue in 1997 presents a particular case of colonial amnesia or what Paul Gilroy has referred to as "post-imperial melancholia", that is, an active forgetfulness to address histories of empire and slavery.³⁴ When observing the physical history of Milligan's statue within the Docklands complex, one is reminded of the ways in which histories of empire, colonial expansion, and violence are often ignored in favour of a national "white saviour" mode of analysis. At the centre of the debates following the 2007 campaigns for remembrance, for example, was the honouring of great white men such as William Wilberforce, who, despite the spread of uprisings in the Caribbean and the tireless efforts of freed Africans such as Ottobah Cugoana, Ignatius Sancho, and Olaudah Equiano, was celebrated as the driver of the abolition movement.³⁵

Such legacies vested in the spatial logic of the docks not only speak to the discomfort and denial in confronting Britain's entangled colonial past, but also demonstrate the ways in which the past is conscripted into the present. Though positioned as a "public" space, the site retains its original status as a privately owned and heavily securitised space—an ode to the city's commercial wealth. The luxury residential homes and private banks have little to say to address local class disparities and child poverty. Moreover, the perpetuity of colonialism and empire in the naming of estates and spaces such as Cabot Square, Columbus Courtyard, and Churchill Place cannot account for the lives lost at the hands of empire. Often overlooked within the strategic spatial developments in the docks as an emblem of financial capital are the everyday encounters that bring into question the relationship between geographies of empire and contemporary citizenship. One must take seriously the emotional implications concerning space and place. What does it mean, for example, to be confronted by such colonial iconography for those whose stories of *coming here* and *being here*, are marked by rupture, or, more specifically, for those who have been unequivocally impacted by the legacies of Britain's imperial trade? And what does *just* citizenship look like in the context of spatial histories honouring colonial heritage sites?

Tadhg O'Keefe has argued that landscapes are a product of our mindscapes.³⁶ In the same way that neoclassical architecture had deployed a construction of the citizen as a white man with political agency, contemporary encounters with statues regulate who is able to participate in notions of citizenship within the public realm. For those of African and Caribbean heritage, the question of citizenship reinforced in the colonial iconography of the docks, stands as a physical embodiment of exclusion.

Consequently, the memory of slavery is often repressed, or merely kept alive in the private spaces of their living rooms, kitchens, and community halls. In other instances, several local initiatives have sought to create separate spaces of collective reflection and healing. The African Remembrance Day (ARD) group, for example, was formed with the support of the MP Bernie Grant to commemorate the Africans who died during four hundred years of the brutal slave trade. Every year since 1995, they hold a three-minute silence at 3pm on 1 August in recognition of the three hemispheres where the suffering unfolded (Western hemispheres, the African continent, and the Middle and Far East). ARD's commitment to foster collective remembering within the public realm demonstrates community-led interventions to repair a history that remains largely untold.

Speculations on Decolonisation

How might we fashion history and memory in a way that acknowledges how public and private spaces in Britain today were configured by a colonial project? There is a need to rethink the physical attributes of space and environment, especially in relation to what is valued as heritage. In other words, if the River Thames works—for whom does it work, and has it worked? It might be more helpful to consider the ways in which such sites of memory along the River Thames are *living*, in that they are constantly being conscripted according to our present. Despite the moral dilemma provoked by honouring Robert Milligan outside of a community-engaged museum commemorating enslaved Africans, the statue remained until June 2020, when, following the Black Lives Matter protests, it was removed by the joint landowners: the Canal & River Trust and the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. Prior to its removal, Black Lives Matter and local activists had covered the statue with an ankara fabric—a transformative intervention symbolising centuries of historical denial.³⁷ Such local campaigns for restorative justice have demonstrated the malleability of colonial iconography by showing the way in which the past can be lived again in the present.

At the time of writing, the integration of colonialism and the built environment in Britain has become the focus of controversy; the concept of “heritage” and its preservation explicitly weaponised for the purposes of attracting public support for a conservative agenda. Following the murder of George Floyd and subsequent Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, questions concerning public spaces, history, memory, and citizenship were anxiously co-opted by local councils in an effort to publicly address a move towards an “inclusive history”. Within months, the land-owning authority, the Canal & River Trust, commissioned and published a report written by Jodie Matthews on the relationship between the canals and transatlantic slavery. The Canal & River Trust acknowledged that “as custodian of the waterways, and despite

ongoing work with communities, we have lacked specific in-depth knowledge about the linkages between canal history and the transatlantic slave trade”.³⁸ This effort coincided with Sadiq Khan’s Diversity in the Public Realm initiative, which followed a series of public consultations led by Tower Hamlets Council on local statues, monuments, plaques, and street names.³⁹ It is still unclear whether the initiative will confront the specificities of London’s involvement in the slave trade, or whether it will be replaced by a wider project of diversity and inclusion. Nevertheless, the process of decolonisation, inasmuch as it applies to historic sites and structures, can never be one of complete undoing, for nothing can undo or reverse the original purposes for which such sites were built, and the harm wrought by those purposes. Memory and meaning are constantly renegotiated. Throughout the history of the West India Docks complex, interventions in the built environment have upheld and, more recently, challenged dominant narratives of empire, capitalism, and white supremacy. The work to dismantle these structures is ongoing and, at times, as shown at the docks, this work is literal.

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- 21 Malcolm Baker, *Figured in Marble: The Making and Viewing of Eighteenth-Century Sculpture* (London: V&A Publications, 2000), 11.
- 22 Joseph Yanielli, "The Nelsons of Bridgetown and Birmingham: What Two Statues Tell Us About the Legacy of Colonialism", *The Conversation*, 29 October 2020. <https://theconversation.com/the-nelsons-of-bridgetown-and-birmingham-what-two-statues-tell-us-about-the-legacy-of-colonialism-148850>.
- 23 Westmacott was also responsible for sculpting the monument to the radical politician Charles James Fox, which features the figure of a Black man kneeling to the dying Fox in gratitude for the latter's anti-slavery efforts—a paternalistic motif, but undoubtedly abolitionist in sentiment, with its echoes of Josiah Wedgwood's "Am I Not A Man And A Brother?" medallion.
- 24 Westmacott married Dorothy, née Wilkinson, the daughter of William Wilkinson of Jamaica. A William Wilkinson and a William Robert Wilkinson appear as owners of several Jamaican plantations in the Jamaica Almanacs of the 1820s, but whether either of these men were connected to Dorothy Westmacott is unclear.
- 25 Anthony Partington, "A MEMORIAL TO HIBBERTS", *The Mariner's Mirror* 95, no. 4 (November 2009): 441–458
- 26 The "Rum and Sugar" menu for 2019: <https://www.rumandsugar.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/C1195-RS-DRINKS-MENU-TRIFOLD-315X297mm-V2-LR10.pdf> On the connection between "walking dead" and slavery, see Sarah Juliet Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion and Living Dead* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015).
- 27 Catherine Hall, "Doing Reparatory History: Bringing 'Race' and Slavery Home", *Race & Class* 60, no. 1 (2018): 3–21.
- 28 Hall, "Doing Reparatory History", 18.
- 29 Teju Cole, "The White Savior Industrial Complex", *Known and Strange Things* (London: Faber, 2016), 340–349.
- 30 The term "outsider from within" is taken from Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought", *Social Problems* 33, no. 6 (1986): S14–S32, DOI:[10.2307/800672](https://doi.org/10.2307/800672). We use it here to reference the ways in which those working "outside", yet "for", institutions, can often produce distinctive and meaningful standpoints to broaden museum audiences.
- 31 Colin Prescod, "Archives, Race, Class and Rage", *Race & Class* 58, no. 4 (2016): 82.
- 32 Robert Wedderburn, *The Horrors of Slavery* (London: printed and published by R. Wedderburn, 1824).
- 33 "Robert Milligan", Legacies of British Slavery database, University College London, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/2146645741>.
- 34 Gilroy argues that "once the history of the Empire became a source of discomfort, shame and perplexity, its complexities and ambiguities were readily set aside". See Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (London: Routledge, 2004), 98.
- 35 See Vincent Carretta, "Cugoano, Ottobah [John Stuart]: (b. 1757?)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 26 May 2016, DOI:[10.1093/ref:odnb/59531](https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/59531); Vincent Carretta, "Sancho, (Charles) Ignatius: (1729?–1780)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 11 February 2021, DOI:[10.1093/ref:odnb/24609](https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/24609); and James Walvin, "Equiano, Olaudah [Gustavus Vassa]: (c.1745–1797)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 1 September 2017, DOI:[10.1093/ref:odnb/57028](https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/57028). See also Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (London, 1787).
- 36 Tadhg O'Keeffe, "Landscape and Memory: Historiography, Theory, Methodology", in *Heritage, Memory and the Politics of Identity: New Perspectives on the Cultural Landscape*, ed. Niamh Moore and Yvonne Whelan (London: Routledge, 2007), 4.
- 37 Disseminated via Dutch trade between Indonesia and the Netherlands, ankara fabric has become a popular symbol in Ghana and is often used to communicate proverbs and messages about the wearer.
- 38 Jodie Matthews, "Canals and Transatlantic Slavery: A Preliminary Literature Review", Canal & River Trust, 2020, <https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/refresh/media/original/42453-canals-and-transatlantic-slavery.pdf>.
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Ships and Souvenirs: Itineraries of the Golden Jubilee

Shalini Le Gall

Abstract

This analysis explores the history of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee through an investigation of three objects: James McNeill Whistler's print *Tilbury* (1887), a photograph taken aboard the HMY *Victoria and Albert* during the Naval Review, and a Royal Worcester commemorative scent bottle. Drawing from methodologies developed in the fields of material culture studies, histories of empire, and the environmental humanities, the study traces the maritime itineraries made visible during the Jubilee. For Whistler, the Jubilee provided an opportunity to leverage Britain's imperial character in a way that would bolster his own artistic ambitions as president of the Society of British Artists. In *Tilbury*, he renders the newly inaugurated docks through a series of etched lines that convey the frenetic level of activity on the riverbank, and point to the environmental impact of this infrastructure project. In the photograph from the Naval Review, two Indian men who had recently joined the royal household mingle with the Queen's guests and companions. Identified as Abdul Karim and Muhammad Bakhsh, their presence signals the widespread visibility of Indian visitors and servants throughout the Jubilee, which occurred only a year after the Indian and Colonial Exhibition. The Queen's global reign is also celebrated in the Royal Worcester souvenir scent bottle, composed of materials mined locally in Britain and imported from South America and other regions. Collectively, these object studies delineate specific ways in which the Jubilee centered the Thames as a portal for the transit and display of colonized peoples and imperial goods, and expand art-historical approaches to the interconnected relationships foregrounded by the environmental and global humanities.

Authors

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As the sun rose on 21 June 1887, crowds lined the streets of London along the procession route from Buckingham Palace to Westminster Abbey. The streets had been filling for days with people eager to participate in the events marking fifty years of Queen Victoria's reign. The most recent similar event had occurred for the Jubilee of King George III on 25 October 1809, so expectations were high for an experience that had been several generations in the making. Although the London proceedings would form the centerpiece of the Jubilee, celebrations throughout Britain and the colonies solidified connections between Queen Victoria's reign, and the imperialist expansion made possible through maritime pathways.

This analysis explores the history of the Jubilee through an investigation of three specific objects: a print, a photograph, and a scent bottle. The print, James McNeill Whistler's *Tilbury*, grounds this study at Tilbury Docks, a port on the eastern end of the River Thames, approximately twenty miles from the Thames estuary, where the river meets the North Sea (fig. 1). As president of the Society of British Artists, Whistler was invited to both the Jubilee ceremonies in Westminster Abbey and the Naval Review at Spithead, which took place one month after the London festivities. The Tilbury Docks were an engineering marvel, having just opened in 1886, and the location marked the departure point for most vessels setting off for the Naval Review at Spithead. As described in the *Illustrated London News*, "The fleet which her Majesty had the pleasure of showing to the numerous Royal and distinguished personages who followed her yacht in its progress comprised every description of ironclad and modern instrument of warfare that floats upon the sea".¹ During the Naval Review, Whistler made a number of etchings, including *Tilbury*, that he later offered to the Queen in a collected volume that came to be called the Jubilee Set.



Figure 1.

James McNeill Whistler, *Tilbury*, 1887, etching (first state of three), 8.1 × 17.6 cm. The Lunder Collection, Colby College Museum of Art (2013.488). Digital image courtesy of Colby College Museum of Art (all rights reserved).

The photograph, *The Deck of HMY Victoria and Albert, 23 July 1887*, is from a group of photographs held in the Royal Collection Trust documenting the events of the Jubilee (fig. 2). This specific photograph captures the ambience aboard the royal flagship, and importantly includes individuals who had traveled from the Indian subcontinent to London for the Jubilee and became part of Queen Victoria's cortège. The image provides a glimpse into how the Naval Review was experienced by London's privileged elite. Their interactions with Queen Victoria's Indian servants exemplified the imperial hierarchies that structured the Jubilee celebrations.



Figure 2.

The Deck of H.M.Y. Victoria and Albert, 23 July 1887, albumen print, 14.1 × 19.3 cm. Royal Collection Trust (RCIN 2916004). Digital image courtesy of Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2022 (all rights reserved).

The scent bottle, manufactured by the Royal Worcester Company as a souvenir object for visitors to the Jubilee, acts as a material trace of the event itself, whose very creation depended upon the maritime prowess celebrated by the Naval Review (fig. 3). The bottle is covered with symbolic references to the British Empire, and composed of raw materials sourced in Britain and abroad. The proliferation of such Jubilee souvenirs forces consideration of the ecological impact of this event, and the environmental legacy of Victorian economic growth more generally. This line of inquiry is shared by many of the authors in this special issue, including Jon Newman and Jennifer Tucker, who in their essays address the ways that infrastructure projects in central London impacted residential living conditions. From the global movement of Queen Victoria's subjects to the construction of new

docks at Tilbury, and the mining of raw materials in Cornwall, the visual and material culture inspired by the Jubilee serve as points of entry into environmental and imperial analyses in the Victorian period.



Figure 3.

Royal Worcester scent bottle, circa 1887, porcelain and silver, 7.62 × 5.4 × 1.9 cm. Collection of the Portland Museum of Art (2021.6.1). Digital image courtesy of Portland Museum of Art (all rights reserved).

My approach to exploring this event through the study of specific objects is shaped principally by my experience as a curator in a collecting museum, a setting in which objects within institutional holdings determine the types of stories that can be told to the visiting public. This analysis also draws widely from studies of Victorian material culture, and the recent series *Crafting Communities* (and related website *Victorian Things*), developed by Dr. Andrea Korda, Dr. Mary Elizabeth Leighton, and Dr. Vanessa Warne.² This initiative brought together a range of scholars and professionals in a virtual setting throughout the pandemic, with each contributor focusing on a single

object. The methodology for this project parallels the recent art-historical turn toward object-based teaching and learning, and the growing interest in material culture, the decorative arts, and images that circulated outside of the established realms of fine art. The print, the photograph, and the perfume bottle at the center of this study are connected by their associations with the Jubilee but, more specifically, they allow us to identify the many itineraries of this historical event.

My interest in the pathways that link these objects draws broadly from postcolonial scholarship, and methodologies adopted by scholars in British art, Atlantic history, and the environmental humanities.³ Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) established an important model for the study of modernist forms developed in transnational networks marked by histories of oppression and racial difference.⁴ In the field of British art, *Colonialism and the Object* (1998), edited by Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn, and *Art and the British Empire* (2009), edited by Tim Barringer, Geoff Quilley, and Douglas Fordham, were among a number of studies that centered imperial questions on the study of visual and material culture. More recently, Sarah Thomas's *Witnessing Slavery: Art and Travel in the Age of Abolition* (2019) situates renderings of transatlantic slavery within larger discussions of abolitionist policies and imperial strategies.⁵

Although this study begins with an analysis of Whistler's *Tilbury*, focusing on the environmental and imperial themes of this subject necessitates an expansive methodological approach. In "Toward a Blue Cultural Studies: The Sea, Maritime Culture, and Early Modern English Literature", Steven Mentz identifies four factors that underlie scholarly interest in the maritime world: globalization, environmentalism, technology studies, and postcolonialism.⁶ These issues coalesce in the visual imagery and material culture of the Golden Jubilee. The three objects at the focus of this study trace specific points on maritime pathways that brought the empire—its people and its goods—to London, and delineate the interconnected histories on display at the Jubilee.

Tilbury

On the day of the Naval Review, a number of vessels began the journey from the newly inaugurated Tilbury Docks. At this port on the Thames, guests would have observed impressive modern technologies of dock operations. This engineering marvel designed to bolster Britain's mercantile activity served as a prelude to the more overt display of naval power at Spithead. As a tidal river, the Thames bore the physical marks of the sea, with access to some locations only possible at high tide. With a tidal basin of 19 acres and a water depth of 43 feet, the largest ships in the world could enter Tilbury

during any tidal conditions, and take advantage of railway connections (see plan in [fig. 4](#)) and modern electrical and telephone wiring.⁷ The economic fortunes of London, and Britain more generally, relied on an understanding of the Thames as Britain's gateway to the open sea, where the naval fleet protected national interests and ensured the security of visitors, traders, and cargo alike.

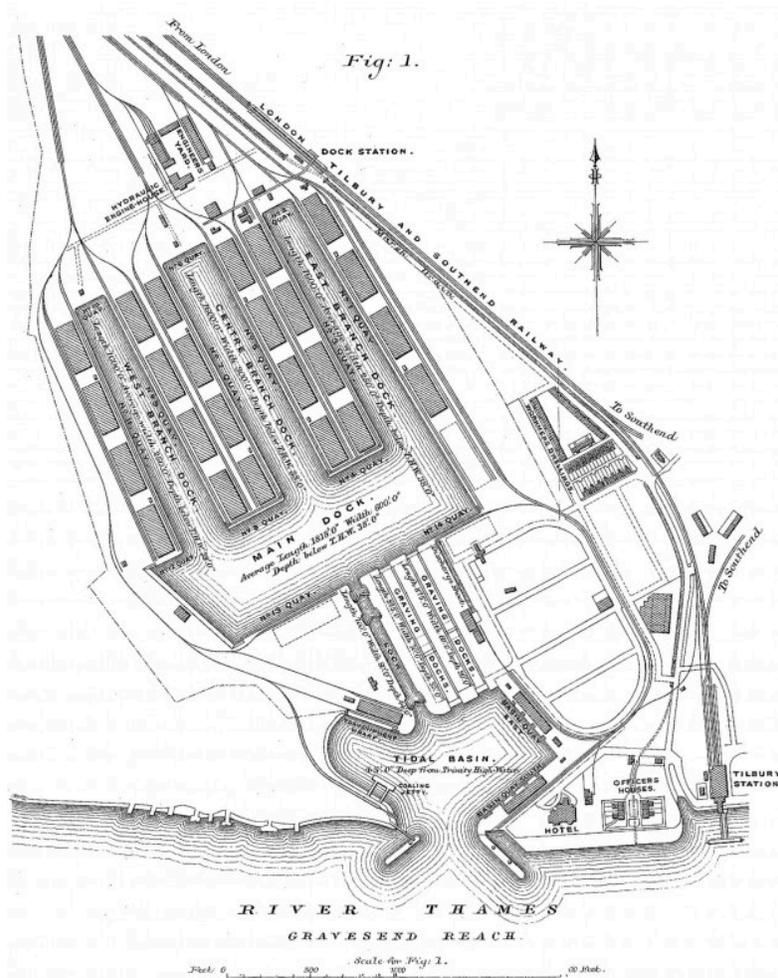


Figure 4. Plan for Tilbury Docks, in J.F. Scott, “The Construction and Equipment of the Tilbury Docks”, *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers* 120 (1895): 276-288, fig. 1. Digital image courtesy of ICE Publishing (all rights reserved).

In the Jubilee Set, Whistler depicts Tilbury twice, at the beginning of the journey and at the end as the ships were returning to port in *Return to Tilbury* ([fig. 5](#)).⁸ As he prepared the prints for presentation to the Queen, Whistler wrote of his interest in capturing the itinerary of the day's events.

Having been officially invited, as President of the Royal Society of British Artists, to attend the Review by Her Majesty of her Fleet at Spithead ... I felt myself moved to offer some tribute within the scope of my own art ... I have accordingly embodied my impressions and observations, on that memorable day, in a set of Etchings—notes, as I may say of the needle, not the pen, taken at the moment and from point to point of that Imperial but pacific and more than Roman triumph, from Tilbury fort to the waters of Portsmouth.⁹

Whistler's reference to Tilbury Fort points to the importance of this location, used by both Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth I as an artillery shelter and staging area in preparation for naval battles, most notably with the Spanish Armada. This historic significance would not have been lost on Jubilee visitors en route to the Naval Review.



Figure 5.

James McNeill Whistler, *Return to Tilbury*, 1887, etching and drypoint (second and final state), 13 × 9.5 cm. The Lunder Collection, Colby College Museum of Art (2013.416). Digital image courtesy of Colby College Museum of Art (all rights reserved).

In *Tilbury*, Whistler renders the port through a series of etched lines that convey the frenetic level of activity both on the water, and near the buildings on the riverbank. The Tilbury Docks had opened in the year prior to the Jubilee, and they offered an important railway connection that allowed goods to move more freely to and from land and sea. This competitive advantage resulted in economic losses for the docks that were more centrally located, which also held smaller warehouse facilities and could not accommodate many of the largest ships then in operation. The development of the Tilbury Docks, however, had steep environmental impacts on the region and anticipated the labor upheavals that would occur leading up to the dockworkers strike in 1889.

The construction and planning for Tilbury took place during a period of economic hardship in which there was increasing pressure on the infrastructure of London's ports. In the 1870s and 1880s, the price of coal and textiles, among the most important exports for the island nation, decreased significantly. Wheat prices also began to fall as less expensive grain was imported from North America.¹⁰ Unemployment increased and wages for manual laborers remained stagnant. The East and West India Docks began to carry out modernization schemes in an effort to accommodate the shifting technological and engineering needs of the modern vessels coming into London. The construction of the Victoria and Albert Docks, with their generous acreage and access to railway lines, soon overshadowed the smaller docks closer to central London. The Royal Albert Dock, completed in 1880, was an especially advanced facility lit by electricity, equipped with hydraulic cranes and steam winches, and able to accommodate the largest ships on the seas—carrying up to 12,000 tons.¹¹

In the face of this stiff competition, the East and West India Dock Company decided to finance a new dock at Tilbury in the hope that the site would allow the company to effectively compete with the newer docks and avoid liquidation. In a rousing address to company shareholders on 30 September 1881, Chairman H.H. Dobree stated: "The Tilbury Docks with a great length of quay with a comparatively limited water alley would enable the dock to be constructed cheaper than other docks. The selected site of Tilbury is at the last possible point within the jurisdiction of London and well within the fortifications of the Thames".¹²

The Chadwell marshes were selected as the site for dock construction and, before the project went public, company representatives purchased 450 acres of marshland at reduced rates.¹³ Preliminary borings revealed that the soil was brown fibrous clay for about six feet, followed by alternating layers of blue alluvial clay and peat, and finally a thick layer of gravel.¹⁴ The quay of the docks was built about twelve feet above the original ground surface, and some excavated material was used to raise the site to this level. A dredger pulled gravel from the bed of the Thames to be used in the concrete. At the end of the first year of construction, approximately two million bricks had been made from clay found at the site.¹⁵ Additional materials used in construction included Portland cement from manufacturers on the Thames and Medway, Cornish granite, and Bramley Fall stone.¹⁶ Extant photographs from the construction site reveal the huge quantities of earth, stone, and timber needed to support the critical railway infrastructure, and create access points to the river (fig. 6). The Tilbury project also involved the construction of additional structures adjoining the docks, including a footbridge that overlooked the railway lines, a hotel, canteen houses, offices, workshops, locomotive sheds, and residential structures including individual

houses for the officers, cottages for the foremen, and workmen's dwelling blocks.¹⁷ There was also a reading room and school nearby, and a place of worship established by the Thames Church Mission.¹⁸



Figure 6.

W.W. Roach, Tilbury Dock construction, looking south east showing the north end of small Gravity Dock, 1 August 1886, photograph. Collection of the Museum of London. Digital image courtesy of Museum of London (all rights reserved).

This enormous infrastructure project had a major impact on the local population and landscape. At the time of the 1881 Census, Tilbury numbered 516 people living in 129 residences.¹⁹ As with any major construction project in the Victorian period, the workforce was a combination of men and boys who had traveled to Tilbury for the job, and local residents already living in the area. The average number of individuals on the job was 4,300, and climbed as high as 6,000.²⁰ Whistler had closely observed dockside manual labor during his first extended study of the London docks in the Thames Set, begun in 1859. In works such as *Black Lion Wharf*, he covered the surface of the etching plate with deep lines that rendered ships, dockworkers, and warehouses in glaring detail (fig. 7). Whistler began the Thames Set shortly after he relocated from Paris to London in 1859, and his approach to these subjects was strongly informed by his exposure to Gustave Courbet and other French artists who tackled challenging social subjects in their canvases. By contrast, Whistler etched the *Tilbury* plate while aboard the vessel that would carry him to the Naval Review, celebrating the reign of

Queen Victoria. The expansive composition of the print creates a panoramic effect, forcing the viewer to study the scene from a considerable distance. Tilbury functions here as a port of embarkation, yet even in this transitory moment, Whistler skillfully conveys his impressions of this industrial site. In the print, lightermen transport passengers in the foreground, and a small group of steamers appear at the midline. The steam emanating from these vessels rises in curved forms and is noticeably different from the linear aspects of the clouds. A brig squarely positioned in the center of the picture plane grounds the composition, with its masts echoing the cranes that appear across much of the background.



Figure 7.

James McNeill Whistler, *Black Lion Wharf*, 1859, etching (fourth and final state), 14.8 × 22.4 cm. The Lunder Collection, Colby College Museum of Art (2013.321). Digital image courtesy of Colby College Museum of Art (all rights reserved).

Whistler made very few alterations across the three known states of *Tilbury*, choosing only to add additional shading in the sky, and fine details to the central ship.²¹ Interestingly, large warehouses were not part of the original design at Tilbury, nor do they appear in Whistler's print. Instead, a four-story warehouse at Whitechapel linked by railway with the docks was the designated holding area for goods in transit at Tilbury. The absence of any pictorial reference to the railway, which was one of the most impressive achievements of the docks, points to Whistler's interest in connecting this site to the compositional modes of his nocturnes and other riverine pictures, and more specifically to the maritime renderings of the *Naval Review*. For Whistler, the link to the Jubilee celebrations, and his unlikely presence aboard the vessel, presented a unique professional opportunity.

The Jubilee Set

An accomplished printmaker by the time of his election as the president of the Society of British Artists in 1886, Whistler hoped that the Jubilee would allow the society to gain new recognition. He described his gift of the Jubilee Set to the Queen in a letter to Joseph and Elizabeth Robins Pennell, his biographers. Whistler wrote that he had,

made decorations all round the text in water-colour, at the top the towers of Windsor, down one side a great battleship plunging through the waves, and below, the sun that never sets on the British Empire ... The following pages were not decorated, just the most wonderful address, explaining the age and dignity of the Society, its devotion to Her Glorious, Gracious Majesty, and suggesting the honour it would be if this could be recognised by a title that would show the Society to belong specially to Her.²²

Whistler was hoping for a title that would add an honorific prefix to the society's name. In correspondence from August 1887, just following the Naval Review, Whistler requested that the Society of British Artists be recognized as the Imperial Society of British Artists.²³ The Home Office responded asking the artist to amend his request and instead proposed the word Royal, which was ultimately selected to newly designate the Royal Society of British Artists. In his short tenure as the society's president, Whistler had transformed the visibility of the group, and aligned it with British institutions such as the Royal Academy of Arts.²⁴ Whistler's original request, however, pointed to how Britain's imperial expansion shaped the way that artists thought about their work within a larger global context. For Whistler, the Jubilee provided an opportunity to leverage Britain's imperial character in a way that would bolster his own artistic ambitions.

The artist's personal attitudes toward the British Empire were mixed. As an American, he recognized the value of self-rule and national independence, yet he also held racist beliefs that reinforced colonial rule and white supremacist attitudes. During the Civil War, Whistler notably left the Union cause when he learned that abolition became a central issue in the conflict.²⁵ His perspective was deeply shaped by a worldview in which white Americans and Europeans exerted dominance, and objects and materials from around the globe, including Japanese prints, were available for collecting. However, the imperialist character of his maritime renderings is also closely linked to the tradition of British maritime art more generally.

In the exhibition catalog *Spreading Canvas: Eighteenth-Century British Marine Painting*, Geoff Quilley discusses the centrality of maritime life and culture in British history, arguing that connections to the sea transcended political differences. He cites J.G. Dalyell's preface to *Shipwrecks and Disasters at Sea* (1812), writing that, "in a country such as Britain, where every individual is either immediately or remotely concerned with the fortune of the sea, the casualties attendant on the mariner must be viewed with peculiar interest".²⁶ Quilley's analysis in the exhibition catalog is focused on the eighteenth century, but many of the same themes continued into the nineteenth century, particularly as Romanticism provided a framework for artists to engage with some of the more harrowing aspects of maritime imagery.

Although most visual artists avoided many of the darker aspects of maritime culture, including images of the slave trade, maritime labor, and the pillaging of foreign villages and cities, these themes were sometimes discernible, such as in J.M.W. Turner's *The Slave Ship* (1840).²⁷ Like Turner's reference to the slave trade, made during a period of abolitionist sentiment, Whistler's depiction of dock labor in the Thames Set is fairly unique for its direct treatment of working-class conditions. Kathleen Pyne has argued that Whistler was able to "aestheticize the tragic historical conditions of his human subjects", in these early renderings of London's East End.²⁸ By contrast, the scenes in the Jubilee Set are closely aligned with the celebratory images of naval power found in more conventional British maritime imagery. For example, in *Troopships*, a number of ships sail in formation, distinguishable only by the masts visible behind one another beyond the horizon line (fig. 8). In *The Fleet: Monitors*, large vessels stretch across the sea, while in the foreground, five individuals sail in another boat (fig. 9). Although monitors were not especially seaworthy, because of their slow speed and short sailing range, the ships provided strong coastal defense.²⁹



Figure 8.

James McNeill Whistler, Troopships, 1887, etching and drypoint, second (final) state, 13.1 × 17.6 cm. Lunder Collection, Colby College Museum of Art (2013.490). Digital image courtesy of Colby College Museum of Art (all rights reserved).



Figure 9.

James McNeill Whistler, The Fleet: Monitors, 1887, etching (first state of two), 14.1 × 22.2 cm. The Lunder Collection, Colby College Museum of Art (017.2007). Digital image courtesy of Colby College Museum of Art (all rights reserved).

While Whistler's maritime depictions drew from some of the compositional elements of celebratory naval battle scenes, the Jubilee Set remained tied to the itinerary of the Naval Review.³⁰ In describing Whistler's process for making the set, the Pennells noted:

Whistler, carrying the small plates about with him, sketched the subjects he found on copper as other artists sketch on paper ... the whole set of ten [were made] during the Naval Review, with a plate at Tilbury, on his embarking, and another at Portsmouth on landing. The prints of this Series, as we know the exact space of time in which they were done, prove strikingly his wonderful power of giving a momentary impression in a few lines on a piece of copper, for they suggest, in extraordinary fashion, the picturesque aspect of the great naval spectacle.³¹

In preparing his gift to the Queen, Whistler included additional prints made at Westminster Abbey, Windsor, and his own residence in Chelsea, and embossed the back cover with his signature Butterfly.³² With images spanning from central London, to Tilbury, and out to the open sea, the collection ultimately functioned as an account of a journey, a moment in which Whistler's personal itinerary briefly paralleled the Queen's own movements.³³

Empress of India

After a month of celebrations that began in London, and included receptions, garden parties, and public addresses, the Queen had arrived at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight on 19 July, just four days before the Naval Review. As sailing craft and vessels assembled on 23 July, all eyes were on the Queen's flagship, the HMY *Victoria and Albert*. *The Deck of HMY Victoria and Albert, 23 July 1887*, one of several photographs taken aboard the Queen's ship during the Naval Review, provides a glimpse of how the event was experienced by guests, servants, and workers, closest to the Queen (see [fig. 2](#)). The photograph is in a leather-bound album containing thirty-six albumen prints that depict Jubilee events during the summer of 1887. In this highly composed image, sailors in uniform spread across the foreground of the picture plane, with the central figure looking directly at the camera, holding a line that extends upward. Vertical masts and funnels frame the scene, and multiple lines soar into the sky suggesting the height of the vessel. In the background, individuals in formal dress are assembled in small groups, some looking toward the camera and others looking away toward the sea. Among these figures are two men dressed in Indian clothing. Their

presence, both on the ship and in the archival holdings of the Royal Collection Trust, points to the singular importance of Indian subjects at the Jubilee.

Of the tens of thousands of spectators at the Jubilee, perhaps none attracted more attention than the Indian visitors and servants. Indians participated in a specialized cavalry in the procession to Westminster, they formed part of the contingent of invited royal guests, and also served in the royal household. Victoria had been proclaimed Queen-Empress of India in 1877, in a ceremony developed in the tradition of the Mughal *darbar*, and the impact on the Queen's surroundings was immediate.³⁴ Growing interest in Indian art and architecture eventually led to the creation of the Durbar Room at Osborne House.

Much of this interest in Indian peoples and objects was spurred by the Indian and Colonial Exhibition, which Queen Victoria opened on 4 May 1886, just one year prior to the Jubilee.³⁵ Covering over 100,000 square feet, the exhibition was open for five months and welcomed over five million visitors. Like the other universal exhibitions and world fairs of the nineteenth century, the exhibition included examples of art and trade from the colonies, as well as artisans who had been expressly brought to Britain for the occasion. A number of scholars, including Tim Barringer, Julie Codell, and Saloni Mathur, have shown how this exhibition relied on the labor of prisoners who had been forcibly displaced to London, and were required to "perform" for visitors, while also fostering a fascination for Indian craftsmanship at a time when British producers increasingly embraced mechanical production.³⁶ In his *Reminiscences of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition* (1886), Frank Cundall identifies eight craftsmen by name and describes them as representing "many different types of race".³⁷ Cundall's volume also describes how Indians and other displaced colonized peoples worked as servants and attendants during the exhibition.³⁸

Following the success of the imperial display in the 1886 Exhibition, the organizers of the Jubilee made considerable efforts to incorporate Indian dignitaries and attendants into almost every public aspect of the celebration. Notes and letters arrived from all over the subcontinent, praising the Queen, describing her as "Empress of Hindoostan, Head of all Kings and Rulers, and King of all Kings".³⁹ In her personal journal, Queen Victoria noted the Indian presence at the Jubilee, writing, "Just in front of my carriage rode the 12 Indian officers".⁴⁰ On 30 June, she held a grand reception for the Indian princes and delegation, during which elaborate gifts were exchanged.⁴¹ A number of photographs in The Royal Collection Trust depict Indian visitors

and guests, including *Queen Victoria's Jubilee Procession, 1887: The Indian Princes* (fig. 10) and *Queen Victoria's Indian Escort for the 1887 Jubilee Procession* (fig. 11).



Figure 10.

Francis Frith & Co. Ltd, *Queen Victoria's Jubilee Procession, 1887: The Indian Princes*, 1887, albumen print, 19 × 29 cm. Royal Collection Trust (RCIN 2915907). Digital image courtesy of Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2022 (all rights reserved).



Figure 11.

Francis Frith & Co. Ltd, Queen Victoria's Indian Escort for the 1887 Jubilee Procession, 1887, albumen print, 24.1 × 29 cm. Royal Collection Trust (RCIN 2915909). Digital image courtesy of Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2022 (all rights reserved).

In light of the increased visibility of Indian visitors to the Jubilee, the presence of the two Indian figures on the deck of the HMY *Victoria and Albert* during the Naval Review appears to be part of a general pattern. However, these individuals are not performing or processing in the manner of cavalymen or princes; they are socializing with the Queen's closest companions. Identified as Abdul Karim and Muhammad Bakhsh, both Indian men were attendants who arrived during the Jubilee to serve Queen Victoria.⁴² Karim would go on to have a long career in the royal household: by 1889, he had been promoted to *munshi* (a term used by the British in India for local secretaries or clerks). Queen Victoria commissioned portraits of Karim, gave him property and, by 1894, he became the "Indian Secretary".⁴³ As controversy swirled around Karim's growing influence, calls emerged for Queen Victoria to re-evaluate her relationship with him. Courtiers alleged that a "thoroughly stupid and uneducated man" should not have had access to politically sensitive information, and they feared that Karim's friends and relations had contact with "disorderly elements in India".⁴⁴ Although Queen Victoria eventually distanced herself from her attendant, the public persecution of Karim laid bare the paternalizing racist attitudes at the foundation of the colonial mission in India.⁴⁵

Aboard the HMY *Victoria and Albert* during the Naval Review, both Karim and Bakhsh glimpsed the extraordinary fleet that reinforced Britain's power across the globe. A photograph of the flagship, *HMY Victoria and Albert passing through the Fleet*, captures the extraordinary number and variety of craft on the sea that day, including yachts, steamships, paddle steamers, steam tugs, and rowing boats (fig. 12). The *Illustrated London News* reported that the Naval Review numbered 135 vessels, including armored and unarmored ships, torpedo vessels, gun boats, and troopships, and required the assembly of 20,200 officers and men.⁴⁶ As the *Victoria and Albert* passed to examine each vessel, all eyes were on the Queen, who "sat surrounded by her grand-children and the ladies of her suite ... the expression on her face was clearly visible to all who had good glasses".⁴⁷ To many visitors on the open sea, the impressive display testified to the success of the British imperial mission during Queen Victoria's reign, yet the presence and enduring influence of Abdul Karim signaled interconnected histories that belied this prevailing narrative.



Figure 12.

HMY *Victoria and Albert* passing through the Fleet, 23 July 1887, 1887, albumen print, 14.7 × 19.3 cm. Royal Collection Trust (RCIN 2916003). Digital image courtesy of Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2022 (all rights reserved).

Jubilee Remembrances

In a satirical *Punch* illustration referencing the Jubilee (*Mr. Punch's Celebration of Queen Victoria's Jubilee, 1886*), Queen Victoria is framed by imperial attributes, including dark-skinned figures accompanied by elephant tusks, a kangaroo, and a tiger (fig. 13). Symbolic forms of Victorian industry and innovation also appear throughout the print, acknowledging the importance of gas, electricity, and train lines in this Jubilee celebration. These technical innovations extended into familiar visible markers on the landscape and seascape (such as modern docks, gas and train lines, and naval ships). However, on a smaller scale, hand-held souvenir objects functioned as microcosms of the Jubilee.

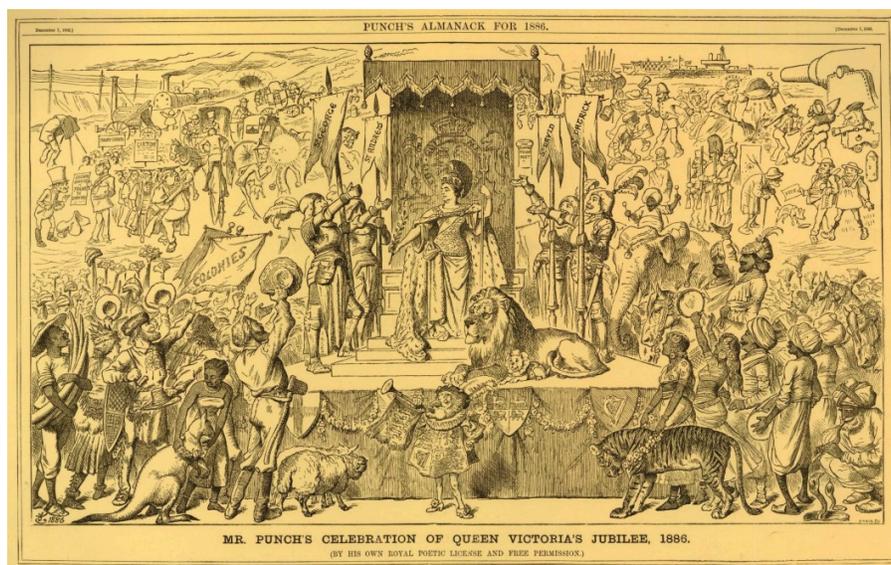


Figure 13.

Joseph Swain, Mr. Punch's celebration of Queen Victoria's Jubilee, 1886, wood engraving, 24.5 × 39.2 cm. Collection of The British Museum (1902,1011.9787). Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

In possession of royal warrants and actively experimenting with porcelain materials and techniques since the mid-eighteenth century, Royal Worcester was a model for how quality-made British goods in the Victorian era relied on local mining as well as raw materials supplied by the empire. These materials were secured and processed through time-consuming labor performed by workers, both at home and abroad, in conditions that ranged from the unhealthy to the inhumane. For the Jubilee, Royal Worcester produced a special edition scent bottle that prominently featured Queen Victoria's profile in a medallion format. Her name, as well as the dates 1837 and 1887, appear in circular text under her image. The verso depicts the Tudor rose, Scottish thistle, and Irish shamrock. The cap of the bottle is an ornate metallic crown.

In another version of this commemorative scent bottle, the cap is made of silver and the verso of the bottle is embossed with text identifying Canada, India, and Australia—calling attention to the imperial references mocked in the *Punch* illustration.

In a forty-seven-page publication, titled *A Guide Through the Royal Porcelain Works, Worcester* (ca. 1895), the company described the process by which their celebrated objects were made.⁴⁸ The opening pages state that beginning on 1 April 1880, each visitor to the manufacturing facility was charged sixpence, and also received the guidebook.⁴⁹ Images throughout the publication illustrate the on-site museum, porcelain-making techniques, and the extensive facilities (including the mill, slip house, thrower, ovens, and dipping and painting rooms).⁵⁰ Many of the raw materials were sourced in Cornwall, including kaolin (referred to as china clay), and petuntse (referred to as Cornish stone).⁵¹ Feldspar was imported from Sweden, and ox bones were brought in from South America. The guide states that, “The use of bones is peculiar to English porcelain, and constituted the great difference between it and the porcelain made on the continents of Europe and Asia”.⁵² In a discussion of throwing, a line drawing illustrates traditional techniques used in Egypt and China, where the power to turn the wheel is supplied by the hand, a foot, or a loose strap.⁵³ In contrast, the writer claims, “At the Royal Porcelain Works, and at most of the large manufactories, steam power is now used and the thrower regulates the speed of the wheel by a motion of his foot”.⁵⁴ A large, detailed accompanying image visually illustrates the differences between these techniques (fig. 14).

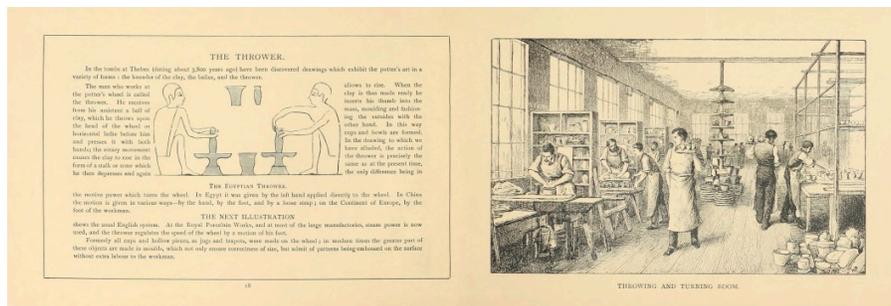


Figure 14.

E.P. Evans, *A Guide Through the Royal Porcelain Works*, (Worcester: Royal Porcelain Works, circa 1895), 18–19. Collection of University of California Libraries. Digital image courtesy of Internet Archive (public domain).

Along with the advanced manufacturing technology and the use of the steam power, the varied geographic origins of materials used at the Royal Worcester facility are expressed as a point of pride in this publication. Referencing Simeon Shaw’s text on Staffordshire pottery, the writer quotes:

To give our readers some idea of the various ramifications of a single piece of *earthenware* before it arrives at completion, we may note that at the present day to produce the commonest painted bowl used by the poorest peasant wife to contain the breakfast for her rustic husband, the clays of Dorset and Devonshire, the flints of Kent, the granite of Cornwall, the lead of Montgomery, the manganese of Warwickshire, and the soda of Cheshire, must be conveyed from their respective districts, and by the ingenious processes, the results of unnumbered experiments, be made to combine with other substances apparently as heterogenous, obtained from other nations. ⁵⁵

Developed through a process that spoke to the broad reach of the British Empire, the commemorative scent bottles and other objects made by the Royal Worcester Porcelain Works pointed to the cosmopolitan nature of apparently quintessentially British objects.

The scent bottle also functions as a type of coda, both to the Jubilee and this analysis. Like Whistler's Jubilee Set, it is a souvenir of a specific event, meant to activate memory and nostalgia, and mark the significance of a historic moment. It symbolically celebrates Victoria's reign, and its physical composition delineates a network of material itineraries that span from Cornwall to South America. As an event, the Jubilee followed the model of the Indian and Colonial Exhibition of 1886, and relied on dislocated Indian subjects to display the range of British domination. Yet, some of these subjects charted their own journeys through the innermost circles of the royal household.

Described through the narrative histories of three objects—Whistler's rendering of Tilbury as part of the Jubilee Set, the photograph aboard the HMY *Victoria and Albert* during the Naval Review, and the Royal Worcester scent bottle—the Jubilee emerges as an event that made visible the fundamental importance of maritime pathways critical to the national achievements celebrated in the Victorian period. The juxtaposition of these objects also points to the interpretive shifts that can occur, both in museum galleries and in written analyses, when biographical modes of analyses are disrupted and developed.

This study originally began as an analysis of Whistler's Jubilee Set, specifically looking at *Tilbury*. Yet, as questions emerged about dock construction, naval power, Indian subjects, and souvenirs, the analysis grew to incorporate additional objects that, in institutional terms, are often identified as archival material or decorative art objects representative of Victorian material culture. As scholarship in the global humanities asks us to

consider the transnational histories of works of art made and exhibited in a fine arts context, art historians and museum curators must equally shift their methods and their galleries in ways that will allow the public to better understand the history, legacy, and ongoing relevance of these interconnected narratives.

Footnotes

- 1 "The Jubilee Naval Review", *Illustrated London News*, 30 July 1887, 126.
- 2 Crafting Communities is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Victorian Studies Association of Western Canada, and the Universities of Victoria, Alberta, and Manitoba; for more on *Crafting Communities*, see <https://www.craftingcommunities.net/about>; see also *Victorian Things*, <https://omekas.library.uvic.ca/s/crafting/page/about>.
- 3 Foundational studies in postcolonial scholarship include Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978) and Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).
- 4 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
- 5 Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn, eds., *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture, and the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1998); and Tim Barringer, Geoff Quilley, and Douglas Fordham, eds., *Art and the British Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009). See also Julie F. Codell and Dianne Sachko Macleod, *Orientalism Transposed: The Impact of the Colonies on British Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998); Jocelyn Hackforth-Jones and Mary Roberts, *Edges of Empire: Orientalism and Visual Culture* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005); and Sarah Thomas, ed., *Witnessing Slavery: Art and Travel in the Age of Abolition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).
- 6 Steven Mentz, "Toward a Blue Cultural Studies: The Sea, Maritime Culture, and Early Modern English Literature", *Literature Compass* 6, no. 5 (2009): 1000.
- 7 Richard Burrell, *Victorian Freemasonry & the Building of Tilbury Docks* (Thurrock: Thurrock Local History Society, 2015), 20-21.
- 8 Information on the complete Jubilee Set is available in the online Whistler catalogue raisonné maintained by the University of Glasgow: https://etchings.arts.gla.ac.uk/catalogue/sets_texts/?eid=jubilee. Margaret F. MacDonald, Grischka Petri, Meg Hausberg, and Joanna Meacock, *James McNeill Whistler: The Etchings, A Catalogue Raisonné*, University of Glasgow, 2012, at <http://etchings.arts.gla.ac.uk>.
- 9 Whistler to W.H. Smith, 1 December 1887, GUL, MS Whistler G214, 01849. Online edition, University of Glasgow, *The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler, 1855-1903*, ed. Margaret F. MacDonald, Patricia de Montfort, and Nigel Thorp; including *The Correspondence of Anna McNeill Whistler, 1855-1880*, ed. Georgia Toutziari, <http://www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/correspondence>. All references to Whistler's correspondence come from this source.
- 10 Burrell, *Victorian Freemasonry & the Building of Tilbury Docks*, 5.
- 11 Burrell, *Victorian Freemasonry & the Building of Tilbury Docks*, 15.
- 12 Burrell, *Victorian Freemasonry & the Building of Tilbury Docks*, 19 and 141.
- 13 Burrell, *Victorian Freemasonry & the Building of Tilbury Docks*, 19.
- 14 Jesse French Scott, "The Construction and Equipment of the Tilbury Docks", *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers* 120 (1895): 277.
- 15 Burrell, *Victorian Freemasonry & the Building of Tilbury Docks*, 35-36.
- 16 Scott, "The Construction and Equipment of the Tilbury Docks", 278-279.
- 17 Scott, "The Construction and Equipment of the Tilbury Docks", 286.
- 18 The *Chelmsford Chronicle* reported that the mission organized an exhibition of artworks, made mainly by the navvies and their family members, at the Mission Hall on 30 May 1885. Burrell, *Victorian Freemasonry & the Building of Tilbury Docks*, 55.
- 19 Burrell, *Victorian Freemasonry & the Building of Tilbury Docks*, 19.
- 20 Burrell, *Victorian Freemasonry & the Building of Tilbury Docks*, 45. Some workers had come after construction on the Hull-Barnsley railway line had stopped in 1884 (due to dried-up funds), others came from the Alexandra Dock in Hull, and casual laborers arrived from throughout the area.
- 21 For information on states, see MacDonald et al., *James McNeill Whistler*.
- 22 Elizabeth Robins Pennell and Joseph Pennell, *The Life of James McNeill Whistler*, Vol. 2 (London: William Heinemann, 1908), 66.
- 23 Godfrey Lushington to James McNeill Whistler, 30 July 1887, MS Whistler G202, Glasgow University Library.

- 24 Godfrey Lushington to James McNeill Whistler, 25 August 1887, MS Whistler G209, Glasgow University Library. <https://www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/correspondence/recno/display/?cid=01844>. Godfrey Lushington to James McNeill Whistler, 9 August 1887, Archives of Art and Design, RBA Archive, AAD 1997/8/105, Victoria and Albert Museum, London. <https://www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/correspondence/recno/display/?cid=13418>.
- 25 Daniel E. Sutherland, *Whistler: A Life for Art's Sake* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 87.
- 26 Geoff Quilley, "Placing the Sea in Eighteenth-Century British Art", in *Spreading Canvas: Eighteenth-Century British Marine Painting*, ed. Eleanor Hughes (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 53. Quilley cites J.G. Dalyell, *Shipwrecks and Disasters at Sea; or the Historical Narratives of the Most Noted Calamities and Providential Deliverances Which Have Resulted from Maritime Enterprise* (Edinburgh: A. Constable & Co., 1812), xi-xii. Quilley also references Tory politician Lord Bolingbroke's famous description of Britons as "amphibious animals"; Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Allen Lane, 1976), 4, as cited in Quilley, "Placing the Sea in Eighteenth-Century British Art", 53. For more on the navy and British identity, see Jan Rüger, "Nation, Empire and Navy: Identity Politics in the United Kingdom 1887-1914", *Past & Present* 185 (November 2004): 159-187.
- 27 Quilley, "Placing the Sea in Eighteenth-Century British Art", 54.
- 28 Kathleen Pyne, "Whistler and the Politics of the Urban Picturesque", *American Art* 8 (Summer/Autumn 1994): 61.
- 29 "The Jubilee Naval Review", *Illustrated London News*. The name monitor came from the famed Union ship *USS Monitor*, the steam-powered ironclad vessel with a revolving gun turret that had fought in the American Civil War. A correspondent of the *Daily News* reported on the especially imposing presence of the Minotaur and Agincourt, writing, "These five-masted ironclads are the most imposing in appearance of all our modern men-of-war"; an excerpt from the *Daily News*, as reprinted in "The Jubilee Naval Review", *Illustrated London News*.
- 30 As early as the seventeenth century, the Dutch artists William van de Velde (father and son) made drawings and paintings documenting royal visits to the naval fleets. Eleanor Hughes, "Taking and Making of Draughts of Sea Fights", in *Spreading Canvas: Eighteenth-Century British Marine Painting*, ed. Eleanor Hughes (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 139.
- 31 MacDonald et al., *James McNeill Whistler*; Pennell and Pennell, *The Life of James McNeill Whistler*, Vol. 2, 81-82. https://etchings.arts.gla.ac.uk/catalogue/sets_texts/?eid=jubilee.
- 32 Pennell and Pennell, *The Life of James McNeill Whistler*, Vol. 2, 66.
- 33 The gifted album would go on to have its own voyages, as it was sold by Edward VII, purchased by Charles Lang Freer, and later sold to Rosalind Birnie Philip, who gave it to the University of Glasgow in 1935.
- 34 Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 45.
- 35 Elizabeth Longford, *Queen Victoria: Born to Succeed* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 489.
- 36 For more on Indian craft and display and the 1886 exhibition, see Saloni Mathur, *India by Design: Colonial History and Cultural Display* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007); Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn, *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture, and the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1998); Antoinette Burton, "Making a Spectacle of Empire: Indian Travellers in Fin-de-Siècle London", *History Workshop Journal* 42 (1996): 127-146; Julie F. Codell, "Indian Crafts and Imperial Policy: Hybridity, Purification, and Imperial Subjectivities", in *Material Cultures, 1740-1920: The Meanings and Pleasures of Collecting*, eds. John Potvin and Alla Myzelev (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), 149-170.
- 37 Frank Cundall, *Reminiscences of the Indian and Colonial Exhibition* (London: William Clowes & Son Ltd, 1886), 29-30. For more, see also T.N. Mukharji, *A Visit to Europe* (Calcutta: W. Newman, 1889); Arindam Dutta, "The Politics of Display: India 1886 and 1986", *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 30-31 (1997): 115-145; and Peter H. Hoffenberg, *An Empire on Display: English, Indian, and Australian Exhibitions from the Crystal Palace to the Great War* (London: University of California Press, 2001).
- 38 Cundall, *Reminiscences of the Indian and Colonial Exhibition*, 37.
- 39 Quoted in Longford, *Queen Victoria*, 497.
- 40 Extracts from the *Queen's Journal*, Buckingham Palace, 21 June 1887, in George Earle Buckle, *The Letters of Queen Victoria: A Selection from Her Majesty's Correspondence and Journal Between the Years 1886 and 1901*, Vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1930-1932), 322-323.
- 41 Extracts from the *Queen's Journal*, Windsor Castle, 29 June 1887 in Buckle, *The Letters of Queen Victoria*, Vol. 1, 333-334.
- 42 The Royal Collection Trust has identified both men, who entered service in May 1887; Visram, *Asians in Britain*, 45. Visram describes both Karim and Bakhsh as having arrived at the Queen's court in 1887.
- 43 Visram, *Asians in Britain*, 44-49.
- 44 Cited in Visram, *Asians in Britain*, 47.
- 45 After Queen Victoria's death in 1901, Karim returned to India and settled in Agra, where he would live until his death in 1909, at age 46.
- 46 "The Jubilee Naval Review", *Illustrated London News*.
- 47 "The Jubilee Naval Review", *Illustrated London News*.
- 48 E.P. Evans, *A Guide Through the Royal Porcelain Works* (Worcester: The Works, ca. 1895), University of California Libraries: <https://archive.org/details/guidethroughroya00royarich/page/4/mode/2up>.
- 49 Evans, *A Guide Through the Royal Porcelain Works*, 5.

- 50 Evans, *A Guide Through the Royal Porcelain Works*, 7–8. The mills had a number of tools to grind a variety of materials into the fine substances used to make porcelain.
- 51 Information on materials comes from Evans, *A Guide Through the Royal Porcelain Works*, 14–15.
- 52 Evans, *A Guide Through the Royal Porcelain Works*, 15.
- 53 Evans, *A Guide Through the Royal Porcelain Works*, 18.
- 54 Evans, *A Guide Through the Royal Porcelain Works*, 18.
- 55 Evans, *A Guide Through the Royal Porcelain Works*, 32.

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Printed Ecologies: William Morris and the Rural Thames

Sarah Mead Leonard

Abstract

William Morris was a Londoner and, in his day-to-day life, he looked out on an urban, polluted Thames River landscape at Hammersmith. However, he turned away from the metropolis to pursue a pastoralist vision of the English countryside in his designs, writings, and life. This essay explores the expression of that pastoral in Morris's printed repeating-pattern designs, arguing that those patterns are indirect representations of the landscape he most admired: the rural reaches of the Upper Thames and its tributaries. Morris's plant motifs and visual effects reflect the botany and physical forms of the riparian environment he encountered at his Thameside country home, Kelmscott Manor. A close inspection of that landscape and ecosystem reveals not only the inspiration for Morris's designs, but also the process by which he selected and elevated certain aspects of the countryside to create his personal pastoral. His patterns are more than decorations for walls and furniture: they are intentional, highly specific evocations of a place and an environment, deeply tied to his broader vision of a rural, equitable, and anti-modern England.

Authors

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When William Morris looked out the windows of his London home, he took in a view much like Whistler's view from Chelsea. A polluted tidal river flowed under murky city air, and a hodgepodge of mixed uses, from fine homes to factories, clustered together along the banks. Kelmscott House, where Morris lived with his family from 1878 until his death in 1896, is located on the Thames embankment in Hammersmith, west London, about two and a half miles west of Cheyne Walk (fig. 1).¹ Like Whistler's home, Kelmscott House was a historic townhouse flanked by others along a riverside road, Upper Mall. Upper Mall was relatively genteel, but its surroundings were not: there were boatyards, brewery malhouses, industrial premises including a leadworks and, around them, workers' housing which Morris's daughter May Morris described as a slum (fig. 2).² Across the Thames, there was a waterworks upriver and a large soapworks downriver. In between, Hammersmith Bridge linked the older settlement of Hammersmith to developing suburbs south of the river. The setting was markedly similar to Whistler's Chelsea, but Morris's reaction to it was markedly different.



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Figure 1.

Ordnance Survey map, showing the Thames area of Hammersmith, with Kelmscott House marked (detail), 1865, 61 × 92 cm. Collection of the National Library of Scotland. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland (all rights reserved).



[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 2.

Ordnance Survey map, with Kelmscott House marked. Malthouses are visible along The Creek at centre, and lead works near the Thames at right (detail), 1895, 61 × 92 cm. Collection of the National Library of Scotland. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland (all rights reserved).

Unlike Whistler, Morris was a lifelong Londoner. He was born in 1834 in Walthamstow, on what was then the outer reaches of London’s northeastern suburbs, and his primary residence was always in London or its suburbs. However, he held no love for the Victorian metropolis. His most well-known response to the city appears in his socialist utopian romance *News from Nowhere*, in which the future Trafalgar Square is an orchard and neighborhoods have become forests. The action of the novel begins with the Victorian main character, a stand-in for Morris, falling asleep in his home on the Hammersmith embankment and waking in another time. His first observations of the socialist utopia of the future take place around—and in—the Hammersmith Thames. The river is clean and populated with salmon, the “ugly suspension bridge” has been replaced with a medieval-style stone one, and the leadworks, the “riveting and hammering” of the boatyards, and the soapworks “with their smoke-vomiting chimneys” are all absent.³ Later in the book, the hero and his party leave London and journey upriver. The story ends at Morris’s country home, Kelmscott Manor. In *News from Nowhere* and in life, Morris rejected the view from his windows in Hammersmith and turned instead to another riverside world: the Upper Thames.⁴

Along the Upper Thames and its tributaries, Morris found a rural world which became his personal pastoral. Like all pastorals, his was an apparently timeless ideal set against an unideal modern urban world: historic, vernacular, hand-crafted, unbothered by modern machinery or factory smoke, and full of lush vegetation and exuberant flowers.⁵ This pastoral appears throughout his life and work. It is a setting in his poetry and romances; it is the utopia described in *News from Nowhere* and his socialist speeches; and it is also the visual world of his designs.

This essay will explore how Morris translated his idealized rural world into his designs for printed, repeating-pattern fabrics and wallpapers.⁶ Alan Braddock has written that attention to ecosystems and the environment “may cast canonical works and figures in a new light by revealing previously unnoticed complexity”.⁷ Unlike many poetic pastorals, Morris’s was not a hazy, generalized, imaginary landscape, but rather a highly specific, closely observed real one: the riparian ecosystem of the rural Thames and its tributaries, and particularly the landscape surrounding his Kelmscott Manor, which is located along the Thames on the far western edge of Oxfordshire. These sites were, and to some extent still are, characterized by traditional features which create particular visual effects in the landscape and support rich botanical biodiversity—elements which can be seen in Morris’s works. By considering the specifics of the Kelmscott landscape, we can better understand what Morris valued in the English countryside and how he constructed his pastoral and presented it to his audience, the middle- and upper-class consumers of Victorian London.

Kelmscott

Morris first encountered Kelmscott Manor in May 1871. He was searching for a place to get away from London, a decision driven at least in part by the fact that his young daughters still had lingering coughs from the winter—a common complaint among residents of the highly polluted city.⁸ The manor and its village (also called Kelmscott) must have been exactly what he sought because he took out a lease immediately. He would retain his affection for the place throughout his life, visiting as often as possible, drawing upon it for his writing and design, and naming his London home and his press after it. When he died in 1896, he was interred in the village churchyard. Kelmscott was his “heaven on earth”, a place he could set in opposition to everything he disliked about the modern world.⁹

Morris’s formulation of Kelmscott as a pastoral ideal was a conscious act. Despite how Morris and those around him described it, the village was no simple rural idyll, no place out of time. In fact, it was a major site in the shift toward industrial agriculture in the second half of the nineteenth century. In

that period, the village was known not as the home of William Morris, but as the home of the Hobbs family. The Hobbs were a local farming dynasty well known in British agricultural circles for their successes with innovative animal husbandry techniques, including using animal feed rather than fattening herds exclusively on meadow grass.¹⁰ In 1900, only four years after Morris's death, the Hobbs introduced the new technology of refrigeration to their dairy and, with the aid of a newly built rail depot, began shipping large quantities of milk to London for sale.¹¹ Even when Morris first arrived in the 1870s, the landscape was not devoid of industrial influence. Only a mile and a quarter away, so close it was likely visible from the Kelmscott property, a large factory stood on an island in the Thames. This complex processed beets for ethanol, animal feed, and artificial fertilizer, and also included a gasworks; a private steam railway to transport the beets; and a telegraph system.¹² Traditionally managed rural spaces existed at Kelmscott, but modernity stood alongside. By concentrating on the former, however, Morris was able to exclude the latter, constructing his own riverside pastoral idyll.

Kelmscott's Thameside setting was one of its great attractions for Morris. In the same letter in which he described the site as a heaven on earth, written the day after he first visited, Morris mentioned that the house was "close down on the river, a boat house and all things handy".¹³ A side channel of the river ran alongside the property, and the main channel is only about five hundred feet away (fig. 3).¹⁴ The boathouse was a particularly good amenity for a man who loved to fish and a family who loved being out on the water.¹⁵ Fishing and boating were not the only things Morris liked about the Thames, however. He held a lifelong love for rivers and riparian environments. His third known surviving letter, written as a fifteen-year-old, includes a rapturous description of a water meadow along the River Kennet.¹⁶ Some of his earliest poetry and prose includes descriptions of rivers and streams, including the grassy brooks of his childhood river landscape, the Lea valley wetlands of far northeast London.¹⁷ These writings show an appreciation for traditional land management and its botanical results. The spaces Morris admired along both the Kennet and the Lea were unplowed, wet meadows managed with cycles of grazing and haymaking.¹⁸ Such meadows were once common along the Upper Thames and the river's tributaries, and they were richly biodiverse, supporting a wide variety of wildflower and wildlife species, as well as the cows and sheep that ate their grass.

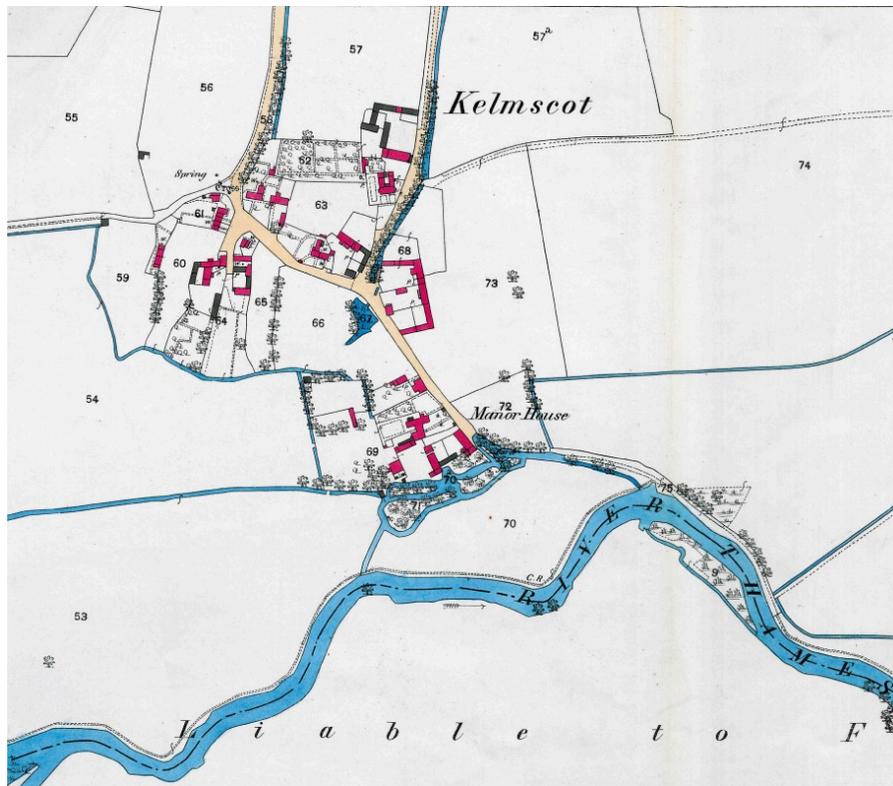


Figure 3.

Ordnance Survey map showing Kelmscott Manor and surroundings (detail), 1876, 64.4 × 96.6 cm. Collection of the National Library of Scotland. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland (all rights reserved).

Water meadows were not the only traditional landscape elements Morris admired. His writings about landscapes—both real and imagined—also reveal an admiration for ancient woodlands, open grazing commons, hayfields, and the hedgerows that divide them all. (This list of landscape features may seem generically “English” at first, and there is good reason for that: they are features of the landscapes of the Thames Valley and other lowland valleys of southern England which have come to be aesthetically synonymous with a particular type of English rural idyll). Morris’s concentration on these landscapes indicates a strong personal preference for a highly specific environment. In the age of increasingly easy travel by train and steamship, British downs, moors, highlands, peaks, and gentle and rugged coastlines, as well as the varied landscapes of Europe, were all within easy enough reach for artists or writers seeking inspiration from the natural world. Morris’s friend, John Ruskin, for example, loved the Lake District, with its sublime fells and waters and less visible evidence of human activity, and Morris himself travelled to Iceland twice in the 1870s.¹⁹ Downland, peak, and strange Icelandic-influenced landscapes do appear in Morris’s writings, though they are absent in his visual work—and even in his stories and poems they are spaces which heroes must overcome to reach their goals, held in

contrast to other places which resemble nothing more than Kelmscott and other rural Southern English locations. Morris could appreciate wild landscapes for their beauty and their power, but his own perfect place was very different: gentle, verdant, and marked everywhere by a long human history of land management. Just as Morris made a choice to turn from London, he also made a choice to turn to the familiar Southern English pastoral of Kelmscott and the rural Upper Thames. ²⁰

At Kelmscott, Morris deepened his creative relationship with a type of landscape he had admired for much of his life. He was able to spend prolonged periods along and upon the Thames and in country lanes and fields, gaining the sort of intimate knowledge of place that can only come from prolonged exposure. It is clear in his works that he looked very closely at his surroundings, understood them deeply, and drew abundant inspiration from them. As noted above, landscapes resembling the valleys of the Thames and its tributaries were already prevalent in Morris's written works before 1871. They were not so present in his design work, but that was about to change. In the decade since the founding of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., commonly known as the Firm, Morris had created about five original designs for printed patterns: four wallpapers and one textile. ²¹ Between 1871 and 1887, he designed approximately forty-one: twenty-five wallpapers and sixteen textiles. There were multiple reasons for this exponential increase in creative output, including Morris's increasing technical abilities as a pattern designer and his burgeoning professional relationship with the dyer Thomas Wardle. It is difficult to say if Morris's life at Kelmscott also contributed to this increase in productivity, but the world he observed there surely helped to shape the designs. The patterns Morris designed after coming to Kelmscott show the influence of the Upper Thames in both their overall visual effects and their motifs, with their intertwining botanical forms evoking the highly specific riparian ecosystem Morris knew so well.

The Patterns and the Landscape

Two types of landscape influence run through the patterns Morris designed between 1871 and 1887. The first is in the overall form of the patterns: the physical structures of their repeats and the interconnections of the motifs. The second is those motifs themselves, the plants which Morris chose to form his patterns. Of course, the line between the two is blurred because of the characteristic way Morris used botanical motifs to form the shape of his patterns—but so, too, is the distinction blurred in the landscape, where multiple species grow together and form features larger than the sum of their parts.

Before moving on to consider the presence of the landscape in Morris's patterns, it is important to consider how Morris drew inspiration from and depicted the world around him. None of Morris's patterns are direct visual inscriptions of a single site or plant. Some were inspired by a discrete place or moment in time: *Trellis* (wallpaper, 1862) and *Strawberry Thief* (printed textile, 1883) by the gardens at Red House and Kelmscott Manor respectively; and *Willow Bough* (wallpaper, 1887) by a single tree near the Manor.²² However, Morris never sought to show things exactly as they were in the world around him. He detested the fashion for illusionistic plants in wallpapers and other decorative arts. What he called for, instead, was design that suited the restrictions of materials and space—for example, flat patterns for flat walls. Despite this, he also could not abide the more abstracted ornament favored by Design Reform advocates such as Owen Jones, which he found empty and meaningless. As he stated in his design theory lecture "Some Hints on Pattern-Designing", he believed all patterns should be made up of "ornament that reminds us of the outward face of the earth".²³ At another point in the same lecture, he said "any decoration is futile ... when it does not remind you of something beyond itself, of something of which it is but a visible symbol".²⁴ Evocation was the goal, rather than either direct representation or ornamental abstraction. And the best thing to be evoked was the natural world: "I must have unmistakable suggestions of gardens and fields".²⁵ This, then, is the landscape representation at the heart of Morris's patterns: not a direct record, but rather a reminder, a suggestion, conveyed by a stylized depiction of a far more complex system. Morris's insistence upon "gardens and fields" is also significant because it reinforces his pastoralism: he demands not the natural world in general, nor the wilderness, but a managed, human landscape such as the one he knew along the Upper Thames and the river's tributaries. Morris also made the link to those types of landscapes explicitly clear in a series of works designed between 1883 and 1885: nine printed fabrics named for Thames tributaries, including the Lea and Kennet, where Morris had first become familiar with the distinct landscape forms and ecology of the Thames river system.²⁶

One pattern form which evokes the Thamesian landscape of Kelmscott is the meander. This form is particularly prevalent in Morris's textile designs in the 1880s, including several of the Thames tributary patterns such as *Wey* (circa 1883, [fig. 4](#)). These designs feature primary stems which either inscribe an S-curve across their repeat or move in a sinuous curve diagonally from one corner of the repeat to the other. As other scholars have pointed out, this curvaceous behavior resembles another type of meander, the path of the Thames.²⁷ Meanders are characteristic of almost the entire length of the Thames, a river with a broad alluvial plain and very little fall in its 215-mile length.²⁸ Kelmscott Manor sits along the curve of one such meander, and Kelmscott House on another (see [figs. 3](#) and [1](#)). Morris's meanders were

derived from historic textiles he studied at the South Kensington Museum.²⁹ However, he reshaped the style with his characteristic coloration and motifs, intertwining it with other elements to make a larger, Thamesian whole.



Figure 4.

William Morris, *Wey*, circa 1883, indigo discharge and block print on cotton, 23.5 × 30.5 cm. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (T.49-1912). Digital image courtesy of Victoria & Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).

The Thames is not only present in the meander patterns; other aspects of its forms and appearance also contribute to the visual style of Morris's designs. Caroline Arscott evokes the physical realities of the river in her exploration of Morris and the Thames, drawing a comparison between the patterns' layering and flattening, depictions of the river in angling handbooks, and tension between surface and depth in the river.³⁰ A comparison might also be drawn between Morris's flattened depth and layered botanical forms and the melding between river and land, between aquatic and riparian environments.³¹ The Thames is a remarkably shallow-banked river, sitting in its flat alluvial plain with little gradation between land and water (fig. 5). Along the river at Kelmscott, the fields meld almost seamlessly with the river, and the environment both bridges and masks the divide. You can walk into the fields near the manor and barely see the river until you are standing just above it, among the dense grasses and wildflowers on its edge. The two environments—land and water—are physically inseparable, and the features of the local landscape rely on the presence of the river. Water meadows cannot be water meadows without water, after all, and even the underlying geography of the land is a result of the river: Kelmscott, like London and

many places in between, sits on terraces of clay and gravel laid down by eons of the Thames's alluvial action.³² Even Morris's terrestrial plants are reflections of the presence of the river: the willow of *Willow Bough* and many other patterns grows in abundance in the wet ground of the Kelmscott riverside (see [fig. 5](#)), and other plants such as snakeshead fritillary—discussed in detail below—are even more specific to the environmental conditions of the Thames landscape. Morris's combination of riverine forms with distinctly Thamesian botany thus evokes the specific landscape and environment he knew at Kelmscott.



Figure 5.

Sarah Mead Leonard, *The Thames and willows near Kelmscott*, 2016, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Sarah Mead Leonard (all rights reserved).

The riverine forms and riverbank species are not the only localized landscape features visible in Morris's patterns. In "Some Hints on Pattern-Designing", Morris said:

In all good pattern-designs the idea comes first, as in all other designs, e.g., a man says, I will make a pattern which I will mean to give people an idea of a rose-hedge with the sun through it; and he sees it in such and such a way; then, and not till then, he sets to work to draw his flowers, his leaves and thorns, and so forth, and so carries out his idea. ³³

He was, of course, describing his own working process. The pattern he was describing may be hypothetical, but the “idea of a rose-hedge” could easily apply to several patterns, including the printed textiles *Rose and Thistle* (fig. 6), which was likely designed in 1881, and *Rose* (fig. 7) from two years later. These patterns, and many other Morris designs, share many traits with hedgerows—from their structure, to the density of their botanical motifs, to the species of those motifs.



Figure 6.

William Morris, *Rose and Thistle*, printed by Merton Abbey Works, 1881, indigo discharge on cotton. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (T.634-1919). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).



Figure 7.

William Morris, *Rose*, printed by Merton Abbey Works, 1883, indigo discharge and block print on cotton. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (T.53-1912). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).

Hedgerows are vegetal landscape features, field boundaries made up exclusively of plants. They are seen in many areas of England but are especially abundant in areas such as the Thames valley that lack the rock deposits needed for stone walling. Dense, mature hedgerows can be observed all around Kelmscott ([fig. 8](#)). These features begin as human-formed structures: expert hedgelayers bend and interweave living plants, usually hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*), around stakes to form dense fence-like barriers which livestock cannot breach ([fig. 9](#)). The foundational plants then grow upwards and outwards while other species of wild and naturalized plants—including roses—gain a foothold and intermingle (see [fig. 8](#)). Mature hedgerows can be several feet thick and more than six feet high.³⁴ As well as serving their purpose as a boundary, they provide shelter and food for animals and support botanical biodiversity. The shallow diagonal meander of *Rose and Thistle*, as well as evoking the path of the Thames, also echoes the diagonal shaping of a newly lain hedge, and *Rose*'s dense symmetrical pattern, meanwhile, might be seen as a more mature hedgerow, with many different plants intermingling and providing habitat for birds. *Rose* is particularly “sunlit”, an unusually light pattern for that period of Morris’s work. Other patterns from the period such as *Wey* (see [fig. 4](#)) or *Strawberry Thief* layer brightly colored plants atop deep blue grounds, giving a sense of receding space without the illusions of perspective. That darkness behind the foreground plants is similar to the effect of looking at a mature hedgerow in a sunlit field: the depths of the hedge are dense with shadows while the plants near to you are illuminated, turning their flowers and leaves to the sun.



Figure 8.

Sarah Mead Leonard, Hedgerow at Kelmscott with Roses in Bloom—Early in Season, 2018, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Sarah Mead Leonard (all rights reserved).



Figure 9.

Vincent Jones, Newly Lain Hedge Near Awre, Gloucestershire, 2006. Digital image courtesy of Vincent Jones (CC BY-SA 2.0).

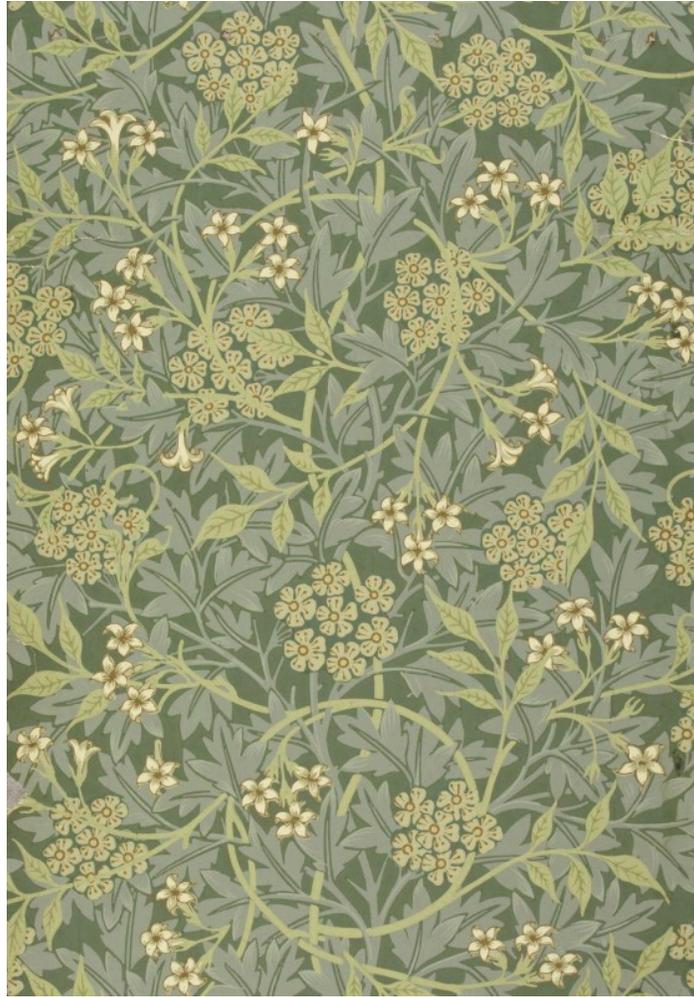


Figure 10.

William Morris, Specimen of Jasmine Wallpaper, printed by Jeffrey & Co. (London), 1872, distemper colour block printed on paper. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (E.2753-1980). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved)."

When Morris created his patterns, he not only evoked the overall forms and visual effects of river or hedgerow, he also shaped the real plants of the Kelmscott ecosystem into the motifs that make up those forms and effects. Hedgerow hawthorn's small clustered white flowers and serrated leaves appear often—as in the wallpaper *Jasmine* (1872) (fig. 10), with its title species (*Jasminum officinale*) entwining with large masses of hawthorn. Roses, meanwhile, are a typical secondary hedgerow plant and a typical Morrisian motif, as are thistles (*Cirsium vulgare* and other similar plants). However, the rose patterns shown above do not depict the most common hedgerow rose, the dog rose (*Rosa canina*, see fig. 8), which has a single layer of petals. Morris instead chose double blooms which are more common in gardens than fields.³⁵ This combination of garden plant and field plant is

common throughout Morris's designs, reflecting Morris's interest in a wide variety of plants as well as the sometimes blurry distinction between wild and cultivated species in the English landscape.³⁶ Some wildflowers are also popular garden plants and, conversely, some garden flowers become naturalized and mix in with wildflowers.³⁷ In the case of the double roses, the choice of garden plant over wild may have been made for the sake of legibility and style: single roses could be mistaken for other single-bloom flowers, and layered double roses are also recognizable within the visual language of design—echoing, for example, the roses of English royal insignia. Again, the overall suggestion was more important than precise accuracy, and Morris combined wild plants, garden plants, and design traditions to communicate what he wanted about the outward face of the earth.



Figure 11.

Christian Fischer, Scarlet Pimpernel, 2016, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Christian Fischer (CC BY-SA 4.0).

The stylization and recognizability of Morris's plant motifs varies greatly and, as a result, any list of species featured in the patterns will likely be incomplete. However, it is possible to identify a number of plants that are associated with the landscape and ecosystem of Kelmscott and the Upper Thames. For example, *Rose* also includes the small five-petaled blooms of scarlet pimpernel (*Anagallis arvensis*, [fig. 11](#)), another common hedgerow species that repeatedly appears in other Morris patterns. Paul Sterry and Bob Press's guidebook of British wildflowers describes the pimpernel as growing "on disturbed ground", a phrase commonly applied to wildflowers and naturalized species that grow on land recently impacted by human activity

such as agriculture and building.³⁸ As a result of that growth habit, many such plants are considered agricultural weeds, and the advent of herbicides in the twentieth century led to their decline. While scarlet pimpernel is still common, many other plants that Morris depicted, such as corncockle (*Agrostemma githago*, featured in *Corncockle*, printed textile, 1883) (figs. 12 and 13), are not nearly so plentiful today.³⁹



Figure 12.

Eowyn Cwper, *Corncockle*, 2014, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Eowyn Cwper (CC BY 3.0).



Figure 13.

William Morris, Corncockle, printed by Merton Abbey Works, 1883, block print on cotton. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (CIRC.87-1953). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved)."

The introduction of herbicides is not the only reason the botanical landscape of Kelmscott and the rest of the British countryside has changed since Morris's time. The decline of traditional land management practices also contributed to the loss of biodiversity. As I have already noted, hedgerows are important hosts of a wide variety of animal and plant species, as are water meadows. In the twentieth century, many hedgerows were torn out in favor of wire fencing. Water meadows, meanwhile, had existed partially because their land was too difficult to cultivate with traditional plows and partially because their grass was good for fattening livestock. Advances in both farm equipment and animal management in the twentieth century changed this, and riverside meadows were increasingly converted to arable fields. Even where the meadows were not plowed away, the seasonal rhythm of flooding, grazing, and haymaking was often abandoned. All these changes altered the botanical make-up of the meadows which, like hedgerows, had been havens of biodiversity in their traditional form.

Snakeshead fritillary (*Fritillaria meleagris*) is one well-known example of a species that declined precipitously with the loss of traditional water meadows. The plant's distinctive checkered, bell-shaped, dark purple flowers were once a common springtime sight along many stretches of the Thames (fig. 14). However, the loss of water meadows reduced the plant's range to

such an extent that it is now considered rare in the wild in Britain. It maintains a hold only in a few field systems along the Upper Thames and its tributaries. ⁴⁰ Morris would have been distressed by that change. He was fond of the plant, naming two patterns for it—*Snakeshead*, a printed textile from 1876 (fig. 15), and *Fritillary*, a wallpaper from 1885 (fig. 16)—as well as featuring variegated bell-shaped flowers in many more. He also mentions the flowers in letters and diary entries written at Kelmscott, noting when they were in bloom to family members in London and recording expeditions to gather them from the surrounding fields. ⁴¹ Many other plants that grew near, or even in, the river appear in Morris's patterns, but fritillary is a particularly significant example because it is so characteristic of the specific ecosystem of the Thames valley. The presence of snakeshead blooms in the meadows of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire indicate the presence of a particular set of ecological conditions. Thus, the presence of those blooms in Morris's patterns is also indicative, showing both that he had access to that ecosystem and that he observed it closely, and drew upon it for his work.



Figure 14.

Michael Apel, Snakeshead Fritillary, 2012, photograph.
Digital image courtesy of Michael Apel (CC BY 3.0).



Figure 15.

William Morris, Snakeshead, printed by Thomas Wardle & Co. (Leek), 1876, block print on cotton, 100 × 63 cm. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (CIRC.46-1956). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).

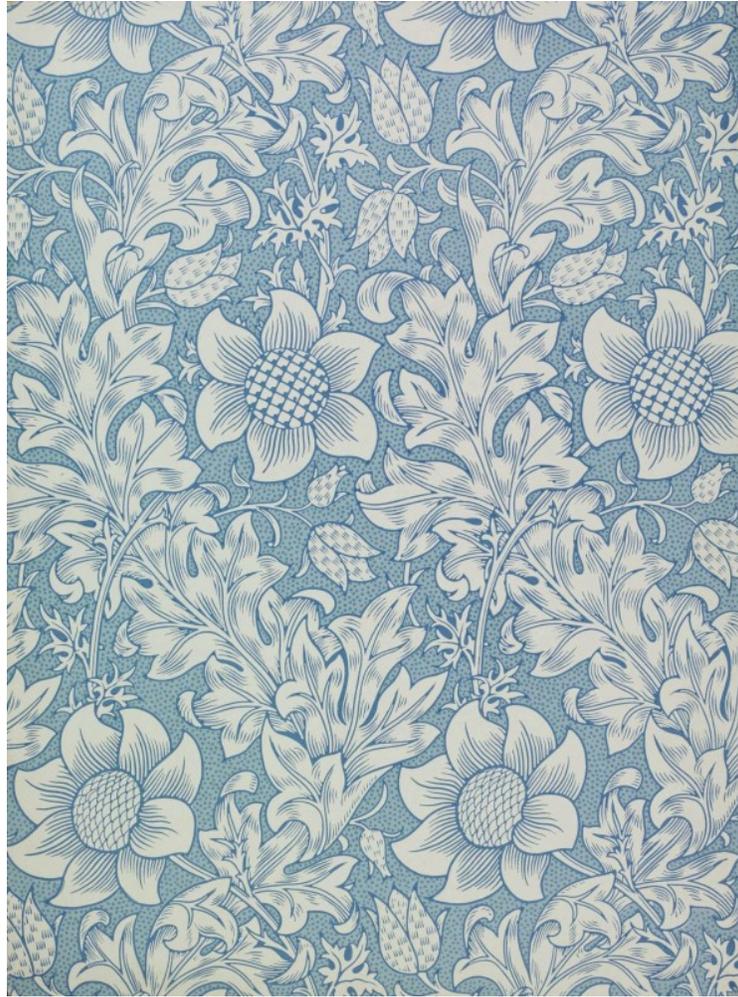


Figure 16.

William Morris, Specimen of Fritillary wallpaper, printed Jeffrey & Co. (London), 1885, distemper colour block printed on paper. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (CIRC.283-1959). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).

Morris would not have recognized the word ecosystem: “ecology” only entered English in 1875, and “ecosystem” is a twentieth-century coinage.⁴² Nevertheless, the rural ecosystem of the Upper Thames was precisely what he observed and chose to depict, an interrelated world of environmental conditions, human influences, and characteristic landscape forms and plant species. In so doing, Morris sought to create visual evocations of a very specific type of site: his Thameside pastoral. Within the context of Morris’s writings on design practice such as “Some Hints on Pattern-Design”, this evocation is treated as the goal in and of itself, the achievement of what Morris felt was aesthetically best. However, the implications of that goal reach much further than visual pleasure. For Morris, aesthetics, design and ideology were as intertwined as the motifs of his patterns or the plants of a

hedgerow. Morris valued the Thamesian landscape of Kelmscott not just because he found it visually appealing, but also because it held ideological value for him. By evoking that landscape in his designs, he necessarily also evoked the ideologies that were tied up in both the place and the work: the veneration of craft, tradition, nature, and beauty (as defined by Morris) and the rejection of modern industry, urbanism, capitalism, and all the ills they brought with them.

In *News from Nowhere*, Kelmscott remains the ultimate goal, the perfect place to which the characters travel, moving along an improved, de-modernized Thames to reach it. However, even that future London has been improved by the introduction of the landscape features Morris knew from the rural Thames and its tributaries—orchards, fields, forests, and gardens. It is possible to view Morris’s patterns as agents of a similar process, especially when considering what Jason Edwards and Imogen Hart term the “potentially interpretable and evocative detail” of Victorian interiors.⁴³ Morris’s designs do not exist in isolation; rather, they were products printed in London factories and sold in Morris & Co.’s Oxford Street shop, primarily to London buyers.⁴⁴ The reception of Morris’s designs and politics in the homes of his consumers is a neglected subject, and much more must be known before any conclusions might be drawn.⁴⁵ However, if Morris’s patterns are evocations of Kelmscott, then the presence of those products in middle- and upper-class London homes must also imply the presence of Morris’s pastoral in those spaces, meaningful to Morris if not his buyers: a section of a Thamesian ideal arrayed on a wall or a settee.

Footnotes

- ¹ By river, the distance is longer—four miles upstream.
- ² May Morris, “Introduction”, in William Morris, *The Collected Works of William Morris, Volume XIII: The Odyssey of Homer Done into English Verse*, ed. May Morris, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912), xvii.
- ³ William Morris, *News from Nowhere, or, An Epoch of Rest: Being Some Chapters from a Utopian Romance*. David Leopold, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3–8.
- ⁴ The Upper Thames is generally defined as stretching from the Thames’s source in Gloucestershire to the beginnings of the urban area of Reading.
- ⁵ Morris’s English pastoral is of course part of a long tradition in literature and art. My framing of the subject is informed by Raymond Williams’s *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973) as well as the work of art historians such as John Barrell and Ann Bermingham. I am particularly indebted to Tim Barringer’s “The Harvest Field in the Railway Age” for its approach to the subject in the nineteenth century, in *Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, CT: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2005), 83–131.
- ⁶ Morris produced designs for many media—too many to explore in a single essay. By virtue of their material and manufacturing process, his printed patterns for cloth and wallpaper have the most in common and include the most visual detail and botanical specificity, and so they are the focus of this piece.
- ⁷ Alan Braddock, “Ecocritical Art History”, *American Art* 23, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 24–28.
- ⁸ Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 275. The Morrises were then living in Queen’s Square, Bloomsbury, in central London.
- ⁹ William Morris to Charles Faulkner, 17 May 1871, in Norman Kelvin, ed., *The Collected Letters of William Morris: Volume I, 1848–1880* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 133.

- 10 Simon Townley, ed., "Broadwell Parish: Kelmscott", in *A History of the County of Oxford: Volume 17* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer for the Institute of Historical Research, 2012), 111-145. *British History Online*, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/oxon/vol17/pp111-145>. The Hobbs were also the Morris's landlords until Jane Morris bought the house in 1913.
- 11 Townley, "Broadwell Parish".
- 12 Tom Hassall, "The Kelmscott Landscape Project", in *William Morris's Kelmscott: Landscape and History*, ed. Alan Crossley, Tom Hassall, and Peter Salway (Bollington: Windgather Press in association with the Society of Antiquaries of London, 2007), 6-7; and John R. Gray, "An Industrialised Farm Estate in Berkshire", *Industrial Archaeology* 8, no. 2 (1971), 171-183. The enterprise was hopelessly overextended and failed during the prolonged agricultural depression of the 1870s. The buildings were pulled down by the early 1880s.
- 13 William Morris to Charles Faulkner, 17 May 1871, *The Collected Letters of William Morris: Volume I*, 133.
- 14 The side channel is now a very shallow backwater. It could still take boats in 1871 but, much to Morris's annoyance, it silted up after alterations to the main channel by the Thames Conservancy in 1882. J.W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris* (New York: Dover Publications, 2013), 71.
- 15 May Morris, William's daughter, described her family as "'wet bobs', nearly as much at home on water as on dry land". Morris, "Introduction", xxxiv.
- 16 William Morris to Emma Morris, 13 April 1849, *Collected Letters Volume I*, 7. Morris was then at school at Marlborough College, which is flanked by the Kennet.
- 17 William Morris, "Frank's Sealed Letter", *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* 4 (April 1856): 231, *William Morris Archive*, <http://morrisarchive.lib.uiowa.edu/proseromances-sealedletter>.
- 18 Water meadow can be both a general term and a specific one. In this paper, I use the more general term to refer to all intermittently flooded, riverside grazing meadows. The Kennet water meadows were of the more specific type, with channels and sluices to control the periods of immersion.
- 19 In a letter, Morris wrote that, on a trip to Oxford, Ruskin "refused to enter into our enthusiasm for the country and green meadows: said that there were too many butter cups and it was like poached eggs". William Morris to Charles Fairfax Murray, 26 May 1875, *Collected Letters Volume I*, 254. Ruskin also famously criticized John Everett Millais for choosing to paint *Ophelia* in a Thames tributary landscape along the Hogsmill in Surrey. Joan Evans, *John Ruskin* (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1970), 186.
- 20 Morris was not alone in his preference; many other Victorian artists looked to the easily accessed landscapes of the Home Counties and Thames Valley for inspiration. See Barringer, "The Harvest Field in the Railway Age".
- 21 Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. reorganized into Morris & Co. in 1875. Most patterns produced by the Firm are not attributed in contemporary sources, meaning the exact number of patterns Morris designed in any period is not entirely clear. While Morris was the primary fabric and wallpaper designer of the Firm until about 1885, other designers made contributions. My attributions for textile designs are drawn from Linda Parry, *William Morris Textiles* (London: V&A Publishing, 2013). I draw some wallpaper attributions from records of the Victoria and Albert Museum, while others are my own hypotheses. Only one Morris & Co. pattern designed after 1885 can be positively attributed to Morris: the 1887 wallpaper *Willow Bough*.
- 22 May Morris, *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, Vol. 2 (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1936), 36.
- 23 William Morris, "Some Hints on Pattern-Designing", in *The Collected Works of William Morris Volume XXII: Hopes and Fears for Art, Lectures on Art and Industry*, ed. May Morris (London: Longmans Green and Company, 1914), 176-177. The lecture was originally delivered to the Working Men's College at the Morris & Co. premises in Queen's Square in December 1881.
- 24 Morris, "Some Hints on Pattern-Designing", 179.
- 25 Morris, "Some Hints on Pattern-Designing", 195.
- 26 The nine patterns are: *Evenlode*, *Windrush*, *Kennet*, and *Wey* (1883); *Lodden*, *Wandle*, and *Cray* (1884); and *Lea* and *Medway* (1885).
- 27 See Caroline Arscott, "Morris: The River", in *William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones: Interlacings* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 177-201; and David Faldet, "The River at the Heart of Morris's Ecological Thought", in *Writing on the Image: Reading William Morris*, ed. David Latham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 73-84.
- 28 The source of the Thames in Gloucestershire is only 360 feet (110 meters) above sea level.
- 29 Parry, *William Morris Textiles*, 62.
- 30 Arscott, "Morris", 189.
- 31 The effects of Morris's flattening and layering are complex, especially when considered within the multiple-layered space of the Victorian interior. I am in the processes of developing the subject in far greater depth for a book project.
- 32 Mark Robinson, "The Environmental Archaeology and Historical Ecology of Kelmscott", in *William Morris's Kelmscott: Landscape and History*, ed. Alan Crossley, Tom Hassall, and Peter Salway (Bollington: Windgather Press, in association with the Society of Antiquaries of London, 2007), 29.
- 33 Morris, "Some Hints on Pattern-Designing", 200.
- 34 About two meters high.

- 35 The single and double designation for blooms is used by horticulturalists and botanists. Single blooms, as the term implies, have one layer of petals, but a double can have two or more. Generally, single blooms are wild species or closer to wild progenitors, and double blooms have been bred to that appearance.
- 36 The garden plants of Morris's designs are discussed in a number of books, most recently in Rowan Bain, *William Morris's Flowers* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2019).
- 37 This process is so common and has gone on for so long that botanists are unsure if some English countryside plants were originally wild or are centuries-old introductions from gardens. Snakeshead fritillary, discussed in more detail below, is one such case. Andy Byfield, "A Chequered History: The Snakeshead Fritillary", *The Guardian*, 26 April 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/gardening-blog/2013/apr/26/snakeshead-fritillary>.
- 38 Paul Sterry and J.R. Press, *A Photographic Guide to Wildflowers of Britain and Europe* (London: New Holland, 2001), 72. A well-known example of a plant that grows on disturbed ground is the common poppy (*Papaver rhoeas*), a common meadow species which bloomed in such abundance on the soil of First World War battlefields.
- 39 Sterry and Press, *A Photographic Guide to Wildflowers of Britain and Europe*, 19.
- 40 Byfield, "A Chequered History".
- 41 Letter William Morris to Jane Morris, 5 April 1890, in *The Collected Letters of William Morris Volume III: 1889–1892*, ed. Norman Kelvin (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press: 1996), 152; and Diary entries, April 1895, British Library, Add MS 45407 B-45411.
- 42 "Ecology (n.)", *The Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ecology>; and "Ecosystem (n.)", *The Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ecosystem>.
- 43 Jason Edwards and Imogen Hart, "Introduction", in *Rethinking the Interior, c.1867–1896: Aestheticism and Arts and Crafts*, ed. Jason Edwards and Imogen Hart (Farnham: Ashgate, 2017), 13.
- 44 MacCarthy, *William Morris*, 111. The history of Morris & Co. production and sales can be complicated, especially for their first fifteen years of operation, but the Oxford Street shop opened in 1879 and the textiles were produced at the Firm's factory in Merton, southwest London, from 1881 onwards. The wallpapers were always printed by Jeffrey & Co. in Islington.
- 45 While works such as Linda Parry's *William Morris Textiles* and her essay "Interior Decoration" have documented some nineteenth-century Morris & Co. interiors, the availability of sources has restricted broader and more critical study; see Parry, "Interior Decoration", in *William Morris*, ed. Anna Mason (London: Thames & Hudson and V&A, 2021), 160–181. Works on the subject tend to concentrate either on large-scale interior commissions by the Firm or on well-documented "artistic" interiors such as those of the Ionides and Howard families, Edward Linley Sambourne, and Emery Walker—members of Morris's social circle and, in some cases, close family friends. This material reflects cohesive Morris & Co. designs and the tastes of Morris's circle. It cannot, however, fully represent the consumption or reception of Morris designs, because it excludes the myriad customers who bought the Firm's goods in smaller amounts and whose homes were not documented in the same ways. While many of these consumers were likely of "artistic" taste themselves, we know very little about them. If records of their interiors do exist, they will be scattered in family photographs, letters, diaries, and Morris & Co. sales ledgers. Additionally, scholarship to date has concentrated on documentation and has not interrogated how even the most well-known consumers thought about Morris & Co. objects or their designer. Thus, the use and reception of Morris & Co. products is due for an extensive critical study, one which might engage with the breadth of the Firm's audience and the complexity of the objects themselves.

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“The River Seemed Almost Turned to Blood”: The Tooley Street Fire

Nancy Rose Marshall

Abstract

This article considers representations of a fire that broke out at Cotton’s Wharf in Tooley Street, London, in 1861 as a case study that reveals a debate about the status of Britain as a global power. Such discussions were fuelled by the three influences of extractive imperial capitalism, a financial system predicated on speculation, and a new investment in the authority of images as records. On multiple levels, images of the Tooley Street fire—a spectacular blaze demolishing the spoils of empire—thematized material transformation in ways that vacillated between reassurance and doubt about the foundational, if shaky, Victorian tenet that nothing was ever lost but rather was in a state of perpetual metamorphosis, infinitely renewable and replaceable. Two new practices of risk-taking—speculation and fire insurance—were likewise predicated on a structure of perpetual substitution, which was also the structure of representation itself. After establishing the various types of illustrations of the Tooley Street fire in terms of their purpose and audience, this article evaluates the principal goods lost in the blaze—cotton and tallow—with regard to their cultural and economic meanings in 1861. It concludes by suggesting that mid-century conceptions of the element of fire resonated with the institutional logic of certain structures of modernity.

Authors

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Introduction

*The river seemed almost turned to blood, but so bright and lurid in its deep glow, that it actually appeared like a stream of fire.*¹

Starting on 22 June 1861, a blaze ignited at Cotton's Wharf in Tooley Street near London Bridge, Southwark. It burned for over two weeks, demolishing three acres and some £2 million or more of goods and property, as well as taking the lives of at least six men, including the captain of the fire brigade, James Braidwood. As a map of the damage suggests, the fire extended along the south bank for a quarter of a mile from St. Olave's Church (now gone) to Battle Bridge-stairs at Beale's Wharf and destroyed a block of buildings three hundred yards wide (fig. 1).² Unlike the picturesquely decaying, modest-scale sites of traditional London shipping, portrayed in James McNeill Whistler's *Thames Set* (1859–1861) and treated in other essays in this issue, this location was dominated by modern multi-story brick warehouses. The two spots were, however, seen in relation to one another in the way they portrayed extreme contrasts in close proximity along the Thames—between old and new building styles, between modes of mercantilism, and between a sail-driven and a steam-driven economy. Not everyone was in favor of the changes signified by the extensive amassing of capital in the new warehouses. This article considers representations of this famous Thames-side fire, which Londoners commemorated for decades, as a case study that reveals a debate playing out about the status of Britain as a global power fueled by the triple influences of extractive imperial capitalism, a financial system predicated on speculation, and a new investment in the authority of the image as record.³ On multiple levels, these images of a spectacular fire demolishing the spoils of empire thematize material transformation in ways that vacillate between reassurance and doubt about the foundational if shaky Victorian tenet that nothing was ever lost but rather was merely in a state of perpetual metamorphosis, infinitely renewable and replaceable—that is, representable.⁴ After first establishing the various types of illustrations of the Tooley Street fire in terms of their purpose and audience, I evaluate the principal goods lost in the blaze (cotton and tallow) with regard to their cultural and economic meanings in 1861. Considering how these issues in turn were informed and constituted by new practices of risk-taking—speculation and fire insurance—and the ways in which the aesthetic category of the sublime deployed in news accounts of the fire worked both to support and to undermine some of the essential principles bolstering the British Empire, I suggest ways in which mid-century conceptions of the element of fire resonated with the institutional logic of certain structures of modernity.

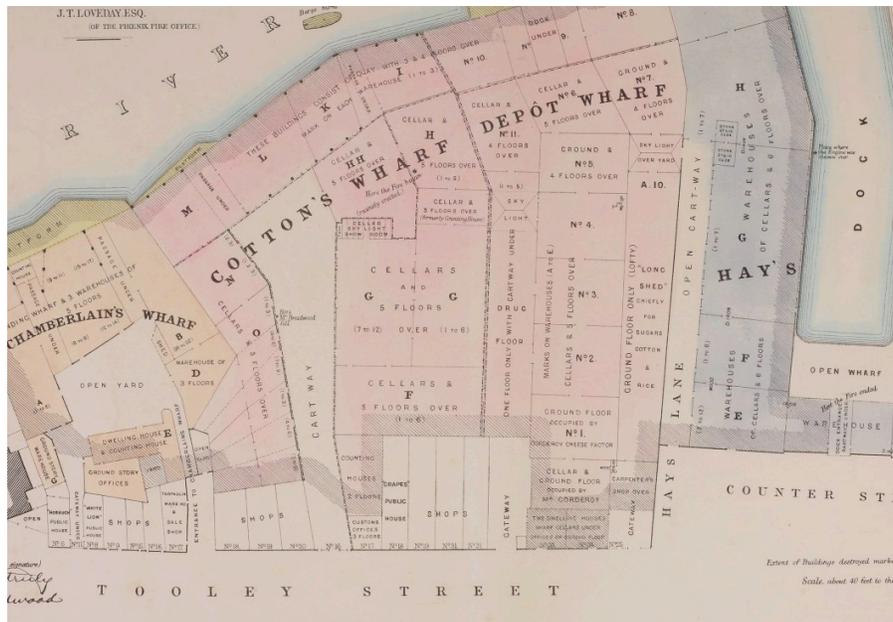


Figure 1.

James Thomas Loveday, Plan of buildings destroyed at Chamberlain's Wharf, Cotton's Wharf and Hay's Wharf in the Cotton's Wharf Fire, Tooley Street (detail), 1861, lithograph, 60 × 49 cm. Collection of London Metropolitan Archives / London Picture Archive. Digital image courtesy of London Picture Archive (All rights reserved).

Representations of the Tooley Street Fire

The proliferation of popular print reproductions of the Tooley Street fire images suggests that they performed important representational work. The meanings generated by the prints were by no means uniform or consistent, but rather varied greatly between the mainstream and more obscure publishing outlets. An example of the former is the highly successful *Illustrated London News's* plate entitled “The Great Fire in Southwark: Scene at Cotton’s Wharf on Sunday Morning at Two o’Clock”, which portrays rectangular, multi-story warehouses ablaze, their crumbling walls filling with molten rubble (fig. 2).⁵ Like virtually all the news accounts, the accompanying text in the *Illustrated London News* spoke at length of the massive amount of property destroyed. It noted, first, that the value was estimated at about £2 million, then listed items in detail.⁶ The fact that the goods that went up in smoke at this moment constituted a portrait of Empire in the form of its trade stuffs was not lost on commentators; as *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* observed, “scarce a country under heaven but contributed its share of precious fuel to that wasteful flame”.⁷ The *Leisure Hour* even listed the countries of origin of many items, such as ginger from Jamaica, and coffee from Trinidad and Ceylon.⁸



Figure 2.

The Great Fire in Southwark: Scene at Cotton's Wharf, *Illustrated London News*, 29 June 1861, 618, 1861, engraving. Collection of the Mary Evans Picture Library. Digital image courtesy of Mary Evans Picture Library (all rights reserved).

Given the reputation of the *Illustrated London News* for trustworthy, firsthand reporting, the newspaper's illustration of the Tooley Street conflagration was influential and copied closely by other printmakers.⁹ In contrast to the irregular clouds speckled with sparks rolling off to the left, the horizontal lines of the river and boats create a sense of order in the foreground. Due to the lack of color, the actual extent of the flames is uncertain, although everything rendered in plain white is clearly blazingly hot. In general, the black and white takes on the matter-of-fact quality of the printed page. A small rowboat angles in from the right of center, giving us an entry into the space, but our precise viewpoint is somewhere vague yet safe, floating in front of the scene. The visual rhetoric of the engraving therefore affords the viewer a position that conveys both a sense of witnessing an event and a controlling, distancing frame. Its one-point linear perspective, carefully observed proliferating detail, and elevated view all conform to the ways in which Andrea Korda sees the *Illustrated London News*'s style as working to generate "instrumental realism" by denying the presence of a fabricating hand behind the image: "When an image is understood to hold this natural relationship to the world, it suppresses critical examination of actual process of production—viewers are discouraged from questioning the formal choices that influence the meaning of the image".¹⁰ We do not doubt the scene's verisimilitude or consider that the artist made choices to produce it. Rather,

we accept its ideological agenda as part of its apparent authenticity. Thinking with Korda, we might look to the *News's* influential representation to underscore mainstream conservative values.

Notably, despite the terrific blaze, there seems to be no immediate threat to human life, with the spectators, most of whom are men whose dress suggests they are predominantly workers, keeping their distance from the fire. On 6 July, when the fire was still burning but under control, the *Illustrated London News* published a narrative plan of the fire, showing with exactitude the boundaries of the damage, the spot where it started, the location of the death of Braidwood, and “here the fire ended”, designed in such a way as to read from left to right, its organization correlating with our expectations of narrative (fig. 3). Such an image suggests a crisis that has been thoroughly investigated, comprehended, ordered, and managed.

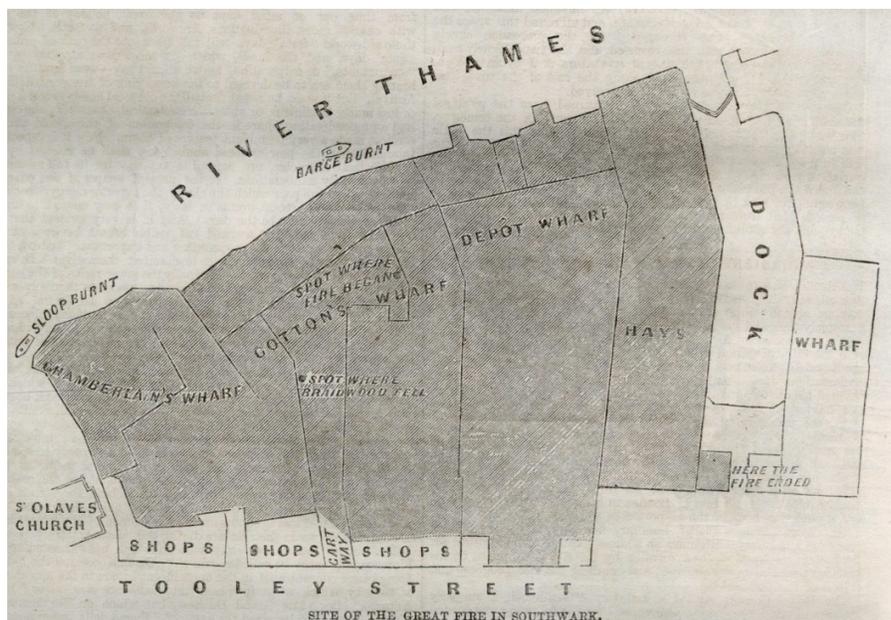


Figure 3.

Plan of the Great Fire in Southwark, *Illustrated London News*, 6 July 1861, 19, 1861, engraving. Collection of the Mary Evans Picture Library. Digital image courtesy of Mary Evans Picture Library (all rights reserved).

Other representations of the same moment during the fire, lacking the hegemonic status enjoyed by the *News*, offer contrasting styles and meanings. Unlike the illustrations embedded in a newspaper intended to be held, leafed through, and read, colored prints such as “The Great Fire Near London Bridge on Saturday 22 June 1861” stood on their own (fig. 4). A purchaser would engage with such a print one-on-one, for its own sake, storing it in a portfolio or framing it on the wall for the sole purpose of looking at it. As its caption proudly reads, it is “printed in colours by P. Macdonald, 30 Great Sutton Street, Clerkenwell”, and that fact immediately

strikes the viewer. ¹¹ The surface of the paper is positively alight with bright, saturated patches of yellow, red, and orange. Orange, a warm color, advances, while blue, a cool one, recedes, with Macdonald in a small way echoing famous oil paintings of London fires that drew for their visual effects on this color contrast, notably Joseph Mallord William Turner's *Burning of the Houses of Parliament* of 1835 (Philadelphia Art Museum). ¹² Its garish tints and repeated simplified forms, along with its agitated, peculiar representation of fire, mark Macdonald's image out as a different order of representation from the cool reportage of the *Illustrated London News*. To the left of the print, a building wall angles into a very weak stab at creating some form of depth, but without any real system of perspective. To the right, London Bridge terminates equally awkwardly. Deficient in the reality effects of the *Illustrated London News*, the work is intended as an appealing souvenir of a current event. Heightening its claims as well as its colors, the caption states the fire was still burning a month after it began and estimates damages at up to £4 million. ¹³



Figure 4.

P. Macdonald, *The Great Fire Near London Bridge on Saturday, 22 June 1861*, 1861, woodcut, 51 × 43 cm. Collection of the London Metropolitan Archives / London Picture Archive. Digital image courtesy of London Picture Archive (all rights reserved).

Also unlike the *Illustrated London News* image, Macdonald's view packs in the bodies. In a portrayal that echoes contemporary descriptions of dangerously overcrowded "skiffs and wherries" that "made a dense and far-stretching mass", human forms and almost fifty boats scatter across a river of orange and yellow that inexplicably turns to blue and green in a foreground patch too large to be cast by the steamboat floating there.¹⁴ The steamboat, featured in most other representations of the scene (although cropped to the right of the *Illustrated London News* version), is crammed with viewers, as we also see in S. Marks & Sons' "A View of the Great Fire in Southwark: From London Bridge!", which similarly emphasizes in cookie-cutter replication the presence of bourgeois spectators (fig. 5). Another cheap colored print, Read & Co.'s "The Great Fire Near London Bridge Saturday June 22 1861", takes advantage of its medium, the new chromolithograph, to produce more naturalistic, detailed descriptions of the people, emphasizing even more distinctly the range of British subjects who came out to observe this scene (figs. 6 and 7).¹⁵ While the *Illustrated London News* limits its portrayal of the crowds both in size and in class identity, preferring perhaps to suggest that most of the individuals on the scene had some actual role to play in the fire management, the colored prints portray people who are here purely to watch.

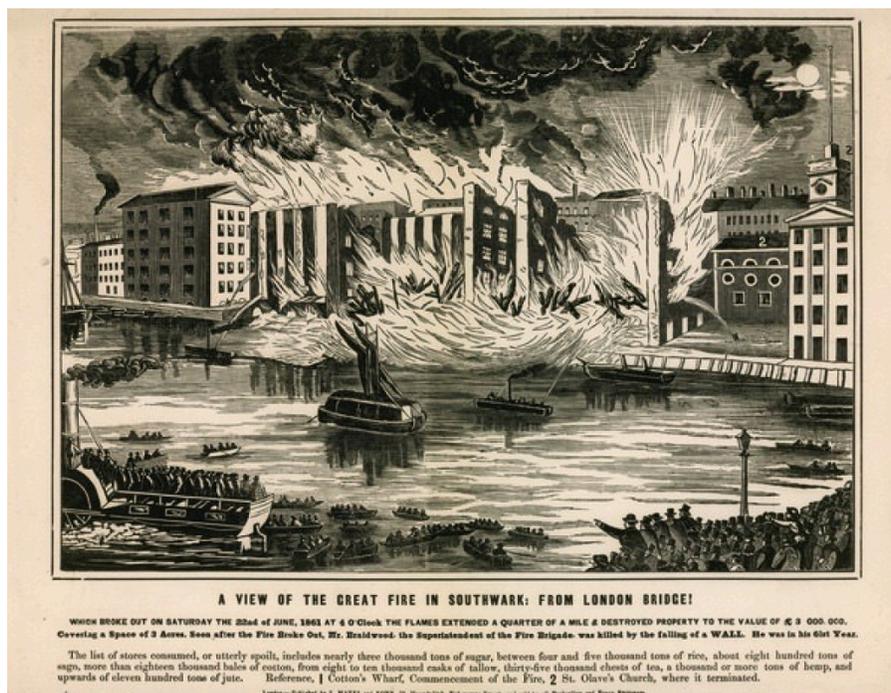


Figure 5.

S. Marks & Son, View of the Great Fire in Southwark: From London Bridge, 1861, woodcut, 46 x 38 cm. Collection of the Look and Learn History Picture Archive / Peter Jackson Collection. Digital image courtesy of Look and Learn History Picture Archive / Peter Jackson Collection (all rights reserved).



Figure 6.
Read & Co., The Great Fire Near London Bridge Saturday, June 22nd 1861, 1861, lithograph, 41.1 × 34.8 cm. Digital image courtesy of Alamy Stock Photo (All rights reserved).



Figure 7.
Read & Co., The Great Fire Near London Bridge Saturday, June 22nd 1861 (detail), 1861, lithograph, 41.1 × 34.8 cm. Digital image courtesy of Alamy Stock Photo (All rights reserved).

The images that emphasized Londoners looking at the fire—and at each other—showed the people to themselves in a format that the vast majority of them would be able to take home with them. Originating in the late 1830s, and marketed as an excitingly new and cheap color process, chromolithography developed various ways to bring colorful images to the masses. ¹⁶ Read & Co.'s "The Great Fire" cost, it notes, twopence. Inexpensive both to make and to purchase, this form allowed for mass distribution. Macdonald's and S. Marks & Sons' prints are other types of equally cheap colored printing. ¹⁷

Such engravings and lithographs took individual experiences and translated them into representations that all could share, in essence helping to create a public sphere. The Tooley Street fire was a "current event" that promised to enter into the historical record; the portability of prints, alongside the fact that they could be individually possessed, put more Britons in charge of producing and preserving the national narrative. Newly accessible pieces of contemporary history in keepsake form preserved a collective story by distilling the ephemeral news of the day, and many such urban disasters throughout the century, like the famous fire that demolished the Houses of Parliament in 1835, generated similar prints. For some publishers, there may have been an ethical as well as a financial incentive in conveying history in this format into people's homes. While it is challenging to retrieve a full picture of the social position or personal politics of the printers issuing these images, P. Macdonald is listed as the secretary of London's first ragged school, an indication of his intentions to assist the poor and his likely engagement at least to some degree in issues related to social reform. ¹⁸ Certainly his print, cheaply produced and sold, was meant for a mass audience.

Notably, both Macdonald and Read & Co. were more direct about the danger to human life than the *Illustrated London News*, as both included markers of the trauma of the event itself. The warehouse walls to the right in the Read plate are in the very act of crashing, suggesting perhaps the moment that Braidwood died under a portion of collapsing building (fig. 8). Moreover, in the Macdonald print, a patch of orange to the right, surrounded by yellow and black toothy jagged lines, helps us understand that the water itself is burning. Just underneath a starburst explosion from the warehouse, a boat is visibly on fire, its occupants waving desperately. On the left occurs another alarming incident of a man jumping or falling into the water from a boat with a burning sail (fig. 9). People in nearby craft raise their arms in response, creating a community identified with an empathetic and suspenseful fear for the safety of its members. Macdonald is recording actual events of the first evening, in which a sloop (variously also termed a "schooner") and a barge caught fire. ¹⁹ Read's version also includes two burning boats, the barge to the left by the warehouses and the abandoned sloop in front of the

disintegrating wall, its lifeboat half submerged. These passages of a terrifyingly close proximity between human beings and a deadly element acknowledge not only the episodes themselves but also the tragic loss of life among those desperate enough to attempt to retrieve property freed from the warehouses by the fire.

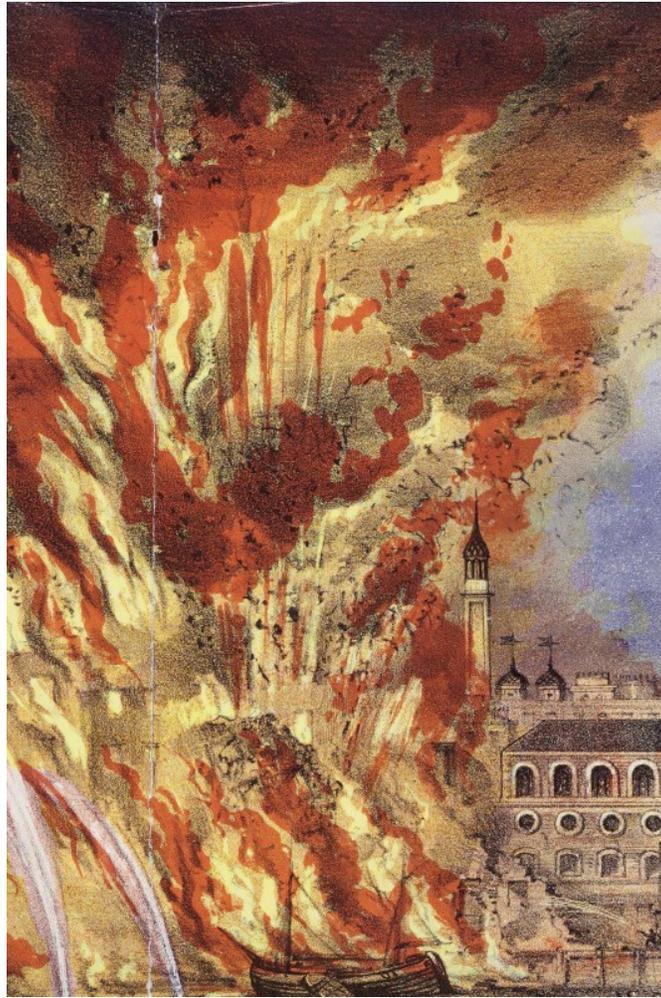


Figure 8.

Read & Co., The Great Fire Near London Bridge
Saturday, June 22nd 1861 (detail), 1861, lithograph,
41.1 × 34.8 cm. Digital image courtesy of Alamy Stock
Photo (All rights reserved).

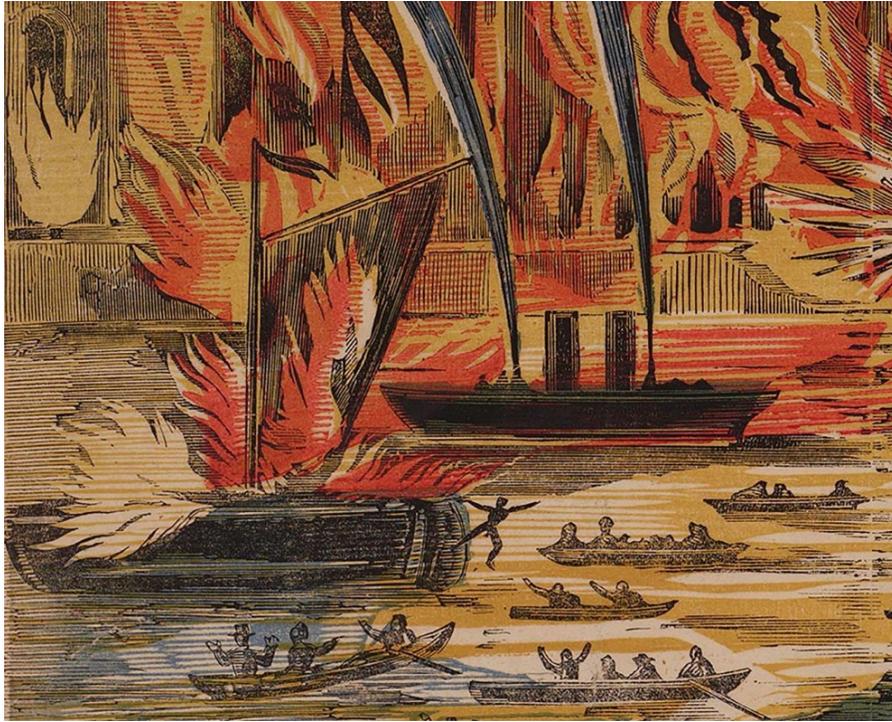


Figure 9.

Read & Co., *The Great Fire Near London Bridge Saturday, June 22nd 1861* (detail), 1861, lithograph, 41.1 × 34.8 cm. Digital image courtesy of Alamy Stock Photo (All rights reserved).

Reynolds's Miscellany went much farther than Macdonald and Read & Co. in its coverage of the deadly toll of the fire. A radical weekly that encouraged reform, founded by Chartist G.W.M. Reynolds, this paper included in its coverage an illustration with a barge alight and stalled against a pile of burning tallow, in front of which several figures, appearing ragged or bare-legged, gesticulate or leap from their small craft; to the right, two bearded men on a boat tow another wherry out of danger (fig. 10).²⁰ Spiky flames run from the lower left to the upper right of the image, indicating the extent of the unnatural condition of the burning river. This image conforms with Charlotte Boger's recollections that "boats with adventurous lads danced like dark specks on the water, to be suddenly enveloped by dark rings of flame, and the boys, in peril of their lives from the rival elements, were rescued".²¹

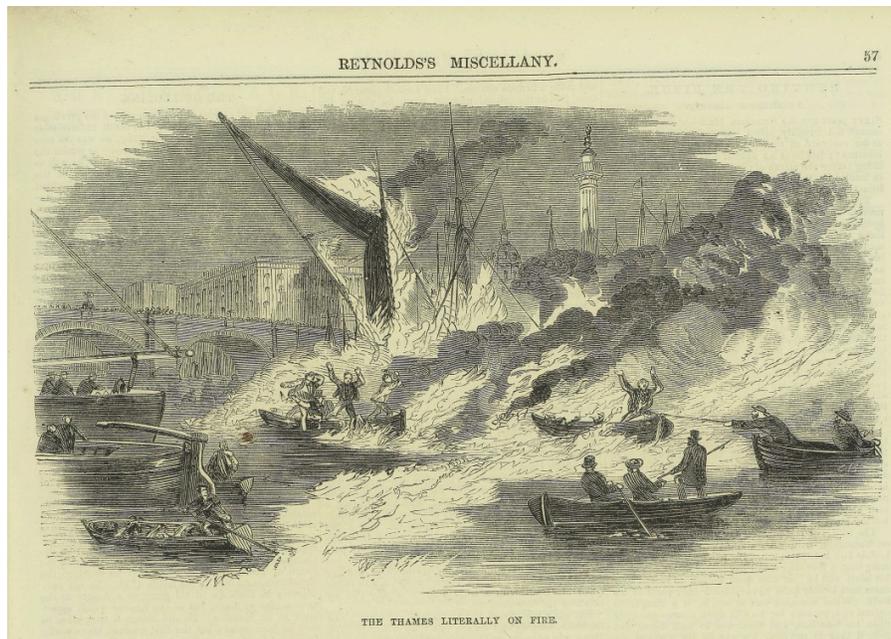


Figure 10.

Read & Co., *The Thames Literally on Fire, The Dreadful Fire in London*, *Reynolds's Miscellany* 27, no. 684 (20 July 1861): 57, 1861, engraving. Collection of the National Library of Scotland. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland (all rights reserved).

In her emphasis on adventure, however, Boger overlooks the major reason people risked entering the maelstrom of water and fire. In the Read & Co. print, one figure fishes something out of the river, a reminder that “many people, ... heedless of the terrific grandeur of the scene around them, were intent on filling their boats with the vast quantities of tallow and cotton floating the stream” (fig. 11).²² Unable to appreciate the sublimity of the spectacle, the poor saw only an opportunity to compete in a world of international trade from which they were usually excluded. Images that include both those in danger and those seeking to scavenge goods are therefore attentive to the variations in class response to this event. Indeed, the caption to Read & Co.’s lithograph, which portrays both burning boats and the man retrieving material from the river, notably observes that “many others” besides Braidwood and the merchant Peter Scott died. At least five nameless poor and working-class individuals were lost to history, while the gentlemen were not only celebrated but also given heroic burials.²³ One writer opined that it was “probable that the number of these unfortunate persons who thus fell victims to their rashness or cupidity, will never be ascertained”, but imagined that number to be “very many”.²⁴ For the popular printmakers, it was important to portray the bourgeoisie as witnesses both to the Tooley Street tragedy and to its working-class victims.

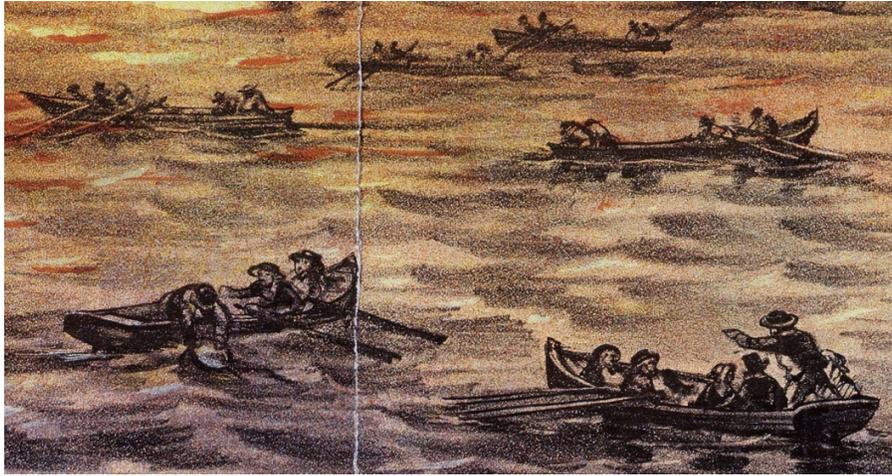


Figure 11.

Read & Co., *The Great Fire Near London Bridge Saturday, June 22nd 1861* (detail), 1861, lithograph, 41.1 × 34.8 cm. Digital image courtesy of Alamy Stock Photo (All rights reserved).

The Goods

However, the merchants, investors, and businessmen who ran the trade at Cotton's wharf and the surrounding warehouses also suffered losses in the fire, tellingly referred to by James Pyne, the editor of *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, as the “funereal pyre of the wealth of the world”.²⁵ Focusing on precisely what the man pulls from the river in the Read & Co. detail, as well as what is melting, burning, and floating in representations of the Tooley Street fire, helps us see the matter itself involved in this incident. The caption for the Read & Co. print emphasizes the “colossal warehouses” “filled with every variety of goods, among which were many of a highly combustible nature, which, igniting, exploded with awful crashes, lighting up the vast metropolis and country round for thirty miles”.²⁶ These goods took on an agency of their own, at times, like the fire itself, seeming to defy human management entirely.

The published cause of the fire was the spontaneous combustion of 1,000 tons of hemp, a product imported largely from Russia.²⁷ Others identified the source as the 1,009 tons of jute imported from Bengal.²⁸ “Spontaneous combustion”, as a final cause of a fire, tended to generate suspicion, as I will discuss in due course, but for now, taken as truth, it is a startling instance of a thing—hemp or jute—rebellious against its masters. Bill Brown's “thing theory” animates the world outside the human by noting that in some circumstances, the thingness of objects—their existence apart from our definitions or control, as when “you get bopped on the head by a falling nut”—becomes inescapable; as Brown reflects, “we begin to confront the

thingness of objects when they stop working for us ... when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily”.²⁹ In the context of the Tooley Street fire, hemp, jute, and many other goods certainly did just this. When considered in light of their flammability, these objects acquired agential powers, jute being considered especially dangerous. In an article on “another jute fire” in 1864, a reporter described this material’s performance in a fire: “it is up and doing in a second; and before a messenger can be despatched for the engines or an alarm bell rung, is master of the position”.³⁰ The goods at Tooley Street feature as star players in the accounts of the blaze, their agency as dynamic as that of the fire itself. Hemp autonomously begins to burn, setting off saltpeter and melting tallow, which in turn goes on a murderous and destructive rampage. Such resistance to human definitions and purposes continues as the things defy their original identity as private property and set off down the river, redistributing wealth in the process.

One of the liberated goods was cotton, frequently mentioned as an item in storage in the warehouses. A highly topical material in the wake of the outbreak of the American Civil War in May 1861, cotton was an ethically charged product that would have been associated with both the United States and India at the time. The *Leisure Hour* specifically identified the cotton in the fire as American; for many Britons, cotton was of course synonymous with the Confederacy, although opinions on the American conflict differed considerably.³¹ In the same newspapers reporting the blaze were accounts of the English ships detained in the blockade of Southern trade, reminding readers that Britain depended for its cotton on the Southern United States.³² Indeed the cotton trade in Great Britain, focused on the manufacture of cotton thread and cloth, was ultimately devastated by the loss of the American supply. As the country’s largest industry, in 1860 cotton employed up to a quarter of the British population, with estimates ranging from three million to six million.³³ Britain was therefore ambivalent about the outcome of the war, with some even actively looking forward to trading with the newly formed Confederate Nation.³⁴

In a melodramatic vein, the abolitionist *Illustrated London News* attempted to persuade its readership in June 1861 that the imminent catastrophe of losing the American cotton source was similar to the cholera epidemic of 1831 in terms of the country’s lack of preparation for devastation despite the obvious threat.³⁵ The article deployed sensationalizing language to make its point about willful ignoring of the peril: “People who live in the neighbourhood of a volcano are proverbially insensible to the perils of an eruption”.³⁶ It is not too great a stretch to see the cotton blazing away in the Tooley Street fire as a representation of erupting national disaster. Moreover, as the *Illustrated London News* forcefully reminded its readers, American cotton was

bloodstained; viewed in this light, its burning might have represented a vengeful justice served on those who hoped to profit from the labor of the enslaved.³⁷ Most news reports of the fire merely listed the cotton in terms of the amounts stored and destroyed, but the *Illustrated London News* was careful to identify it specifically as Indian (17,000 bales of Surat cotton, and 6,000 of Tinnevely).³⁸ This detail reflected and reinforced the *News's* position on the paramount importance of ending British dependence on American cotton for imperatives both financial and moral. The urgency of sourcing cotton from other locations spurred colonial cultivation at this time.³⁹

Joining cotton in the conflagration were 8,800 casks of tallow (worth £200,000), which melted, flowed into the Thames, and continued to burn.⁴⁰ A large surface area of the Thames was alight for hours; spraying the burning tallow with water only heightened the intensity of the flames (fig. 12). The unnatural green, orange, and yellow water in Macdonald's print points to the perverse conditions in which elements behave contrary to their nature: *pace* Adele and her claim to "set fire to the rain", this state of affairs should be an impossibility. Indeed the phrase "setting the Thames on fire" meant precisely this and was cited more than once in connection with the Tooley Street blaze.⁴¹

[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 12.

Chris Murphy, *Burning Tallow Hitting Water*, 2021, video. Digital image courtesy of Chris Murphy (all rights reserved).

Like the hemp and jute, tallow here rules its masters; outside natural law, it becomes another form altogether, a wild force of nature: it was described variously by witnesses as a "torrent", a "cataract", "cascades", or "rivers".⁴² In liquifying, it flowed beyond ownership, out of the bounded forms and spaces in which it had been contained. Tallow was valuable, primarily used to make candles and soap but also to lubricate various types of machinery, including the sort of steam press that would have printed the images representing the dramatic display it helped to produce; prices for boatfuls ran to as much as £30, which for some represented "boundless wealth, out of boundless ruin", as Pyne characterized the situation.⁴³ The *Saturday Review* similarly remarked on "the diffusion of wealth caused by this vast sacrifice of property": "In many a humble home the tradition of this night's golden harvest will be long preserved. It saw the destruction of some large fortunes and the accumulation of many small ones".⁴⁴ The scavenger economy appears to have temporarily triumphed here, at least in many

accounts. Like the tallow itself, the working classes portrayed in the prints are therefore interfering with the economic system represented by the Tooley Street warehouses.

In the center of the prints, then, is the metamorphosis of matter, in the case of tallow from a solid to a liquid and then a gas.⁴⁵ Spectators of the fire itself would remember its terrible smell, which “polluted the atmosphere of London for upwards of a fortnight”.⁴⁶ Pyne observed the physical effects of the onslaught of odor: “We felt sick and ill; for all night long ... we had been half-suffocated by tallow fumes, which ... I hold to be the very nastiest stench that can be inhaled without stupefaction”.⁴⁷ The tallow also caused a visible mess, as the streets and alleys in the area were slippery and full of a “most offensive smell” caused by the substance oozing up to ankle deep.⁴⁸ Nearby sewers collected the matter and also became a potential explosive threat.⁴⁹

The disgusting odor was a haunting reminder that the “pyre” was all too real, given the innumerable animal bodies that were burning here. Formed from rendered beef or sheep fat, tallow lit and lubricated the industrial revolution, at the cost of a number of animal lives that was both countless and exponentially growing.⁵⁰ The vile stench would also have been a clear violation of Nuisances Removal Acts designed to control the environmental impacts of the “offensive trades” (such as slaughterhouses, tallow makers, and tanners) in London. Clearly, catastrophic fires such as Tooley Street represented dramatic resistance to the various environmental initiatives undertaken in London by the 1860s, particularly regarding the Thames and sanitary reform. From the 1840s, in the wake of Edwin Chadwick’s reports, various boards were established to regulate organic pollution affecting the Thames.⁵¹ Although less remarked upon, vast amounts of animal waste from numerous small businesses joined with the infamous sewage to create the noxious conditions of the Thames culminating in the Great Stink of 1857.⁵² As a fouling substance, tallow would have contaminated the river and left a lasting effect on its ecosystem.⁵³ Moreover, the extreme heat absorbed by the river, along with the lack of oxygen due to the surface covering, would have caused flora and fauna die-off, at least in the short term. In terms of air pollution, the Alkali Acts of the 1860s sought to curb industrial air pollution, while the Smoke Nuisance Abatement Act of 1853 focused on “black smoke”.⁵⁴ The prints of Tooley Street make clear the feebleness of such efforts at mitigating deleterious human influence on the environment in the face of a colossal industrial disaster such as a warehouse fire, especially in their emphasis on the supposedly banned “black smoke” generated both by the steam launches in the prints and by the fire itself.

Countering the obvious fears set in play by such cataclysmic damage to the water and air was a persistent belief that rivers were self-cleansing organisms, capable of absorbing and neutralizing any amount of human-produced effluvium; such a view, and its parallel attitude that plants possessed a boundless ability to neutralize smoke and pollution, would have made it possible to relish the sublime sensory assault of the Tooley Street fire without concerns for its environmental consequences.⁵⁵ The “numberless mouths, of grass and shrubs, and trees ... purify the air”, maintained a school textbook, observing that “man ... is a great spoiler of the air. How can it be then that the air is as pure, as bright, as clean to-day, as it was a hundred ages ago? A very beautiful arrangement exists to keep it in perfect order”.⁵⁶ The very element of fire itself was the reassuring evidence of a balanced cycle, noted the *English Mechanic*, in which plants captured and then released energy repeatedly: “everything goes out and returns. ... once-imprisoned but now released gases pass into the atmosphere again and thus are fitted for proceeding on a similar round; and so on, forever”.⁵⁷ Combustion was but a temporary transference of matter into other forms; corruption of air and water always a reversible condition.

The stink might also have signaled that something else was rotten in the heart of the Empire. As it happens, just at this very moment, tallow had become an example of a good whose value had been falsely valued by manipulation of the price by dubious practices of Russian businessmen who stockpiled and then charged exorbitant amounts for it. Three-quarters of the tallow in England came from Russia.⁵⁸ By deliberately buying up the product in Britain, the Moscow group “caused tallow to reach a fictitious price in the market so very considerably above its real value as to seriously prejudice its sale”.⁵⁹ At this point British consumers began to fight back by substituting other oils and developing tallow trade with other countries, but Russia was able to maintain this high price until June 1861, when the market crashed and they took a financial hit somewhere between £300,000 and £500,000.⁶⁰

Tallow therefore represented a trade good that was subject to what Tamara Wagner calls “new motif-structures” created by the “economic uncertainty” and other aspects of the new finance capital system.⁶¹ At mid-century, Victorian Britain experienced volatile economic conditions, speculation being one of the causes of financial crises.⁶² As Britain moved away from industrial production and consumption of goods to an economy based on credit and speculation—the “begetting of money from money”, in Anna Kornbluh’s phrase—the 1850s became a turning point.⁶³ In 1861, then, a system in which goods such as tallow had once had “intrinsic worth”, making the “fictitious” valuations of a bubble obvious, was disappearing under the new economy in which value was continually fluid, flickering, and inconstant.⁶⁴

Tallow was therefore associated with risk for both its intrinsic material qualities (flammable) and its human-defined attributes (fluctuating price). Burning tallow, a profoundly unstable substance producing both a horrific stench and the unnatural behavior of elements, pointed to the idea of financial instability at the heart of capitalism.

Indeed, the volatile economic conditions of the era metaphorically correlate with the uncertainty of safety in new city spaces. Like devastating ruin from fire, financial speculation and ruin were aspects of urban modernity. Wagner cites Peter Brooks's observation that, in the nineteenth century, money came to represent "the fluidity and vaporousness of things in an economy that can swiftly move from boom to bust and recycle".⁶⁵ In a world in which nothing is solid or stable, money is merely representation itself, the ultimate example of a thing standing in for something else.

Fire Insurance

Another novel aspect of the contemporary London economy, and one similarly dependent on the power of representation, was fire insurance. All of the prints include firemen and boats, making it clear that the goods in question were insured, as at this time the London fire brigade was made up solely of employees of a number of private fire insurance companies.⁶⁶ Such images patently question the efficacy of such a system, as in fact did many Britons at the time.

The repeated emphasis on the monetary value of the losses portrayed in text and images of the Tooley Street fire was, on the one hand, a way of visualizing and measuring it in social terms; on the other, the staggering numbers would have set in play the question of whether that loss was irrevocable or recuperable. As Paul Fyfe trenchantly observes in his book on the changing definitions of risk in the Victorian period, *By Accident or Design*, a large urban fire "blazed away with the spectacle of risk unmanaged".⁶⁷ Fyfe perceives the extent to which it was actually in the interests of fire insurance companies to play up the losses and dangers of major fires, such that they often fed the newspapers their reports directly: "Catastrophes could translate into big business for insurance companies and newspapers alike ... Fire insurance transformed the very impediments to its operation into its best publicity. With their sensational and sympathetic storylines, fire reports doubled as advertisements for market-ready conceptions of loss and compensation".⁶⁸

In an article after the Tooley Street fire, Charles Dickens's journal *All the Year Round* observed that "the insurance offices, while they pay out rather heavily with one hand, receive something back with the other in the shape of the

premiums paid upon policies taken out under the influence of extraordinary fear".⁶⁹ As Fyfe found, "big fires might be costly but also frightened new clients into the market".⁷⁰ The companies were in need of such boosts, as they tended to operate at a loss, and by 1850 had only managed to cover half the potential properties in Britain.⁷¹ Indeed rates for insuring the warehouses rose after the Tooley Street fire.⁷² Not surprisingly, then, the hyping of the dangers inherent in doing business in this area appeared in many guises, such as the *Daily Telegraph's* lengthy paragraph, reprinted in the *Illustrated London News*, listing historical conflagrations back to the Great Fire of 1666: "it is in the close vicinage of below bridge that the Fire King seems to have his favorite haunt. One might almost fancy that there was a smouldering volcano at either end of London-bridge".⁷³ Utilizing volcanic imagery both naturalized the human-created disaster and made it all the more imperative that such a chaotic threat be predicted and mastered. Such repeated emphases on the danger of this site encouraged the sale of more insurance policies to warehouse and other area property owners. In part, then, the representation of the fires played into the hands of the businesses involved in risk management.

Insurance therefore grew hand in hand with private property-owning classes, marketed as a way of mitigating their risk, encouraging development, and securing the social order.⁷⁴ Risk mitigation involved an empirical analysis of evidence to determine natural patterns from what might seem chaotic events and fed on vivid eyewitness accounts; this, then, is what we see on display in the prints and reports of the Tooley Street fire. Fyfe insightfully perceives that, like the British financial system in general, fire insurance was bound up in the ways it was represented, depending on writing and image-making to come into being.⁷⁵ Representations of risk therefore became bound up in a complex socio-economic system supporting the status quo. In *Victorian Writing About Risk*, however, Elaine Freedgood argues that seemingly insignificant, ephemeral texts—a category into which one can place the Tooley Street fire prints and news accounts—can in fact often do important cultural work in the way they reveal conflicts in the political unconscious.⁷⁶ Often such texts direct attention to the very thing they are attempting to master or occlude. In the case of images of risk, Freedgood analyzes how some of these might work "to expose how cultural deployments of risk are used to moralize and naturalize the economic and political institutions of industrial, imperial culture".⁷⁷ Images of the Tooley Street fire, then, could be understood in part as a way of encouraging yet more capital towards global imperial trade, because risk was an important "legitimator of profit or fortune".⁷⁸ At the same time, however, we might see

these works pointing to the man behind the curtain, helping us see the ideological mechanisms clunkily chugging away (fueled, of course, by steam power).

Sublime Spectacle

The visually and verbally spectacular representations of the Tooley Street fire are ambivalent in their encouragement of the ongoing development of capitalist concerns. On the one hand, they play into the definitions of risk as simultaneously painful and pleasurable, identified by Freedgood as a structuring principle in advancing economic expansion.⁷⁹ A common rhetorical conceit in the accounts of the fire was to invoke the aesthetic category of the sublime, repeatedly acknowledging the puniness of human efforts in the face of natural fury. In the same way that many of the prints portray tiny, ant-like human figures, newspapers focused on the overwhelming force and scale of the blaze; the *Illustrated History of the Great Fire* solemnly remarked: “we are fond of talking of the great progress we have made in engineering science, and all the other sciences which tend to the comfort and preservation of man; but the present calamity is a terrible lesson of the futility of human efforts”.⁸⁰ The deployment of the sublime in visual and verbal representations of the Tooley Street fire fits tidily into Freedgood’s framework of the painful pleasure accorded to risk in this system.

First codified by Edmund Burke in 1757, the sublime was commonly deployed in representations of an inescapable or terrifyingly immense deadly force, the final cause of which was God.⁸¹ One might distinguish in the sublimely impressive representations of the Tooley Street fire, then, a resignation to the workings of fate and a foregrounding of what Robin Pearson, a historian of fire insurance, has identified as older modes of behavior relating accident to the mysterious workings of the divine. As Fyfe similarly found, religion offered the comforting belief that there was an established plan for all on earth, and that “anything seemingly random would resolve into patterns given a large enough view, revealing general laws established by God”.⁸² By the nineteenth century, calamities were increasingly associated with foreign lands seen as disorganized and backward, dominated by superstition and resignation to fate. Yet, Pearson holds, the push for more safety regulations and standards in Britain was countered by the continued existence of the belief that disasters were in the end such a matter of chance as to be unforeseeable.⁸³ One could read in the massed crowds a fatalistic acceptance of the disaster, a recognition but tolerance of the pain it caused.

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On the other hand, the emphasis in representation on the vast numbers of spectators clearly enjoying the visual display without any true concerns for their safety undercuts any notion that the scene was in fact truly terrifying. Rather, its aesthetic pleasures outweighed its horrors. Indeed, numerous accounts described the Tooley Street fire as a grand spectacle, with more or less embarrassment about the fact that Londoners and other Britons traveled to the city for days and weeks to see the fire and its ruins. As many prints suggest, part of the spectacle was therefore the people themselves (fig. 13).

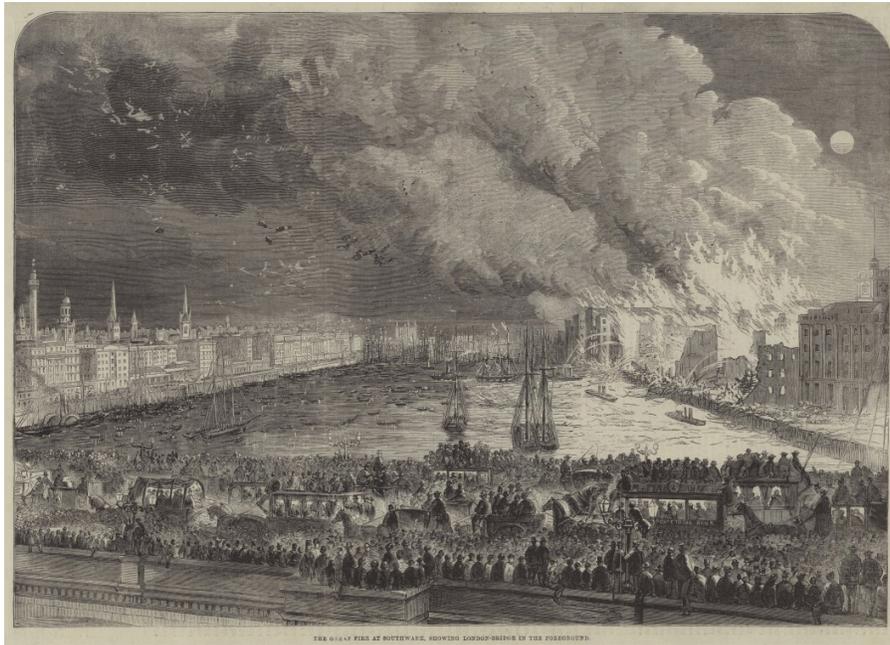


Figure 13.

The Great Fire at Southwark, Showing London Bridge in the Foreground, *Illustrated Times*, 29 June 1861, 425, 1861, engraving. Collection of Look and Learn History Picture Archive / Bridgeman Images. Digital image courtesy of Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved).

Writers were frequently provoked to compare the fire to popular London sites of spectacular entertainment. As “a stimulant of the popular mind”, what ought to have been a catastrophe became merely another modern urban sensation, engaging the viewer through heightened sentiment or novelty but not producing any serious or lasting effect.⁸⁵ Even the *Illustrated London News*’s sedate print became the basis for a blazingly colored magic lantern slide around 1900, morphing from serious reportage into a light distraction for children (ironically, it was part of a series detailing the heroism of the firefighters, who of course initially failed in their task at Tooley Street) (fig. 14). The *Saturday Review* declared that “incomparably the finest exhibition in or near London during the past week has been the fire in Tooley-street”.⁸⁶ Some reporters explicitly linked the event to painted stage sets of the sort seen in the fiery shows at amusement parks: admitted the *Saturday*

Review, “it was impossible to avoid ... yielding to the delusion that we are at some grand entertainment on the model of the Surrey Gardens, and that this is a canvas effigy of some city with a foreign name which is burning in felicitous make-believe for the amusement of the crowd up on the bridge”. ⁸⁷



Figure 14.

W. Butcher & Sons, *Our Firemen*, Primus Junior Lecturer's Series, circa 1901, lithographic magic lantern slide.

Such references were intended to suggest a mass taste that thrived on forms that were easily comprehended and in some way experientially impressive—in other words, characteristic of the new more trivial or superficial aesthetics of London entertainment. Surrey Gardens was a well-known pleasure site in early Victorian London, which mounted a number of outdoor panoramas involving destruction by flames, starting in 1837–1838 with the subject of Mount Vesuvius and following this with other volcanoes and even scenes replicating the Great Fire of 1666. ⁸⁸ Given that the Tooley Street area had been characterized as a “smoldering volcano”, and London’s inhabitants as carelessly ignoring the threat to their cotton stores in the manner of incautious dwellers near a crater, it is perhaps not surprising that descriptions and illustrations sometimes described the 1861 fire as being

“like a volcano in eruption”.⁸⁹ Indeed, *L'illustration's* dazzlingly explosive image is visually very close to its own representation of Vesuvius a few years later (figs. 15 and 16).

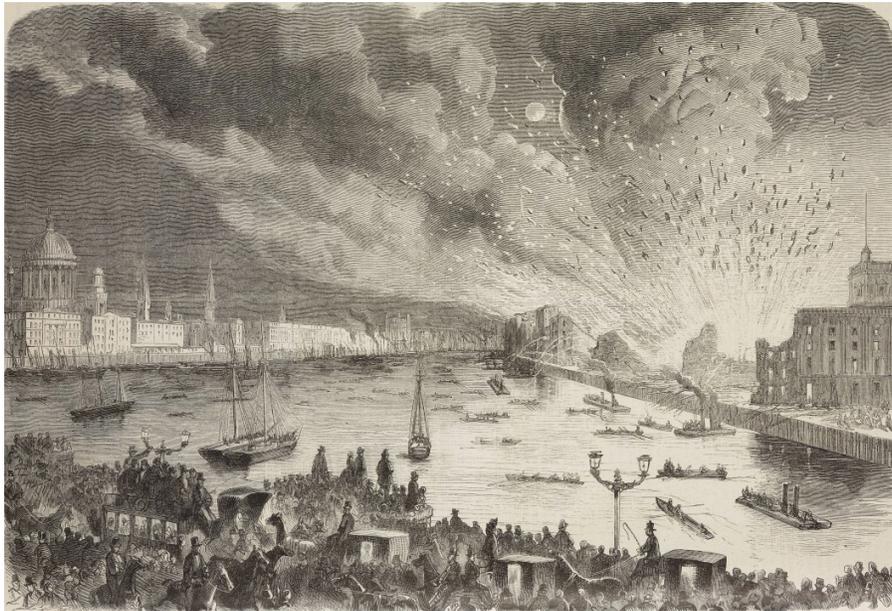


Figure 15.

A Huge Crowd on a Bridge Watches a Fire Burning in Tooley Street, 23 June 1861, *L'illustration, Journal Universel, Paris* 37, no. 957, 29 June 1861, 1861, engraving. Collection of DeA / Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan. Digital image courtesy of De Agostini Picture Library (all rights reserved).

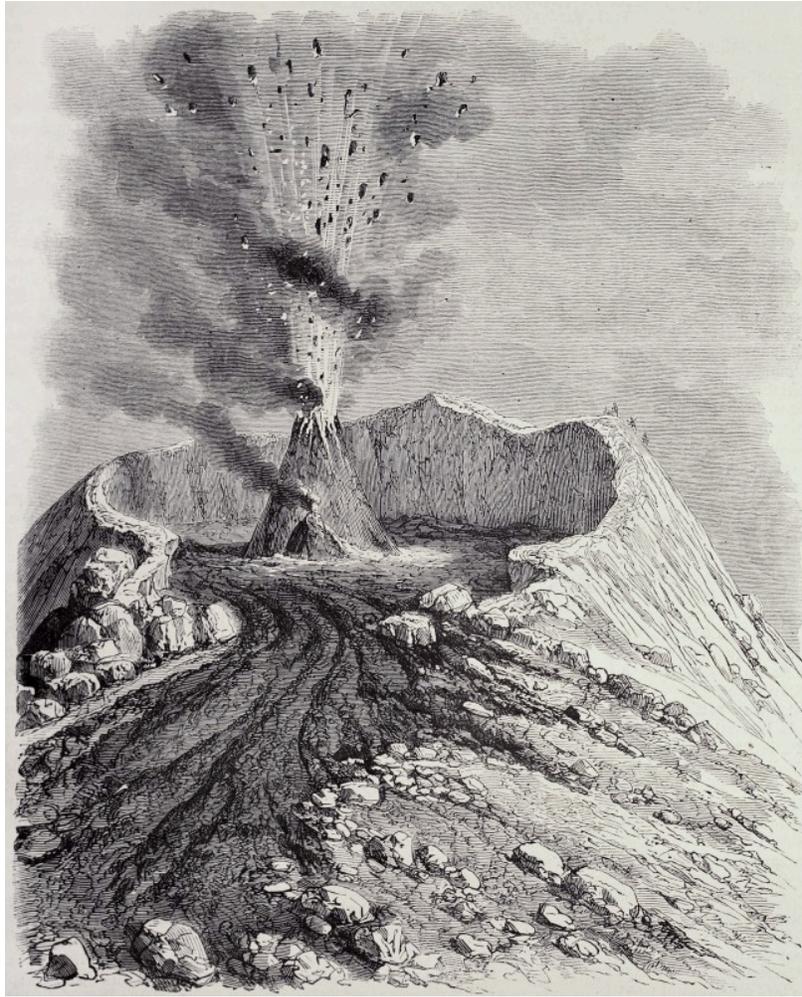


Figure 16.

Vesuvius Erupting, from a drawing by Cochot, in *L'Illustration, Journal Universel, Paris* 51, no. 1297, 4 January 1868, 1868, engraving. Digital image courtesy of Marzolino/Shutterstock (all rights reserved).

While the *Illustrated London News* depicted its crowd as sparse and mostly working class, the popular prints portraying identical bourgeois spectators call attention to the ways that middle-class spectatorship was itself mass-produced through spectacular urban entertainment. Such images acknowledged the fact that urban dwellers, conditioned by realist entertainments that only imitated death, eagerly sought out danger as a form of pleasure, perhaps as a sign of confidence in the abilities of modern London to control it. The audience may be watching Empire itself burn, but at the same time it knows this does not represent any serious derailment of imperial primacy. Instead, Londoners expect the disaster to be managed and have accordingly turned out to watch the battle. The discourse of the

sublime might have served as a mere echo of an old form that is now doing different work; no real terror is set in play when the sublime becomes the sensational.⁹⁰

Moreover, images and descriptions of fiery destruction, while seemingly beyond human control, might instead suggest that rather than worrying about the prevention of such disasters, the modern individual could now concentrate instead on what really matters in this new world: averting financial shortfall. Insurance, after all, presents loss as “not loss”. Under the new regime of fire insurance, the published lists of destroyed goods represented not that which was permanently gone but rather that which will be remunerated and replaced. The social form supported by insurance is, then, that of infinite renewability, which in turn encourages and supports the drives of extractive imperial capitalism.

Indeed, the affordances of fire itself sustained belief in a system in which nothing was ever lost but rather simply transmogrified. In his eulogy for Captain James Braidwood, who died leading the assault on the Tooley Street fire, the Reverend John Cumming asked, “What is the law that every scientific man knows? Fire destroys nothing; it makes matter enter into new combinations”.⁹¹ While he was intending to console those mourning the loss of the heroic fire fighter, he might as well have been discussing the goods consumed by the blaze. Insurance promised that the property owner’s lost investment would merely enter into a “new combination”. Like fire itself, insurance was a converter of matter—in this case, rubble transformed into a monetary sum that could then turn that rubble back into its previous forms, promising an infinite renewal in which resources could be summoned to replace those that humans might have destroyed. Fire, as a process of conversion without loss, in this way analogizes insurance as conversion of an absence into a presence: cash. Some of the stunning inferno that we see in the images of the Tooley Street fire may have resonated with the grandeur of a world in which there was no real death or disappearance of anything.

Perhaps, however, there is not only complacency flashing from the spectacular sublime of the Tooley Street fire. It is true that the materials stored in the warehouses, as well as the buildings themselves, were not demolished but rather metamorphosized into gases, ash, ruins, and souvenir objects like those held in the Museum of London, molten glass fused with burnt jute, rice, wheat, and sugar.⁹² However, what was in fact destroyed was the utility of the materials for human beings. Even if their financial value was replaced, those specific items were gone forever. The attention to the fantastic, dazzling aspects of their going up in smoke puts in play a recognition that the current system was based on representation and substitution, and potentially sets up an anxiety that this process ultimately will not be sustainable. Eventually the colonially and globally sourced cotton,

tallow, hemp, and jute might just run out. Much as Victorians predicted the drying up of the coal deposits fueling the industrial era and the Anthropocene itself, much as the cotton famine was stalking this moment, such images of mass destruction of property could not help but ambivalently invoke both the comforting notion of replaceability and the haunting specter of entropic expiration.⁹³ The facile panaceas regarding the ability of the environment to cleanse itself and return to equilibrium seem in this light like the obvious disavowal they were.

British imperial status could, then, be seen as predicated on spectacle rather than reality, its economic system and its ideological truths alike mere hollow performances, representations rather than reality. As James Pyne acknowledged, the Tooley Street fire seemed separate from the reality of any individual suffering, appearing rather as an imperial exhibition: "Altogether, and independently of its vast human interest, so grand a pyrotechnic display was never seen, nor one so costly planned by Imperial lavishness to please a spectacle-loving people".⁹⁴

Perhaps, therefore, some of the Tooley Street images might resonate with unease regarding the dangers of the system of modern urban property accumulation and management. For one thing, the modern warehouses, with their egregious accumulation of capital, were known sources of danger.⁹⁵ For another, fire insurance companies faced opposition, enjoying a dubious reputation in mid-century Britain. It was thought that in competitive pursuit of profit with one another, they discouraged investigation and reporting of arson. In a parliamentary hearing, dock owner John Humphreys stated that "it is well known that a large proportion of the fires are wilfully caused; but insurance offices cannot defend, or otherwise they would lose their business; they would get the character of being litigious, and people would refuse to insure with them".⁹⁶ Other Britons viewed insurance companies skeptically as revenue-focused enterprises more inclined to encourage than to prevent accidents; in 1863 the *London Review* observed that "insurance offices, it has been said, like fires, on the ground that they alarm people and bring an influx of customers".⁹⁷

In fact, unconvinced by the finding of spontaneous combustion in the Tooley Street insurance investigations, some people perpetuated rumors about arson committed by individuals from two extremes of the economic continuum. One camp believed that a wealthy warehouse owner destroyed his own goods to reap the insurance money; scrawled on a drawing by "J. De Roxtro" of the Tooley Street fire in the London Metropolitan Archive is the handwritten comment "there is little doubt but these fires were the work of incendiaries they usually occur when the building and stock of the forestallers are insured to heavy amounts and rather than they will sell at

reduced prices they will waste the provisions the blessed God [h]as given for food". ⁹⁸ Another narrative, posited by the author of *Six Questions of National Importance Relative to the Great Fire*, imagined a destitute, unemployed waterman "disaffected with world and his prospects", who looks "with a jaundiced eye on those stately warehouses and wharves, and contrasts the wealth of their owners with his own ne'er-ending lot of squalid poverty". ⁹⁹ The fact that it was equally possible to imagine that either Capital or Labor might have attacked the system points to the pervasiveness of the distrust of the institutions in charge of commerce and shipping in this spot. As an indication that the Tooley Street fire did in fact unsettle the establishment enough for it to turn to tighter oversight of a range of practices, Parliament passed the Malicious Damage Act 1861 as an anti-arson measure, and, following a series of hearings, eventually put the fire brigade under state control rather than that of the private insurance companies. ¹⁰⁰

To return to the popular colored prints by Macdonald, Read & Co., and S. Marks & Sons, I would argue that in their awkwardness, indeed in their ugliness—the jarring style, abrasive color, and peculiar, unfixable perspectives—they acknowledge their existence as representations, insistently grating on our aesthetic sensibilities so that we must pay them attention. Further, the clumsy renderings of flame acknowledge that fire is not a thing but a process, inherently unrepresentable—it is combustion, metamorphosis, change itself. Analyzing these works provides insight into a world that burns for many reasons, not least of which could be the inequitable distribution of wealth, as well as the very system by which that wealth was accumulated through the exploitation of resources and peoples around the world.

Some of the depicted conflagrations of Tooley Street, then, could be understood as a warning aimed at a society which chose to see in the fire Pyne's "funereal pyre of the wealth of the world", rather than the loss of human lives or the deadly costs of a systemic exploitation of global resources for capital gain. ¹⁰¹ The anonymous author of *Six Questions* spoke openly of the "money-grubbing principle" that led people to save rent on land by building up rather than out, creating structures of "extreme danger ... those inflammable magazines commonly called warehouses or 'bonded wharves'". ¹⁰² The phrase "inflammable magazines" suggestively indicates the explosiveness of a situation in which a nation dominated by the "money-grubbing principle" created dangerous conditions for its citizens.

Conclusion

In a century that encompassed the thrilling move from candlelight to gas illumination to electricity, images and descriptions of fire often point to and elucidate epistemological shifts, yielding insights into Victorian fears and desires. Prints and illustrations of the Tooley Street fire bring to light the ways this event may have set in play both pride in Britain's economic practices and anxiety over their potential instability or even immorality. These ephemera, themselves both products and agents of the forces of industrial imperial capitalism, enacted the era's great theme of metamorphosis in subject matter, materials, and modes of production. In the relentless, and in many cases newly identified, processes of chemical transformation, we get paper out of rags or wood, ink and lithographic crayon out of lampblack (from carboniferous matter), and artworks themselves from processes driven by the conversion of coal to steam. In the images, as in the words of the epigraph to this article, we witness a river turned to blood, as well as tallow, as it changes states from solid to gas and escapes its frame, both literal and in representation, analogizing the way fire and the new speculative insurance-based economy both transform one substance into another.

Footnotes

- 1 *Illustrated History of the Great Fire, and A Biography, with Lithographic Ills, Sketches of the Fire, Portrait, and Funeral Procession of Mr. Braidwood* (London: Henry Lea, 1861), 12.
- 2 *Great Fire of 1861: Total Destruction of Cotton's Wharf* (H. Vickers, 1861), 5.
- 3 *Dickens's Dictionary of London* listed it as a historical event in its 1882 edition. "Calendar for June 1882" (London: Macmillan, 1882), n.p. There is still a plaque to the fire and to James Braidwood on the site today.
- 4 As established by scholars on Victorian thermodynamics such as Barri Gold, *ThermoPoetics: Energy in Victorian Literature and Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 6–14 passim.
- 5 In 1862 circulation of the *Illustrated London News* was 300,000, making it by far the most successful paper of its kind. Patrick Leary, "A Brief History of the Illustrated London News", *Illustrated London News Historical Archive 1842–2003* (Independence, KY: Cengage Learning, 2011). https://www.gale.com/binaries/content/assets/gale-us-en/primary-sources/intl-gps/intl-gps-essays/full-ghn-contextual-essays/ghn_essay_inha_leary1_website.pdf.
- 6 "Great Fire in Southwark", *Illustrated London News*, Supplement, 29 June 1861, 615. Other estimates ranged from £1 million to £4 million. The "Report from the Select Committee on Fires in the Metropolis" stated that the amount was £1.2 million. *Reports from Committees 4* (London: House of Commons, 1862), 74; Arthur Munby cited "two millions, at least, of property destroyed". *Diary*, 22 June 1861. <https://www.victorianlondon.org/dates/tooleystreet.htm>. So, too, did the *Illustrated History of the Great Fire*, 31. The caption for Read & Co.'s print stated the damages were upward of £3 million. P. Macdonald's print calculates the loss as from £2 million to £4 million. The lists of goods included coffee, tea, cocoa, sugar, hops, rice, cotton, silk, spices (pepper, ginger, cayenne, nutmegs, mace, cloves, cardamoms, cassia), rags, flax, hemp, jute, cordage, leather, goatskins, buffalo hides, cochineal, gums, gutta-percha, butter, cheese, ham, bacon, potatoes, peas, figs, clover seed, safflower, oil, castor oil, shellac, turpentine, tar, aqua fortis (nitric acid), saltpeter, arsenic, white lead, yellow ochre, and glue, along with more obscure materials such as cutch, galls, gambier, and senna. List assembled from numerous reports, including "Relics of the Past", *Illustrated London News*, 6 July 1861, 20; Braidwood, *Fire Prevention and Fire Extinction*, 23. "The Great Fire", *Illustrated Times*, 29 June 1861, 416.
- 7 "Meliboeus at the Fire", *Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature, Science, and the Arts* 16, no. 398 (17 August 1861): 102. "A to Q warehouses, all four floors high, contain[ed] colonial produce". "Official Report of Damage", *Great Fire of 1861. Total Destruction of Cotton's Wharf*, 7.
- 8 "Fire-Doomed Cities", *Leisure Hour: A Family Journal of Instruction and Recreation*, no. 512 (17 October 1861): 663.
- 9 See F. Silber, "Der Brand in London", 1861 ("Scene at Cotton's Wharf on Sunday Morning June 23rd 1861"), and Louis Rochefort, "The Great Fire at London Bridge: Scene at Cotton's Wharf on Sunday Morning June 23rd 1861". Notably, these imitators changed the dates, altered details and applied color, relying on more spectacular effects to move away from some of the orderly aspects of the original.

- 10 Andrea Korda, *Printing and Painting the News in Victorian London: The Graphic and Social Realism 1869-1891* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2015), 35-37. As she notes, the ways in which news media then and now underscored the idea of "seeing for yourself" suggest a desire to convince the viewer that the event portrayed is unmediated, its forms of representation invisible (20). Korda also cites John Tagg's arguments in *The Burden of Representation* about the ways the realist form of signification is complicit with dominant bourgeois values, finding in such imagery "a disciplinary function, reinforcing a dominant system of power". Korda, *Printing and Painting the News*, 6.
- 11 P. Macdonald was a publisher/printer. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIOG256793>. The address on the print is 30 Great Sutton Street, Clerkenwell.
- 12 W.D. Richmond, *Colour and Colour Printing as Applied to Lithography* (London: Wyman & Sons, 1885), 49.
- 13 Macdonald, caption, "The Great Fire Near London Bridge on Saturday 22 June 1861".
- 14 "Meliboeus at the Fire", 101.
- 15 Read & Co. are listed at "10, Johnson's Court, Fleet Street". The British Museum identifies them as a publisher/printer also known as "M. Read & Co". <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIOG132257>. Read & Co. was familiar with the process of representing fire in chromolithograph form, having produced in 1856 a print of Covent Garden theater (British Museum, 1880,1113.3107) ablaze.
- 16 For more on this medium, see Michael Twyman, *A History of Chromolithography: Printed Colour for All* (London: British Library, 2013); Richard Benson, *The Printed Picture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2008). For a period source, see W.D. Richmond, *Colour and Colour Printing as Applied to Lithography* (London: Wyman & Sons, 1885).
- 17 P. Macdonald's print is identified as a "coloured lithograph" by the British Museum, but it really does not appear to be in this medium; more likely it is a "woodcut", as described by the London Metropolitan Archives. Print curator Drew Stevens observes that it is an all-printed product without any hand coloring. Stevens also notes that Read & Co.'s lithograph might have had some color added by hand rather than by the lithographic process itself (Private communication, 2 May 2021). S. Marks & Sons' work appears to be a hand-tinted wood engraving.
- 18 P. Macdonald of 30 Great Sutton-Street, Clerkenwell, is listed as the Secretary of Field Lane Sabbath School, West Street, Smithfield, in *The Metropolitan Charities Being an Account of the Charitable, Benevolent, and Religious Societies; Hospitals, Dispensaries, Penitentiaries, Annuity Funds, Asylums, Almshouses, Colleges, and Schools in London and Its Immediate Vicinity* (London: Sampson and Low, 1844), 164. This became the Field Lane Ragged School, the first ragged school. He seems to have been a teacher in the early days of the school. *Ragged School Union Quarterly Record*, vols. 1-2 (London: Kent & Co., 1876), 51.
- 19 "The Dreadful Fire in London", *Reynolds's Miscellany* 27, no. 684 (20 July 1861): 57. The "draught created by the fire ... [was] so great as to suck in a large barge coming up the river with her sail set ... three men on board". "Meliboeus at the Fire", 101.
- 20 Anne Humpherys and Louis James, eds., *G.W.M. Reynolds, Nineteenth-Century Fiction, Politics, and the Press* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2017), 4-5.
- 21 Charlotte G. Boger writes of her eyewitness experience in *Southwark and Its Story* (London: Simpkin, Marshall & Co., 1881), 223.
- 22 *Illustrated History of the Great Fire*, 8.
- 23 The *Illustrated London News* included an image of the ruins identified as the spot where Braidwood fell.
- 24 A policeman stated that he saw at least five men perish. "The Great Fire", *Illustrated Times*, 416. It was agreed that there were a "great many lives lost in pursuit of floating grease". *Illustrated History of the Great Fire*, 28.
- 25 "Meliboeus at the Fire", 102. Committed to social improvement and modeling middle-class values, *Chambers's* under Pyne would have been supportive of the establishment. Michael Feldberg, "Knight's Penny Magazine and *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*: A Problem in Writing Cultural History", *Victorian Periodicals Newsletter*, no. 3 (1968): 13-16.
- 26 Read & Co., publishers. "The Great Fire Near London Bridge Saturday, June 22nd 1861". Lithograph.
- 27 James Braidwood, *Fire Prevention and Fire Extinction* (London: Bell & Daldy, 1866; his essay 1830), 23. "Hemp is largely grown in England for its fibre, and still more largely in Russia, from which country vast quantities are annually imported for the use of our rope-makers". *Descriptive Guide to the Museum of Irish Industry* (Dublin: Alex Thom & Sons, 1857), 85.
- 28 The cause of the fire was the "spontaneous combustion of a lot of jute. The flames communicated themselves to a quantity of saltpetre from thence to the hemp and cotton, and finally assailed the tallow, which polluted the atmosphere of London for upwards of a fortnight". "The Docks of London"; *Their deficiencies, defects, and disadvantages; showing how the port will be improved, and its shipping accommodated, by the New Dagenham (Thames) Docks* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1868), 64. Jute was "very largely cultivated in Bengal, whence an annually increasing import into England takes place". *Descriptive Guide*, 86.
- 29 Bill Brown, "Thing Theory", *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 3-4. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344258>.
- 30 "Another Jute Fire", *London Review* 9, no. 231 (3 December 1864): 607.
- 31 "Fire-Doomed Cities", 663. Duncan Andrew Campbell, *English Public Opinion and the American Civil War* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2004), 49-54.
- 32 "The Prize Court sitting in Washington has condemned an English Schooner and her cargo, valued at 22,000 dollars, for endeavouring to run the blockade of the VA waters". "Civil War in America", *Illustrated London News*, 6 July 1861, 3.

- 33 "The Future of Cotton", *Illustrated London News*, 8 June 1861, 519; the *New York Times* listed the weight of cotton from each country in 1860 as 1,115,890,608 lb. of cotton from America vs. 204,141,168 lb. from India (America therefore produced five-sixths of Great Britain's cotton). The stated value of this amount was £80 million or \$4 billion. "England and the Cotton Supply", *New York Times*, 1 June 1861, 4. In 1860 England used over a billion pounds of cotton, 77 percent of which was from the United States, but by 1862 the imports would drop by 96 percent in what became known as the "cotton famine". William J. Phallen, *The Consequences of Cotton in Antebellum America* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2014), 167.
- 34 "It is indeed, more than probable that these States, by the acquisition of greater independence, will be able to enter into the markets of Europe as purchaser, to a larger extent ... and this could not fail to be advantageous to British commerce". Charles Capper, *The Port and Trade of London* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1862), 306. For more on the complexities of these networks, see Zach Sell, *Trouble of the World: Slavery and Empire in the Age of Capital* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), particularly chapter 5, "White Overseers of the World: U.S. Cotton and Colonial India", 72–84.
- 35 "Unless we take effectual steps to ensure ourselves and our interests against sudden ruin, we shall have none but ourselves to blame for the ravages of so fearful a calamity should it unhappily overtake us". "The Future of Cotton", 519.
- 36 "A total disregard of visible danger ... is certain of being punished, sooner or later, by sudden and overwhelming disaster". "The Future of Cotton", 520.
- 37 "We should strenuously exert ourselves to defeat an experiment so largely fraught with evils to humanity", opined the writer. "The Future of Cotton", 520.
- 38 "Relics of the Past", *Illustrated London News*, 20.
- 39 Due to the fact that cotton grew so readily in "fertile virgin soil", little attention had been paid to the needs for its culture. "The Culture of Cotton", *Illustrated London News*, 5 October 1861, 344.
- 40 "The Great Fire", *Illustrated Times*, 416.
- 41 Charlotte Boger mentions how she saw "the impossible myth of one's nursery days realized by the Thames being literally on fire". *Southwark and its Story*, 223. "The Thames has been literally and in an awful sense, set on fire ... No imagination could surpass the terrors of that tremendous spectacle", *Daily Telegraph*, 24 June 1861, in London Metropolitan Archives Scrapbook on the Tooley Street fire. Sun Fire Assurance MS 38840/1. This is also the caption of the *Reynolds's Miscellany* plate (fig. 10). Adele, "Set Fire to the Rain", 21, 2011.
- 42 *Great Fire of 1861*, 4; Munby, *Diary*; Boger, *Southwark and Its Story*, 223.
- 43 "Meliboeus at the Fire", 102.
- 44 "The Great Fire", *Saturday Review*, 666.
- 45 With thanks to master electrician Chris Murphy for his incendiary expertise. Having been drawn to perform this recreation, I was struck to learn of Matthew C. Hunter's recreations of chemical experiments as a way of asking that art historians engage in "thinking the fine and industrial arts together", allowing "equal footing to form and materials, the visible and the invisible". *Painting with Fire: Sir Joshua Reynolds, Photography, and the Temporally Evolving Chemical Object* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 184. This would appear to represent a fascinating new direction for the field, but one that is beyond the scope of this article.
- 46 "The Docks of London", 64.
- 47 "Meliboeus at the Fire", 102.
- 48 *Great Fire of 1861*, 6.
- 49 Boger, *Southwark and Its Story*, 224.
- 50 The stench of its burning and its unpleasantness to denizens of the city can be read as an olfactory haunting of the species exploited on a newly massive scale. Janice Carlisle discusses the way in which the response to the smell of tallow candle is an indicator of class and character in George Eliot's *Felix Holt*. *Common Scents: Comparative Encounters in High-Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 8–9. As an indication that some Victorians themselves were aware of this fact, the growing vegetarian movement was working to replace animal with vegetable tallow, an initiative that worked hand in hand with attempts to bring down the price of the substance. Henry S. Salt imagined a dialogue between a non-vegetarian and a vegetarian to run thus: Non-vegetarian, "no carcasses [*sic*] to supply us with hides, bone and tallow? ... we should soon have no soap, no candles ... relapse into barbarism". Response: "vegetarian soap, and vegetarian candles are now in the market". *The Logic of Vegetarianism: Essays and Dialogues* (London: Ideal Publishing Union, 1899), 90. The decades of the 1850s and 1860s saw a fall-off of interest in this movement after the foundation of the Vegetarian Society in the 1840s, but vegetarian soap was part of the movement from its inception, James Simpson providing it to the poor in Manchester in 1845. James Gregory, *Of Victorians and Vegetarians: The Vegetarian Movement in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2007), 49–52, 30, 33.
- 51 Leslie Tomroy, "Moving East: Industrial Pollution in London 1800–1920", in *A Mighty Capital under Threat: The Environmental History of London, 1800–2000*, ed. Bill Luckin and Peter Thorsheim (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2020), 136.
- 52 Tomroy, "Moving East", 137–139.
- 53 Tallow is toxic when released into waterways. "Department of Transportation: Coast Guard Vessel Response Plans", *Federal Register* 61, no. 9 (12 January 1996): 1076.

- 54 As Tomroy notes, most of these various efforts had little impact for some time, given the lack of enforcement mechanisms. Tomroy, "Moving East", 136.
- 55 See Christopher Hamlin, *What Becomes of Pollution? Adversary Science and the Controversy on the Self-Purification of Rivers in Britain, 1850-1900* (London: Routledge, 2019). Anthony S. Wohl, *Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 238.
- 56 Frank Richard Cheshire, *The Scientific Temperance Hand-book for Temperance Teachers and Advocates, and for Senior Classes in Schools* (London: National Temperance Publication Depot, 1891), 47.
- 57 "The Power of the Sun", *English Mechanic and Mirror of Science*, 19 October 1866, 55.
- 58 In 1860 the value of tallow imported from Russia was over £3.5 million. Capper, *The Port and Trade of London*, 203, 201-202.
- 59 Capper, *The Port and Trade of London*, 204-205. Another report of the previous year commented: "The Tallow Trade during the past year, has been in a most unsatisfactory state, the usual laws of supply and demand having been entirely ignored by a most unusual speculation ... the feeling against these speculations has been so great, that consumers have resorted to every available substitute, curtailing their consumption as much as possible". This resulted in preventing the Moscow speculators from dominating the market entirely. "Reports of the Trade of the United Kingdom During the Year 1859", *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* 23 (March 1860): 89. "The tallow market is one of those fields for speculation where large amounts are lost and won; but there is a lull at present in the state of affairs". "No doubt many a shipper and broker looks back longingly at the high prices at the close of 1860". Currently there were "heavy stocks in store". "The Tallow Trade", *Farmer's Magazine* 44, no. 109 (1861): 291.
- 60 "Oils of various descriptions, consequently, began to supersede the use of tallow. ... At the same time the English merchants sought to develop the tallow trade of South America, Australia, and other countries". Russian-British relations were not exceptionally strong in the wake of the Crimean War, and some of the impetus to move away from Russian tallow import may have been due to this fact. Remarkably, the Tooley Street fire actually served as a temporary counter to this precipitous loss; although there is no evidence that Britons sought to lay blame at Russia's door for this coincidence, the general suspicious circumstances of the fire, never entirely explained, did mean that rumors were rampant regarding its origin. "The fall, however, was checked by a large fire at the riverside wharves". Capper, *The Port and Trade of London*, 204-205.
- 61 Tamara S. Wagner, *Financial Speculation in Victorian Fiction: Plotting Money and the Novel Genre, 1815-1901* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), 4. Mary Poovey likewise argues that economic and literary texts should be considered in relation to one another. *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 4, 6.
- 62 Wagner, *Financial Speculation*, 4.
- 63 Anna Kornbluh, *Realizing Capital: Financial and Psychic Economies in Victorian Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 2, 22.
- 64 The manager of the Victoria docks, Charles Capper, described the false prices as "fictitious" in *The Port and Trade of London*, 204-205. In speculation, D. Morier Evans states, the value of goods "may be taken up far above their intrinsic worth". *Speculative Notes and Notes on Speculation* (London: Groombridge & Sons, 1864), 114. He observes that the greatest speculation was currently in cotton.
- 65 Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 14, in Wagner, *Financial Speculation*, 12. Brooks relates "language as a system to money: meaning in both systems depends on exchange value, what you get in return for what you are offering. And the great realist novelists come to understand that words, like shillings or francs, are part of a circulatory system subject to inflation and deflation, that meanings may be governed by the linguistic economies and marketplaces of which they are part". Wagner's note 41 (184).
- 66 The Sun, Phoenix, and Royal Exchange fire insurance companies first joined forces in the early 1800s, and in 1833 others followed suit to collectively form the London Fire Engine Establishment. Frederick Henry Radford, *"Fetch the Engine": The Official History of the Fire Brigades Union* (London: FBU, 1951), 18-19.
- 67 Paul Fyfe, *By Accident or Design: Writing the Victorian Metropolis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 101.
- 68 Fyfe, *By Accident or Design*, 113.
- 69 "Great Fires", *All the Year Round* 5, no. 115 (13 July 1861): 382.
- 70 Fyfe, *By Accident or Design*, 113.
- 71 Fyfe, *By Accident or Design*, 105-106.
- 72 "Report from the Select Committee on Fires in the Metropolis", in *Reports from Committees* 4 (London: House of Commons, 1862), 67.
- 73 "Great Fire", *Illustrated London News*, 615. The *News* renewed this topic with another article in its next edition. "Relics of the Past", 19.
- 74 Robin Pearson, *Insuring the Industrial Revolution: Fire Insurance in Great Britain 1700-1850* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2004), 3.
- 75 Fyfe, *By Accident or Design*, 101-102.
- 76 Freedgood is citing Fredric Jameson, "the political unconscious is revealed when a work 'insistently direct[s] us to the informing power of forces or contradictions which the text seeks in vain to wholly control or master'" (*The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Art* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1981), 49), in *Victorian Writing about Risk: Imagining a Safe England in a Dangerous World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3.

- 77 Freedgood, *Victorian Writing about Risk*, 9.
- 78 Freedgood, *Victorian Writing about Risk*, 9.
- 79 "Risk of various kinds must be encouraged as pleasurable and profitable activities or else economic and imperial expansion would stagnate; at the same time, risk must be represented as painful so that its rewards can be morally justified. Risk was continually constructed and reconstructed to evoke a usefully mutating array of attitudes". Freedgood, *Victorian Writing about Risk*, 9.
- 80 *Illustrated History of the Great Fire*, 27. The *Observer* agreed: "From whatever point of view it was seen the spectacle presented was grand and terrible—a mighty element in the full tide of its power, defying all the puny efforts of man". "Great Fire at Cotton's Wharf", *Observer*, 23 June 1861, n.p. In the London Metropolitan Archive Scrapbook on Tooley Street Fire. Sun Fire Assurance MS 38840/1.
- 81 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: R. & J. Dodsley, 1747).
- 82 Fyfe, *By Accident or Design*, 8.
- 83 Pearson, *Insuring the Industrial Revolution*, 3-4.
- 84 A single account of the Tooley Street fire includes both perspectives; after recognizing the up-to-date mechanisms in place to quell the blaze, the writer of the *Illustrated History of the Great Fire* asked in a snide and xenophobic aside why in fact Britons strove to fight the fire at all, rather than "at once adopt[ing] the system of fatalism which causes the Turks to regard a fire as a special punishment inflicted from Above ... calmly look[ing] on as a fire extends, and ... exclaiming 'Allah is great?'" *Illustrated History of the Great Fire*, 45.
- 85 *Six Questions of National Importance Relative to the Great Fire in Tooley Street* (London: Elliot, 1861), 3.
- 86 "The Great Fire", *Saturday Review*, 666.
- 87 "The Great Fire", *Saturday Review*, 666.
- 88 These shows attracted as many as half a million people. Richard Altick, *The Shows of London* (London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978), 325. The Surrey Gardens displays sometimes included the Great Fire of London in their repertoire, as seen in an 1845 image in the *Comic Almanack*, portraying the showmen at the spectacle of the Great Fire of 1666. Anon., "The Great Fire of London", *Comic Almanack* for 1845. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52204/52204-h/52204-h.htm#y1845>, opp. 75.
- 89 "Meliboeus at the Fire", 100.
- 90 Elsewhere I have explored the close relationship between sensation and sublimity at mid-century. See Nancy Rose Marshall, "'Startling; Nay, Almost Repulsive': Light Effects and Nascent Sensation in John Everett Millais's *The Rescue*", *Journal of Victorian Culture* 21, no. 4 (2016): 514-547.
- 91 The Rev. John Cumming, "The Last Fire: A Funeral Sermon on the late Mr Braidwood", preached in the National Scotch Church, Covent Garden, 30 June 1861. Scrapbook. Tooley St Fire. Sun Fire Assurance. London Metropolitan Archives. MS 38840/1.
- 92 "The extraordinary agglomerations to be found among the ruins were wonderfully curious; slates, glass, and iron, were fused into rough and picturesque masses, with all sorts of nondescript material. The fire at the Tower of London filled all the curiosity-shops with numbers of such relics, but those to be found among the ruins of the great fire of 1861 were still more wonderful, and fantastic beyond description". *Illustrated History of the Great Fire*, 39.
- 93 In the same decade as the Tooley Street fire, William Stanley Jevons predicted that Britain would run out of coal. *The Coal Question* (London: Macmillan, 1866). For more, see Peter Thorsheim, *Inventing Pollution: Coal, Smoke, and Culture in Britain Since 1800* (Athens, OH: Ohio University, 2006), 45-47.
- 94 "Meliboeus at the Fire", 102.
- 95 The *Saturday Review* commented that "the noble range of modern buildings filled with the produce of every country, and fitted with every contrivance for receiving and shipping goods" was poised to endanger the city and the country to a much greater extent than the old wharves nearby, as "the effect of a conflagration upon the neighborhood would be infinitely more disastrous". They continued that previously "the business done on the banks of the Thames, as well as the mode of doing it, has always involved great risk of loss from fire. But the risk was about equal everywhere, and the loss of property on any particular occasion was likely to be moderate". "The Great Fire", *Saturday Review*, 667.
- 96 "Report from the Select Committee on Fires in the Metropolis", 78.
- 97 "Steam Fire-Engines", *London Review* 7, no. 158 (11 July 1863): 51. Likewise the *Examiner* equated the "interest taken by Fire Insurance Companies in fires, and their tendency to preserve them" with that of "a country gentleman and his game". "Fire and Water", *Examiner*, 29 June 1861, 404.
- 98 J. De Roxtro, *Tooley Street*, 1861. Metropolitan Prints Collection. London Metropolitan Archive, record no. 285694, catalogue no. SC_PZ_BE_01_117.
- 99 *Six Questions*, 4.
- 100 Charles John Bunyon et al., *The Law of Fire Insurance* (London: Charles & Edwin Layton, 1906), 455; Radford, "Fetch the Engine", 20.
- 101 "Meliboeus at the Fire", 102.

¹⁰² The phrase also drew attention to the fact that saltpeter, one of the primary components of gunpowder, was stored in Cotton's Wharf and made for the startling explosions portrayed by Read and Macdonald, which shook the ground and sent up showers of burning material around the buildings. *Six Questions*, 5.

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Women in Whistler's Images of Chelsea and the Thames

Patricia de Montfort

Abstract

Women are an active, if often low-key, presence in Whistler's Thames images, from ghostly figures of models and fashionable strolling women to the small traders who populated the streets near his home in Chelsea. Women shopped for their families; they worked outside the home as servants, nursemaids, shop assistants, and in family trades. They travelled along the river daily and criss-crossed its banks in a changing cityscape in which new spaces for leisure were being opened up. They sought a living in a night-time world of entertainment venues like Vauxhall Gardens and Cremorne that could lead to exploitation, disease, and an early grave. This world beyond Whistler's Chelsea homes, overseen during the 1860s by his model and partner, Joanna Hiffernan (and by his mother, Anna Whistler for a time), is often overlooked. Moreover, Whistler's suggestion that the presence of tiny, anonymised female figures in works like *Variations in Pink and Grey: Chelsea and Cremorne Gardens, No. 2* was merely about colour and establishing a balance of decorative elements invites fresh analysis. This essay takes as its starting point women's presences in Whistler's riverside home and family circle before venturing outdoors to explore the world they inhabited along the Thames at Chelsea. It considers such questions as: how did women experience the contemporary redevelopment of the river? How did they occupy its adjacent streets and public spaces? Drawing upon examples of Whistler's Thames subjects from the 1870s and the work of chroniclers of social change like Chelsea photographer James Hedderly (1815-1885), it examines the world of women along the river in the context of visual, literary, and socio-economic discourses of the period. It seeks to give voice to their presence beneath the quiet surface of Whistler's images and how, as "involuntary neighbours", they made sense of the watery, arterial world of London's celebrated river.

Authors

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Introduction

Women are an active, if usually low-key, presence in Whistler's representations of Chelsea and the Thames, placed within the composition as colour notes and visual points of interest. They feature not only in the role of professional studio model (as in early studies such as *The Balcony* that use the Thames as a backdrop), but also in Whistler's nocturnal subjects painted in the 1870s. The women in Whistler's paintings offer us tantalising glimpses of riverside life and women going about their business in the public spaces of the late nineteenth-century city: strolling with their children along the sweeping new Chelsea Embankment, criss-crossing its bridges, shopping in its adjacent suburban streets, and working in trade. Other women worked these riverside spaces to earn a living in the night-time world of entertainment venues such as Cremorne Gardens that could lead to exploitation, disease, and an early grave. The river itself became a familiar backdrop for images of so-called fallen women in Victorian visual and literary culture, from Dickensian characters such as Nancy in *Oliver Twist* (1838), and the drover's former lover driven to prostitution in D.G. Rossetti's *Found* (1854), to William Hayward's popular melodrama, *London by Night* (1865).

As Stuart Oliver has observed, between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries, the middle and upper classes progressively "turn[ed] away from" the Thames. He points out that "as pollution increased only those who relied most immediately on the river for their income ... remained living in close proximity to it". London, by contrast with other cities, had "nothing like the riverside vistas or walks such as those by the Seine in Paris".¹ The construction of the Thames embankments from 1869–1874 on the north side of the river (and Albert Embankment on the south) suggest a change in attitude. Built as a response to human disease, principally a series of cholera outbreaks that culminated in the so-called "Great Stink" of 1858, Stephen Halliday summarises their role as "in effect, heavily used roads, superimposed on a honeycomb of tunnels carrying railways, water, gas and sewage, and bounded on one side by a powerful tidal river" (fig. 1).² In the drive to improve sanitation, a vast stretch of the riverside was transformed, opening up new opportunities for its use and for leisure, concentrated mainly north of the Thames. Whistler's nocturnes of the 1870s incorporate these changes, which are documented in detail in the work of local photographer James Hedderly, an acquaintance of the artist. They were not, of course, only structural, but also affected Chelsea's inhabitants, many of whom are captured momentarily in Whistler's paintings. I have long been intrigued by the presence of the female inhabitants in particular, since they appear not only at the margins of paintings such as *Chelsea in Ice* (1864–1867) and *Variations in Pink and Grey: Chelsea* (1871–1872) but—denied in economic and social power—also at the margins of their society of the period. Social and legislative reform, including the Public Health Acts of 1848 and 1875 and

the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882, promised change both for the river and for many of these women, historically excluded from economic and social positions of power. While in visual terms the role of these women in Whistler's paintings of the Thames in the late 1860s and early 1870s seems largely to be about colour and establishing a balance of decorative elements, the larger socio-economic context of their presence is less well understood and invites analysis. By exploring the relationship of these figures within the complex and changing urban riverscape, it is possible to enlarge our understanding of this period of Whistler's career and question scholarly assumptions that these women are merely decorative additions to his paintings. For a start, how did the women experience these transitional moments in the life of the river? How did they occupy its adjacent streets and public spaces? This article explores these questions, adopting as its starting point Whistler's early scenes of family domesticity before venturing out, as Vanessa Taylor puts it, into the "unruly environment" of the river beyond the second-floor window of his Chelsea home from which he painted several nocturnes.³ I suggest that if Whistler's images of women in his Thames paintings perform a role in his construction of modernity, it is bound up with the shifting environment of the river itself.

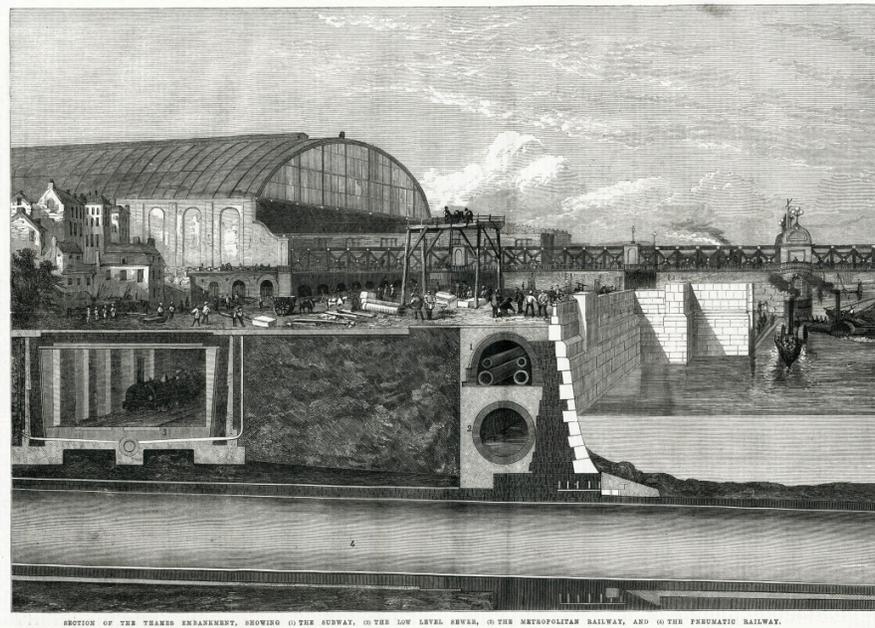


Figure 1.

The Thames Embankment, in *The Illustrated London News* 50, no. 1432, 22 June 1867. Digital image courtesy of Mary Evans (all rights reserved).

Whistler's Images of Women

Although Whistler was born in Massachusetts in the United States, he visited London frequently as a boy and later as an art student, staying with his half-sister Deborah, before he finally settled in the city in 1859. Deborah had been living in London since her marriage to Francis Seymour Haden in 1847. By contrast with his student life in late 1850s Paris, Whistler's stays with the Hadens at 62 Sloane Street involved living the genteel existence of a late nineteenth-century middle-class household. Seymour Haden enjoyed a successful medical career; the family lived comfortably and feature often in Whistler's work of the period. After Whistler's move to Chelsea in 1863, to his first home at 7 Lindsey Row (now 101 Cheyne Walk), Joanna Hiffernan, his then model and girlfriend, presided for a time over the household. This arrangement was disrupted by the arrival of his mother from America in December 1863, in search of refuge from the war-torn Confederate South. This required Whistler to secure, as he put it, "a buen retiro" for Hiffernan elsewhere.⁴ From then on, the household acquired a more bourgeois air. Charmed by its garden and views of the Thames, Mrs. Whistler thrived at 7 Lindsey Row, where, as she told her friend James H. Gamble, a room on the second floor served a hybrid purpose as a studio and a cosy sitting-room: "In this room ... he has an Easel & paints generally—tho he dignifies it as our withdrawing room—for here is our bright fire & my post".⁵

Whistler's images of women from this period reflect these intimate settings in which women from his family, including Deborah, are seen engaged in domestic activities, for example reading and sewing—as in the etching *Reading by Lamplight* (1859)—and in genteel accomplishments, such as music-making. In *Harmony in Green and Rose: The Music Room* (1860–1861), however, painted in the music room at Sloane Street, Deborah is captured in three-quarter view, reflected by the mirror, in an implied conversation with a standing figure dressed in a riding habit, identified as Isabella Boott (fig. 2). A family connection of the Whistlers and the Hadens, Boott stands poised to depart while Annie sits nearby with her nose buried in a book. Such paintings represent an ordered Victorian society in which social structures were understood and rigorously maintained; an interior, feminised world that hints at women's so-called talent "for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision", as Ruskin claimed in "Sesame & Lilies".⁶

Why does Whistler give these women, carrying parasols in the fashionable garb of the period, prominence in this grimy setting?



Figure 2.

James McNeill Whistler, *Harmony in Green and Rose: The Music Room*, 1860-1861, oil on canvas, 96.3 × 71.7 cm. Collection of the Freer Gallery of Art, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institute, Gift of Charles Lang Freer (F1917.234a-b). Digital image courtesy of Smithsonian Institute (CC0 1.0).



Figure 3.

James McNeill Whistler, *Battersea Reach from Lindsey Houses*, 1864–1871, oil on canvas, 51.3 × 76.5 cm. Collection of The Hunterian, University of Glasgow (GLAHA_46358). Digital image courtesy of Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved).

It is worth considering the conditions in which such women moved about outside the home in the nineteenth-century city. These have been examined over several decades by scholars including Griselda Pollock, Janet Wolff, and Lynda Nead, as has the existence and nature of the *flâneuse*—the so-called female counterpart of the Baudelairean *flâneur* in Paris and London. Wolff argued against its existence, claiming “that such a character was rendered impossible by the sexual divisions of the nineteenth century”, for, after all, women could not stroll alone in the city.⁷ More recent studies, such as D’Souza and McDonough’s *The Invisible Flâneuse: Gender, Public Space and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (2006) have sought a nuanced reading of what has been interpreted as the opposing forces of masculine public space versus feminine private space.⁸ My concern here, however, is more with the fact that, while a doctrine of separate public and private spheres prevailed among the Victorian middle classes from the 1830s, it was not always applied consistently. As Wolff has argued,

The real situation of women in the second half of the nineteenth century was more complex than one of straightforward confinement to the home. It varied from one social class to another, and even from one geographical region to another, depending on the local industry, the degree of industrialisation, and numerous other factors.⁹

In the same vein, Lynda Nead has warned against the assumption “that the only way to write middle-class women into histories of modernity is by looking at the private sphere, or the history of shopping”, especially since “shopping imposes a specific chronology on the emergence of women into the public sphere”, beginning in the 1870s.¹⁰ As she has argued: “Rather than seeing public life as a monolithic entity, it is possible to conceive a variety of ways of accessing the public world and a number of different public arenas in which women could be involved”.¹¹ This could mean clubs aimed at middle-class working women, for example the Somerville Club (founded in 1878), but also public spaces, such as railway station buffets, department store refreshment rooms and, later in the century, tearoom chains, similar to Lyons or Fuller’s. She also joins Elizabeth Wilson in questioning the all-pervasive presence of the *flâneur*, “one of the central orthodoxies of recent accounts of modernity” therein opening up examination of women’s presence on the city streets.¹² This line of argument has also been explored in more recent times by scholars of historical geography such as Richard Dennis. He cites a number of examples of female characters in George Gissing’s novels of the 1890s, who “lead independent lives, confident in their knowledge of the city’s geography and use of its public transport”.¹³ At the same time, as Wilson points out, class and ethnicity shaped women’s experiences. The question of whether London represented danger or opportunities for women in the nineteenth century “depends on what is being compared” for, should we “compare the life of urban working-class women with what they had left behind in the countryside, we may well conclude that the cities opened a vista of opportunities”.¹⁴ This same territory of inconsistency informs women’s presence in the late nineteenth-century environment of the Thames that included parks, gardens, promenades, and river crossings. This riverside space—a space in which the stark boundaries between danger and opportunity blurs—is the basis of my observations of the women in Whistler’s Thames paintings.

Distinction should be made, however, between green spaces inhabited by women represented by Whistler in these pictures, such as the embankment gardens, and those elsewhere. While Nancy Rose Marshall evokes the so-called feminine sphere in her discussion of the painting of London’s parks—“grass in a park represented nature in its domesticated and orderly form”,¹⁵—this seems to me closer to the essence of the large established parks such as Hyde Park and Regent’s Park, which were contained environments sited away from the river. Settings similar to Hyde Park, Marshall suggests, became places “in which the middle classes could assume at least the trappings of the coveted ‘blood and bearing’ of the aristocrats” through pursuits such as riding on Rotten Row.¹⁶ Women were prominent in visualisations of this setting “since, with the horses, they provided flesh of

two sorts".¹⁷ Moreover, most of the new urban parks that emerged in British cities during the late nineteenth century were planned and constructed with a clear sense of social purpose. As Hilary Taylor puts it,

One of the main aims of those setting up the parks was so to embody the teachings of science and art as to elevate the personal and public character of all urban dwellers, especially the working classes.¹⁸

By contrast, any sense of social improvement attached to the embankment gardens was complicated by their fluid boundaries with the Thames, always at risk of the damage caused by flooding.

Chelsea and the Embankment

Let us return to the embankment project itself and its impact on Whistler's neighbourhood. Before the Embankment was commenced in 1868, the geography of Chelsea close to the river at Old Battersea Bridge and Cheyne Walk looked rather different. As the river, with its tidal creeks, its spaces were more haphazard and meandering, opening out into an estuary that was, as Théophile Gautier noted on a visit to London in 1842,

so wide and the banks themselves so low that these cannot be seen from the centre of the stream. It is only after steaming many a mile that one at last makes them out, narrow, flat, black lines between the grey sky and the turbid water.¹⁹

Boats and barges lined the foreshore, including those belonging to the Greaves family of boatmen, Whistler's neighbours at Lindsey Row, whose sons Walter and Henry became his studio assistants for a time. Although only a limited area of land was reclaimed for the Chelsea Embankment at this spot, access to the river was streamlined and its views reconfigured. In 1878, Edward Walford noted the alterations that had taken place,

The old awkward way down to the steamboat pier under the archway of a private house has been cleared away, and the pontoon, moored close to the wall, is reached by a bridge resting in an opening in the granite. An old block of houses, too, which stood between this spot and Chelsea Church has been entirely removed. They formed a narrow quaint looking old thoroughfare,

called Lombard Street ... The backs of one side of this thoroughfare overlooked, and here and there overhung, the river; but they have all been cleared away, and the narrow street converted into a broad one, so that one side of it faces the river. After passing the church the road widens out, and as the space between the houses and the embankment wall becomes greater, a piece of land has been laid out as a garden, so that there are two roads, one in front of the shops, the other between the garden and the granite wall. ²⁰

The partial demolition of Lombard Street (and nearby Duke Street) to make way for the embankment was approved enthusiastically by the *London Times*; it did away with a “row of ancient and dilapidated houses” in Lombard Street and an adjacent crumbling row of tenements of “disreputable appearance”. ²¹ The narrow semi-rural track that bordered the river in front of Cheyne Walk also disappeared, to be replaced by a broad new highway. Nearby, the old Ranelagh pleasure gardens, by then absorbed by the Royal Hospital grounds but which had enjoyed a licentious reputation in the eighteenth century, became separated from the Thames altogether (figs. 4 and 5).



Figure 4.

James Hedderly, *The Building of the Chelsea Embankment*, 1873, photograph. Collection of Historic England Archive (OP04624). Digital image courtesy of Historic England Archive (all rights reserved).



THE RIVERSIDE OF OLD CHELSEA.

Figure 5.

The Riverside of Chelsea, in *Illustrated London News* 61, no. 1726, 5 October 1872. Digital image courtesy of Mary Evans (all rights reserved).

These changes introduced a heightened sense of order to the riverside that was remarked upon in the press. “Chelsea”, the *Daily News* reflected in 1872, “waking up from its somnolence of many years, seems determined not to be behindhand with its neighbours in this rejuvenescent age”.²² The Embankment also marked the incursion of the city upon the last remnants of Chelsea’s historical roots as a leafy retreat from central London, a neighbourhood of market gardens and covert spaces and the resort of many historical figures. This was romanticised by Victorians: the “traditions of Sir Thomas More, of Katherine Parr, of Anne of Cleves ... haunt its boundaries”, the same paper declared, “the times of Charles II, of William and Mary, and of Queen Anne—are visible in its streets”.²³ By contrast, the embankments introduced a sleek, modern world of sanitation, underground railways, and spaces for leisure in the name of progress.

A photograph from the 1870s by James Hedderly, photographic chronicler of Chelsea’s transformation, hints at the new atmosphere of the neighbourhood (fig. 6). The view of historic Chelsea Old Church, then under renovation (and where Whistler escorted his mother to services every Sunday), looks westwards through one of the new public gardens built after the embankments were completed. A parade of shops, a remnant of old Lombard Street, can be glimpsed in the distance. In a related photograph, two respectably dressed women—perhaps a mother and daughter—wait idly by the church railings (fig. 7). This atmosphere is echoed in John O’Connor’s panoramic view of the Victoria Embankment looking eastwards, towards the City and St. Paul’s Cathedral; the view was painted in 1874 shortly after the embankment’s completion in 1872 (fig. 8). A bourgeois woman basks in the sunlight with her two children on the terrace of Somerset House, shaded by her parasol, while a regiment of Grenadier Guards march along the road below. The smoke-filled industrial world of chimneys, trains, and bridges is relegated to the distance. Despite the recent nature of their completion, the

embankments, with their orderly public spaces and bourgeois strollers, seem an established presence, the disruption caused by their construction barely perceptible.



Figure 6.

James Hedderly, Chelsea Old Church, 1870s, photograph. Collection of the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea Libraries. Digital image courtesy of Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea Libraries (all rights reserved).



Figure 7.

James Hedderly, Chelsea Old Church, 1870s, photograph. Collection of the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea Libraries. Digital image courtesy of Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea Libraries (all rights reserved).



Figure 8.

John O'Connor, *The Embankment*, 1874, oil on canvas, 90.5 × 143.5 cm. Collection of the Museum of London (85.552). Digital image courtesy of Museum of London (all rights reserved).

At the same time, as Vanessa Taylor has emphasised, “rivers have always been enmeshed in dominant economic and political discourses”.²⁴ In August 1871, the *Times* reported Joseph Bazalgette’s speech as the foundation stone was laid for the construction of the Embankment between Chelsea Hospital and Battersea Bridge. It emphasised the grand scale of his ambitions, and the belief that London’s improvements bore comparison with those that had taken place recently in other European cities.

[He] admitted that the Board [of Works] ... had accomplished many proper and judicious improvements in the course of the last 15 years, having created new parks and streets, broken up overcrowded districts, formed embankments, and, in fact, placed the metropolis in a fair position to bear comparison with the European capitals.²⁵

The scale of the work yet to be undertaken in this one section of the embankments was remarkable: ninety-one acres were to be reclaimed from the river and replaced by a seventy-foot wide roadway, three-quarters of a mile long and bordered by public gardens.²⁶ The gardens contributed to the promotion of physical and social hygiene as well as the embankment. There were precedents: in Paris, Baron Haussmann’s garden schemes, executed under the patronage of Napoleon III (an admirer of Hyde Park), were

considered the above-ground counterpart to a network of sewers built in the 1850s.²⁷ His approach was widely admired; indeed, his gardens are considered a model for the Temple Garden at Victoria Embankment.²⁸

Whistler's *Variations*

The innovative nature of Bazalgette's project and its impact on the river boundaries can be glimpsed in two oils by Whistler of this period: *Variations in Violet and Green* (1871) and *Variations in Pink and Grey: Chelsea* (1871/2) (figs. 9 and 10). In *Variations in Violet and Green*, a woman sits partly turned away from the river to face the broad sweep of the new gardens, apparently conversing with her companion, who carries a Japanese-style parasol. To their right, a woman stands poised, perhaps preparing herself to approach them. All are portrayed in fashionable aestheticised dress that appears in harmony with the ornamental setting of the gardens. At the same time, the figures are constrained by the setting, their containment intensified by their location at the lowest point of the composition, within the vertical lines of the railings and the cherry blossom placed by Whistler on either side. *Variations in Pink and Grey: Chelsea* is painted in a similar format/spatial arrangement. Three Thames barges are partially obscured by some temporary hoarding—only their furled sails can be seen—as can a newly constructed boundary wall, formed of concrete faced with granite, reinforced concrete having recently come into vogue as an industrial material.



Figure 9.

James McNeill Whistler, *Variations in Violet and Green*, 1871, oil on canvas, 61 × 35.5 cm. Collection of Musée d'Orsay (RF 1995 5). Digital image courtesy of Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved).

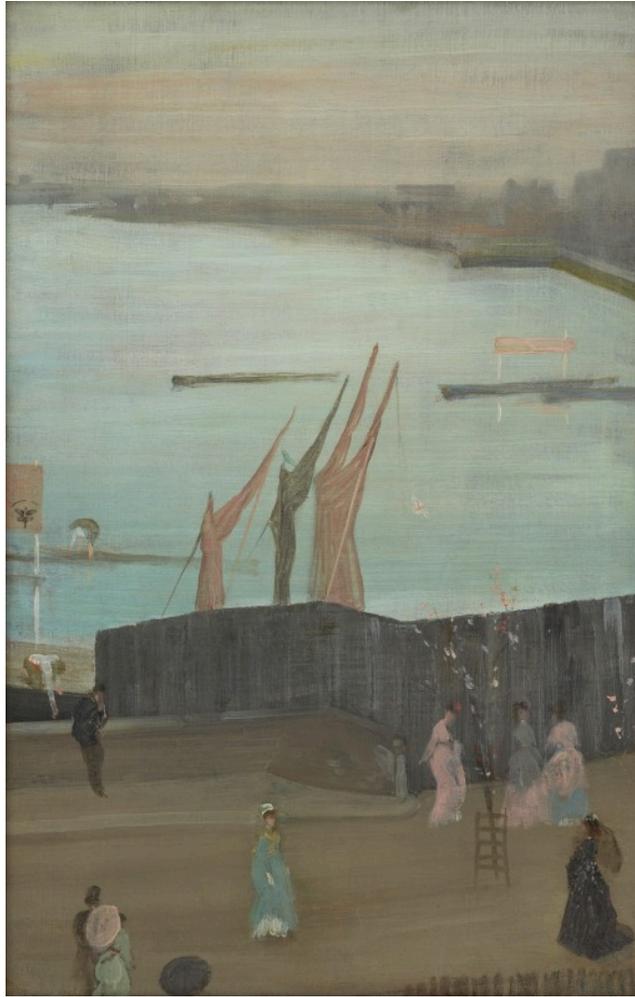


Figure 10.

James McNeill Whistler, *Variations in Pink and Grey: Chelsea, 1871-1872*, oil on canvas, 82 × 62.7 cm. Collection of the Freer Gallery of Art, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institute, Gift of Charles Lang Freer (F1902.249a-b). Digital image courtesy of Smithsonian Institute (CC0 1.0).

Whistler himself maintained that *Variations in Pink and Grey* was “not a Nocturne!! but a little picture of Chelsea”, his attitude suggesting that he intended it as a nod to the material transformation of his neighbourhood taking place before him that was being documented by Hedderly.²⁹ According to Mrs. Whistler, he often worked outside during the summer of 1871 and was invigorated by the experience, which presumably would have been intensified by the clamour of construction activity. To “work in the open air”, Mrs. Whistler wrote, “was like the renewal of Etching & gave zest to Studio at intervals”.³⁰ The hoarding clearly remained for some time, for it

forms a backdrop to his depiction of the riverbank being recolonised by urban dwellers. This centres on several female strollers who appear to weave in and out of the newly planted trees.

This returns us to my original question: how did Whistler see these women? If, as he so readily claimed, they were no more than compositional devices or colour accents, why did he trouble himself with the indicative details of their dress and with referencing fashions of the day—albeit in a sketchy and non-specific manner? It is worth considering one of Whistler's portrait commissions begun around this time, *Symphony in Flesh Colour and Pink: Portrait of Mrs Frances Leyland* (1871/1874), wife of Frederick Leyland, Whistler's chief patron during this period (fig. 11). Its decorative, ethereal elements—and Mrs. Leyland's three-quarter pose—resonate with the figures in the two *Variations* pictures and in *Battersea Reach from Lindsey Houses*. Certainly, Whistler attended to every detail of the setting: his biographers, the Pennells, reported that “Mrs Leyland stood in the flesh-colour and yellow drawing room and he designed her gown to harmonise with it”.³¹ More recently, Susan Galassi has emphasised the uniqueness of the gown (which she classifies roughly as a tea gown), with its train decorated with rosettes in white and gold, and how it became a vehicle for Whistler's artistic aims.

Like all of Whistler's work of the period, the costume draws from an eclectic mix of historic traditions and current trends, freely adapted to articulate his ideas of the beautiful, and to assert his modernity—for which fashion was an important signifier.³²

Through the portrait, Whistler could present “an ideal modern world—a symphony of the arts”.³³



Figure 11.

James McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in Flesh Colour and Pink: Portrait of Mrs Frances Leyland*, 1871-1874, oil on canvas, 95.9 x 102.2 cm. Collection of The Frick Collection, Henry Clay Frick Bequest (1917.1.133). Digital image courtesy of The Frick Collection (all rights reserved).

Whistler himself was dissatisfied with the result, however, as he told Frances Leyland,

It should have been so beautiful! ... I sometimes dare to hope that still it may be saved—The strange little something, that stands between a master-piece in its perfection, and failure, might at any moment yield—and a mornings work bring with it the bright life that is now smouldering with in [sic].³⁴

Nevertheless, the aestheticised nature of the portrait (Rossetti called it “a graceful design” but not “at all a likeness”) and Whistler’s subsequent response point towards a transformative role for the semi-anonymised female figure in his Thames images during this period.³⁵ It served to direct the viewer towards a new way of looking at the city—a poetic landscape of the mind that lay beyond the particularities of daily living for Victorians. Indeed, the dreamy air of Mrs. Leyland’s portrait—the distance placed between sitter and viewer by her backward pose and flower-strewn robe—together with the geometric patterns of the matting and panelling, seem to connect directly with the flickering presence of the women and their Thames-side settings in Whistler’s *Variations* and Cremorne images.

Marshall highlights the extent to which ““woman” in nineteenth-century representation came to stand for modernity, a trope that was recognised and celebrated in countless texts and illustrations.³⁶ The fashionable female window-shopper was a particular manifestation of this trope that correlated with the rise of the fashion plate and the department store. The presence of female figures in fashionable garb in Whistler’s pictures thus seems plausible—his placement of the women within the emerging new borderland of the river and the spaces between the figures serve to introduce light and air—forms of modernity—into the murky urban landscape and its masculinised world of global trade. The presence in the *Variations* and *Battersea Reach* paintings of linear elements such as railings, hoardings, and balconies is also worth noting—the latter are seen in earlier representations that include the Thames, as in *Variations in Flesh Colour and Green: The Balcony* (1864/73). This correlates with the prevalence of balconies in Haussmann’s Paris where, as Gen Doy has examined, land values were high and the structures became “a means of providing additional space and light”.³⁷ Indeed for both locals and visitors, Haussmannisation offered, as Temma Balducci points out, “ever more visual distractions and alluring vistas through its expanded park system, new layout and burgeoning variety of commercial establishments”.³⁸ It offered new ways of viewing the city.

Balducci also gives attention to the presence of balconies (and windows) as vantage points in French painting of the period, most memorably in Manet’s eponymous *Le Balcon* (1868), a painting likely known to Whistler, who maintained his contacts with French artists long after he settled in London.³⁹ Manet’s focus is essentially inward—on the domestic interior and the eerily still spectacle of the figures on the balcony. By contrast, our experience of Whistler’s depictions of women posed by balconies and railings—from the explicitly titled *Variations in Flesh Colour and Green: The Balcony* (1864–1873), to early crepuscular pictures such as *Variations in Violet and Green* and *Battersea Reach from Lindsey Houses*, is led by the largely outward gaze of the female figures over and beyond the human-made

structures around them. Even in other comparable Whistlerian subjects, Gustave Caillebotte's *Le Pont de l'Europe* (1876) for instance, the male and female pedestrians are engulfed by the girders of the bridge. Indeed, Whistler's elevated representations of women in these settings seem on this basis to have more in common with the work of female Impressionists, for example Morisot's distant, indistinct representations of Paris in works like *Femme et Enfant au Balcon* (1872).

The aestheticised world of Whistler's female bystanders, and their outward gaze, surfaces in his "Ten O'Clock" lecture, first delivered on 20 February 1885.⁴⁰ In Whistler's imaginary history of art, the artist—a "dreamer apart"—"stayed by the tents with the women" to perform a magician-like role as "deviser of the beautiful". Nature is represented in feminised terms as the fount of the artist's imagination.

And when the evening mist clothes the riverside with poetry, as with a veil, and the poor buildings lose themselves in the dim sky, and the tall chimneys become campanili, and the warehouses are palaces in the night, and the whole city hangs in the heavens, and fairy-land is before us then the wayfarer hastens home ... Nature ... sings her exquisite song to the artist alone, her son and her master—her son in that he loves her, her master in that he knows her.⁴¹

Elsewhere in the lecture, the artist's self-directed journey into the imagination is described with the same deft brush strokes that Whistler applied to his visualisation of the women bystanders in his Thames images.

In the citron wing of the pale butterfly, with its dainty spots of orange, he sees before him the stately halls of fair gold, with their slender saffron pillars, and is taught how the delicate drawing high upon the walls shall be traced in tender tones of orpiment, and repeated by the base in notes of graver hue.⁴²

This dreamy universe should perhaps be seen in the context of the compromised and unstable position occupied by women by comparison with their male counterparts, since they lived in a society in which women's capacities were believed to centre upon reproduction and replication. As Judith Walkowitz points out: "In the mental map of urban spectators, they lacked autonomy: they were bearers of meaning rather than makers of meaning".⁴³

At the same time, the spectral women in Whistler's paintings confirmed the domestication of the river in line with technological progress. This is betrayed by the explicit presence of civic structures (and public safety devices like hoardings) in Thames views as in *Variations in Pink and Grey: Chelsea*. The women themselves had come to belong to what Oliver describes as a "regulated landscape of water, controlled and channelled into [an] ordered form".⁴⁴ This correlates with the rationalist tenor of nineteenth-century urban planning more generally that was based, as Elizabeth Wilson puts it, on "utilitarian principles of surveillance, hygiene and labour discipline" (although this was challenged on occasion by socialist demands that principles of redistribution be applied).⁴⁵ Guardians of moral and physical hygiene, bearers of the next generation to labour for trade and empire, middle-class women were required to fit into this schematic landscape. As Wilson highlights, for many Victorians: "the condition of women was the touchstone of the state of civilisation and progress".⁴⁶

Although a new world was emerging along these lines, the "old" world of Battersea Bridge, the eighteenth-century wooden structure depicted repeatedly by Whistler over forty years, still exercised its own constraints, in particular over the working-class men and women, who can be glimpsed making the crossing in etchings such as *Old Battersea Bridge* (1879) (fig. 12). While the bridge, as one commentator explained in 1872, had "always been, more or less, a resort for strollers", it was as much about economics as leisure.

You have to pay at one end of the bridge, so that Chelsea folks can walk towards Surrey as far as the toll-bar, and turn back while the Battersea people cannot go on the bridge without paying ... at certain times in the day, the Surrey end forms a point of meeting, where working men and women come to receive meals or bundles from relatives to whom the payment of even a halfpenny toll is something desirable to be saved.⁴⁷

The passage of the women who crossed the creaking bridge (soon to be replaced by a gleaming new structure) was constrained by the old-style economics of Victorian laissez-faire capitalism.⁴⁸



Figure 12.

James McNeill Whistler, *Old Battersea Bridge*, 1879, etching, 20.2 × 29.3 cm. Collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Thomas E. Donnelley (1953.215). Digital image courtesy of Art Institute of Chicago (public domain).

The embankments, by contrast, were a concentrated expression of Victorian liberalism overseen by the Metropolitan Board of Works, charged since 1855 with steering the expansion of London's infrastructure. Promenades and green spaces, such as the Victoria and Chelsea Embankments Gardens, offered new opportunities to middle-class women for movement at a time when they were leading more visible lives on the street.⁴⁹ Gas lamps were installed to improve lighting and, for a time, the stretch from Westminster to Blackfriars was lit by electricity, attracting crowds of curious onlookers.⁵⁰ By the time Whistler made a watercolour in the same vicinity a few years later, *Pink and Silver—Chelsea, the Embankment* (circa 1885), the ornamental trees were maturing and the Albert Bridge, then undergoing substantial modifications, is clearly visible on the horizon (fig. 13).⁵¹ The revitalised bridge, the *Times* declared, would be “an ornament to the river and neighbourhood, and ... command an extensive and picturesque prospect”.⁵² The embankments came to form part of a complex web of modern structures in the service of urban life, delivering an aesthetic experience within a productive landscape.



Figure 13.

James McNeill Whistler, *Pink and silver—Chelsea, the Embankment*, circa 1885, watercolour, 12.7 × 21.6 cm. Collection of The Clark, Williamstown, MA (1955.1533). Digital image courtesy of The Clark, Williamstown, MA (public domain).

Cremorne

But for women of all classes, the problem remained—as Nord has shown, there was little escape from their status as urban spectacle.⁵³ The idea that an unaccompanied respectable woman could experience enjoyment from walking alone through the city still threatened conventional models of femininity. Writing in 1862, conservative journalist and novelist, Eliza Lynn Linton, advised that a woman’s behaviour should be, ideally, “unobtrusive, gentle, womanly, she is just the person to slip through a crowd unobserved, like one of those soft grey moths in the evening, which come and go upon their way, unseen by men and undevoured by birds”. Linton’s opinions were nothing if not practical. They sought to place women, as Nead puts it, “in the city, but not of the city”, against a backdrop of “conditions created by London in the period [that] tested and expanded contemporary definitions of femininity and respectability”.⁵⁴

At Cremorne, a tree-covered pleasure gardens laid out with flower beds, statues, and fountains a short walk westwards from Whistler’s home, such contingent boundaries of women’s behaviour were subject to continual scrutiny. Until early evening, it was the haunt of the lower middle classes—shopkeepers, tradesmen, and their families, drawn to the entertainment on offer, which included dancing, fireworks, and a captive balloon. By night, however, Cremorne acquired a shadier atmosphere that fascinated Whistler, who made six nocturnal paintings of the subject in the 1870s. There is a foggy air of mystery to *Cremorne Gardens, No. 2*, the

largest of these, in which brightly dressed women, some of whom may have been sex workers, meander and chat in a naturalistic setting, the trees lit with fairy lights (fig. 14).⁵⁵



Figure 14.

James McNeill Whistler, *Cremorne Gardens, No. 2*, 1870–1880, oil on canvas, 68.6 × 134.9 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, John Stewart Kennedy Fund, 1912 (12.32). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).

Cremorne had long been subject to moral scrutiny, not helped by its proximity to respectable parts of suburban Chelsea. Visiting London in the late 1860s, Daniel Joseph Kirwan declared it:

the maddest place in London, after ten o'clock in the evening ... from thence until one and two o'clock in the morning Cremorne is in the possession of Lost Women and their male friends and abettors ... Between the dances the girls promenade, or take supper with their male friends in the numerous restaurants, which are always crowded to excess by noisy people of both sexes, drinking Champagne and Moselle, or eating lobster or devilled kidneys.⁵⁶

Kirwan's forensic description of his visit includes statistical information from the police returns as to the numbers of women engaged in sex work in the neighbourhood in the tradition of urban investigation practised by Henry Mayhew in *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851–1862).⁵⁷ Mayhew's study suggests, however, that their status as so-called "lost women" was often subject to revision in a manner that tended to be overlooked by Victorian popular imagination: The women's own voices are largely inaudible, but Bracebridge Hemyng, who contributed to Mayhew's work, claimed that

many women “eventually become respectable, and merge into the ocean of propriety”, quoting the words of one: “We often do marry, and well too; why shouldn’t we, we are pretty, we dress well, we can talk and insinuate ourselves into the hearts of men by appealing to their passions and their senses”. ⁵⁸

Cremorne also drew women from a category that Hemyng termed “convives”, women who lived together by necessity with their co-workers, albeit this was often a fitful arrangement.

They never stay long in one house, although some will remain for ten or twelve months in a particular lodging. It is their principle to get as deeply into debt as they are able, and then to pack up their things, have them conveyed elsewhere by stealth. ⁵⁹

Such transgressions of the social order had long been part of the scene at Cremorne. In the end, local disapproval of the night-time crowd (which led to a procession of drunk and disorderly cases before the magistrate), defeated the efforts of its last proprietor, John Baum, to run the gardens as a middle-class leisure facility. He closed the enterprise in 1877 and the women moved on. Soon, developers moved in to exploit the site for building, encouraged by the gentrification of the surrounding area brought about by Chelsea Embankment. With his final Cremorne painting completed the same year, Whistler moved into a crisis period of his own—his libel case against Ruskin and subsequent bankruptcy—a crisis period which nevertheless led to a transformation of his art over the next few years.

What can we conclude from such shifting settings about women’s relations with the environment of the Thames in this period? How can their presence be contextualised in Whistler’s paintings of this subject? I have argued previously that the positioning of the female figures in paintings such as the two *Variations* help Whistler convey his vision of the urban landscape that is about wide open spaces, light, and air. So too does the format of subsequent subjects like *Chelsea Shops: Yellow and Grey* (1884) with its strong verticals and horizontals, the vastness of the foreground punctuated by scurrying movement of the figures, including several women. This contrasts with *Cremorne Gardens, No. 2*, in which there is a perceptible psychological focus on the women that conforms to the notion of the sex worker as “a central spectacle in a set of urban encounters and fantasies”, as Walkowitz puts it.

⁶⁰ At the same time, there is an echo of his Chelsea streetscapes and river views in Whistler’s treatment of the setting and the sketchy indistinctiveness of the figures which counteracts, as Marshall puts it, “the Victorian fondness for the use of binary oppositions of the ‘city of gold and mud’ sort” to

produce pictorial meaning which, she points out was an approach commonly employed by modern life painters, including William Powell Frith.⁶¹ The ghostly appearance of the women precludes their categorisation as Frith-like physiognomic street types.

Richard Dennis cautions, however, against likening “public spaces” such as Cremorne and the Embankment with “public sphere” for, he points out, while in the late nineteenth century, “women were increasingly visible in the city’s streets and other public spaces ... it does not follow that they were also more engaged in political and social debate”.⁶² This is reflected in women’s relations with the Thames environment. The Embankment and its gardens formed part of a movement not only to improve hygiene but also to bring the country to the city.⁶³ It represented space and order in contrast to London’s crowded shopping streets with their attendant hazards for women and worries about the mixing of classes and the sexes. Its presence increased their visibility across the social and economic classes. But despite the opportunities for health and leisure it offered, in the end, the Embankment represented another extension of the private sphere (as with shops); it was a controlled rather than an emancipatory environment. As for Whistler’s paintings of the Thames in the 1870s, they seem to me too non-specific in their portrayal of women to advocate a particular role for them in the modern city, and too grounded in theories of colour. Indeed, at least some of these portrayals may have been conjurings of Whistler’s imagination, based on models in the studio rather than literal representations of Chelsea life.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, by the same token, his consistent inclusion of women in futuristic public settings, his avoidance of physiognomic types, and resolute disinterest in narrative (as he says in “The Red Rag”, “I care nothing for the past, present, or future of the black figure, placed there because the black was wanted at that spot”), affirms powerfully their place within it.

Footnotes

- ¹ Stuart Oliver, “Fantasies in Granite: The Thames Embankments as a Boundary to the River”, *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in The Representation of London* 5, no. 1 (March 2007), <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/march2007/oliver.html>.
- ² Stephen Halliday, *The Great Stink of London* (Stroud: Sutton, 1999), 149-150.
- ³ Vanessa Taylor, “London’s River? The Thames as Contested Environmental Space”, *The London Journal* 40, no. 3 (2015): 183-195, DOI:10.1179/1749632215Y0000000010.
- ⁴ Whistler to Henri Fantin-Latour, 4 January-3 February 1864, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Pennell-Whistler Collection, PWC 1/33/15. See *The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler, 1855-1903*, ed. Margaret F. MacDonald, Patricia de Montfort and Nigel Thorp, online edition (Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 2003). <http://www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/correspondence>, GUV #08036. Thereafter cited “GUV”, followed by record number.
- ⁵ Anna Matilda Whistler to James H. Gamble, 10-11 February 1864. Glasgow University Library, MS Whistler W516, GUV #06522.

- 6 John Ruskin, "Sesame and Lilies. Lecture II—Lilies: Of Queens' Gardens", *The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols, ed. Edward Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (1903-1912), Vol. 18, 122, <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/the-ruskin/the-complete-works-of-ruskin/>.^[fn] By contrast, the shifting margins and muddy levels of the nearby River Thames, together with the choking pollution of the city (caused at least in part by domestic coal fires), made for a hazardous and uncertain environment. Richard Dorment conveys the starkness of these divergent worlds succinctly in his description of *Battersea Reach from Lindsey Houses* (1864/71) (fig. 3), one of Whistler's earliest atmospheric depictions of the river

a view looking across the river to a coal slag on the Battersea side ... instead of the working class bargemen in the foreground Whistler places fashionably dressed Victorian ladies, two carrying open parasols that make them look like delicate figures on a Japanese screen.^[fn]Richard Dorment, "Whistler and the Thames, Dulwich Picture Gallery, Review", *Daily Telegraph*, 21 October 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/10393447/Whistler-and-the-Thames-Dulwich-Picture-Gallery-review.html>.

- 7 Janet Wolff, "The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity", *Theory, Culture and Society* 2, no. 3 (November 1985): 45.
- 8 Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough, eds., *The Invisible Flâneuse: Gender, Public Space and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).
- 9 Wolff, "The Invisible Flâneuse".
- 10 Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 69.
- 11 Nead, *Victorian Babylon*, 70.
- 12 Nead, *Victorian Babylon*, 70-71.
- 13 Richard Dennis, *Cities in Modernity: Representations and Productions of Metropolitan Space, 1840-1930* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 156. Dennis also cites an earlier example of the young independent woman, Lucy Snowe in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), who travels and walks alone in London, although she is more naïve abroad than a streetwise flâneuse. See Dennis, *Cities in Modernity*, 152.
- 14 Elizabeth Wilson. *The Contradictions of Culture: Cities, Culture, Women* (London: SAGE, 2000), 83.
- 15 Nancy Rose Marshall, *City of Gold and Mud: Painting Victorian London* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 217.
- 16 Marshall, *City of Gold and Mud*, 221.
- 17 Marshall, *City of Gold and Mud*, 221.
- 18 Hilary A. Taylor, "Urban Public Parks, 1840-1900: Design and Meaning", *Garden History*, 23, no. 2 (Winter 1995): 213.
- 19 Théophile Gautier, "Une Journée à Londres", in *The Works of Théophile Gautier*, 24 vols. (New York: G.D. Sproul, 1900), Vol. 14, 301-302.
- 20 Edward Walford, *Old and New London*, 6 vols. (London: Cassell, Petter and Galpin, 1878), Vol. 5, 50-70, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/old-new-london/vol5/pp50-70>.
- 21 "The Chelsea Embankment", *The Times*, 25 December 1872.
- 22 "Old Chelsea", *Daily News*, 2 November 1872.
- 23 "Old Chelsea", *Daily News*.
- 24 Taylor, "London's River?"
- 25 "New Embankment on The Thames", *The Times*, 7 August 1871.
- 26 "New Embankment on The Thames", *The Times*. The river embankment was estimated to be forty-one miles in length from Blackfriars to Battersea Bridge.
- 27 In his *Mémoires*, Haussmann emphasised the importance of public parks within the framework of the modern city; Georges Eugène Haussmann, *Mémoires du Baron Haussmann*, 3 vols. (Paris: Victor-Havard, 1890-1893), Vol. 3: *Grands travaux de Paris*.
- 28 Haussmann's influence remains visible today in the meandering paths and "corbeille"-shaped flowerbeds in the adjacent smaller gardens. I am grateful to my colleague Prof. Clare A.P. Willsdon for this observation.
- 29 Whistler to D.C. Thomson, 28 February 1892, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Pennell-Whistler Collection, PWC 3, GUV #08213.
- 30 Anna Matilda Whistler to James H. Gamble, 29 November 1871, Glasgow University Library, MS Whistler W541. GUV #06547.
- 31 Elizabeth Robins Pennell and Joseph Pennell, *The Whistler Journal* (London: J.B. Lippincott, 1921), 301.
- 32 Susan Galassi, "Whistler and Aesthetic Dress: Mrs Frances Leyland", in *Whistler, Women and Fashion*, ed. Margaret F. MacDonald, Susan Galassi, Aileen Ribeiro, and Patricia de Montfort (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 95-96.

- 33 Galassi, "Whistler and Aesthetic Dress: Mrs Frances Leyland", 96.
- 34 Whistler to Frances Leyland, [1/6 January 1874], Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Pennell-Whistler Collection, PWC 13/1171-72, GUV #10867, <http://www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/correspondence/recno/display/?cid=10867>.
- 35 Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown, [August 1874], William Fredeman, ed., *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 9 vols. (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2002–15), Vol. 6, 523.
- 36 Marshall, *City of Gold and Mud*, 222–223.
- 37 Doy suggests that the presence of balconies had particular implications for bourgeois women since they "turned domestic life outward to the street, rather than towards an inner courtyard". Gen Doy, *Seeing and Consciousness: Women, Class and Representation* (London: Routledge, 2020), 62–63.
- 38 Temma Balducci, *Gender, Space, and the Gaze in Post-Haussmann Visual Culture: Beyond the Flâneur* (London: Routledge, 2017), 2 and 113.
- 39 Whistler first met Manet through their mutual friend Henri Fantin-Latour in 1861. In 1864, Fantin-Latour depicted the two men in *Hommage à Eugène Delacroix* (Musée d'Orsay) in which artists (who also included the painters Alphonse Legros and Félix Bracquemond) and critics (Charles Baudelaire, Edmond Duranty, and Jules Champfleury) gather in tribute to Eugène Delacroix, who had recently died.
- 40 James McNeill Whistler, *Mr Whistler's Ten O'Clock* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1888).
- 41 James McNeill Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, 2nd rev. ed. (London, 1892), 144.
- 42 Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, 144.
- 43 Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 21.
- 44 Oliver, "Fantasies in Granite", 3.
- 45 Wilson, *The Contradictions of Culture*, 69.
- 46 Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 29.
- 47 Anon., "London Bridges and their Memories", *Kind Words for Boys and Girls*, 1 December 1872.
- 48 Most London bridges were private enterprises that charged tolls before these were abolished with the passing of the Metropolitan Toll Bridges Act, 1877.
- 49 See Nead, *Victorian Babylon*, 62ff.
- 50 This stretch was lit by electricity between 1878 and 1884 but, after the failure of the Jablochhoff electricity supply company in 1884, gas lighting was reinstated. Halliday, *Great Stink of London*, 163.
- 51 Built in 1873, the Albert Bridge proved to be unsound. The modifications under Bazalgette's direction included incorporating the design elements of a suspension bridge.
- 52 "The Albert-Bridge at Chelsea", *The Times*, 26 December 1871.
- 53 Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 4.
- 54 Nead, *Victorian Babylon*, 67.
- 55 The scene may incorporate an encounter between several prostitutes and a potential customer. See Margaret F. MacDonald and Grischka Petri, *James McNeill Whistler: The Paintings: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 2020), <http://whistlerpaintings.gla.ac.uk>.
- 56 Daniel Joseph Kirwan, *Palace and Hovel: or, Phases of London Life* (Hartford, CT: Columbian Book Company, 1878), 594–595.
- 57 Kirwan, *Palace and Hovel*, 590.
- 58 Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 4 vols. (London: Charles Griffin & Company, 1862), Vol. 4, 220.
- 59 Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, Vol. 4, 218–219.
- 60 Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, 21.
- 61 Marshall, *City of Gold and Mud*, 43.
- 62 Dennis, *Cities in Modernity*, 154–155.
- 63 Albeit the reality may have been much grittier, prompting leading commentators such as George Sala to declare his wish that the Embankment "be something more than a camping-ground for hulking roughs and blackguard little boys". George Augustus Sala, "Imaginary London", *Belgravia: A London Magazine* 1 (July 1873): 29–30.
- 64 Certainly, their aestheticised attire (which includes what looks like Japanese kimonos and parasols) points towards this. See, for example, *Battersea Reach from Lindsey Houses* (1864/71) or *Variations in Violet and Green* (1871).

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Whistler and Battersea: The Aesthetics of Erasure and Redevelopment

Jon Newman

Abstract

This article looks at the significance of South London for Whistler, particularly the line of Battersea factories that he viewed and depicted repeatedly from his home on Cheyne Walk, where he lived from the 1860s. It uses *Variations in Flesh Colour and Green*, *The Balcony* (1864–1873) as a way of considering the context and precursors of these factories in Battersea, interrogating Whistler's use of Japonisme, and his emerging aesthetic that went on to manifest in the nocturnes and become fully articulated in his "Ten O'clock Lecture". A contrast is drawn between Whistler's depiction of factories in *Variations in Flesh Colour and Green* and the nocturnes, and use of these buildings as motifs in earlier British social realist art and writing of the 1840s and 1850s. Parallels are found between the transformation of industrial Battersea into a twilight fairyland of the imagination, as advocated in Whistler's lecture, and the subsequent developer-led transformation of Battersea's riverside, which started in the late twentieth century, turning it into a new zone of exclusive riverside apartment blocks where, quite literally, "the tall chimneys become campanile—and the warehouses are palaces in the night".

Authors

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A Changing Prospect: Painting Battersea from Cheyne Walk

When James Abbott McNeill Whistler first came to live in London in 1859 and stayed with Seymour Haden, the bourgeois lifestyle at his brother-in-law's house on Sloane Street would have had a certain predictability, familiarity even. Less so his explorations of the river and wharves of East London that fed into the Thames Set, the sixteen etchings of riverside London he made between 1859 and 1871. Perhaps these forays in turn led him to the fashionable riverside raffishness of Cheyne Walk, just to the west of Battersea Bridge, to which he moved in 1863 into a house in Lindsey Row, part of the larger and now subdivided Lindsey House. He would not yet have met his Chelsea neighbour and future sitter, Thomas Carlyle, but perhaps already recognised Carlyle's ambivalent judgement that being situated here was like "living at the end of the world ... safe at the bend of the river, away from all the great roads", yet at night unable to escape "the gleam of the great Babylon, affronting the skies".¹

By the early 1860s Whistler was acquiring a sense of the distinctiveness of London's different locales—from the mercantilism of Wapping and Rotherhithe to the gentilities of Sloane Street—but what did he make of the South London that confronted him across the river from Cheyne Walk? Despite the connectivity offered by road and rail bridges, the Thames was still a distinct divide between the city and its south bank. As viewed from the window of his house at Lindsey Row, it separated not only the riverside parishes of Battersea and Chelsea, and the counties of Surrey and Middlesex, but also a mainly industrial quarter from a residential one, and a predominantly working-class area from the self-consciously artistic and intellectual enclave of Cheyne Walk ([fig. 1](#)).



Figure 1.

Edward Stanford, Detail from Edward Stanford's Library Map of London and its Suburbs, showing Whistler's viewpoint south east from Lindsey Row across the Thames to Battersea, 1862, 59.4 × 84.1 cm. Collection of Lambeth Archives. Digital image courtesy of Lambeth Archives (all rights reserved).

Cheyne Walk—the first high ground secured from flooding on the north bank to the west of Charing Cross—had long been an attractive point of settlement. Its relative isolation from main roads, even after the river crossing of Battersea Bridge, had preserved a *rus in urbe* quality, caught between the actual riverside villages of the upper Thames to the west and the creep of London to the east, exemplified by Thomas Cubitt's development of neighbouring Pimlico from the 1840s as a new middle-class quarter. Cheyne Walk was an area with a sense of both self-importance and continuity. When Carlyle moved there in 1834, he had observed that he “could shoot a gun into Smollett's old house (at this very time getting pulled down)”.²

In 1863 Whistler was living on the street where the artist Joseph Mallord William Turner had died twelve years earlier. He might already have known of the area's cultural and artistic legacy, and he would soon encounter its contemporary representatives in the persons of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Algernon Charles Swinburne, who both lived at 16 Cheyne Walk. Yet alongside this category of residents, in an early instance of aesthetic zoning, several successful industrialists with manufactories on the Battersea riverfront had also chosen to live on Cheyne Walk and commute over the bridge to their workplaces. From 1808 Marc Brunel lived on Lindsey Row opposite his Battersea sawmills, boot factory, and tin plate factory. A

generation later, Thomas Morgan of the Morgan Crucible factory, built in part on the site of Brunel's works, lived in Beaufort Lodge on Cheyne Walk. These smoky, steam-powered enterprises lurking on the horizon of their owners' riverside views would be incorporated by Whistler into his future work.

In the Thames Set and in his earlier works, Whistler had been a free agent, coming upon and exploring multiple different views of London. By contrast, at Lindsey Row he was static, set at an upper window, repeatedly exploring the incongruities and the absences of traditional pictorial qualities in the view. There is a freshness and a sense of wonder to these paintings of the early 1860s. By the simple act of looking from north to south, he was bucking one established pictorial convention that treated the south bank of the river as a platform from which to view or depict the metropolis.³ Instead, Whistler reversed that direction of view and looked south to produce a series of startlingly different versions of what was essentially the same riverscape that shifted between a busy realism and a fleeting "impressionism". *Brown and Silver: Old Battersea Bridge* (1862-1865) ([fig. 2](#)), *Battersea Reach* (1863), *Grey and Silver: Old Battersea Reach* (1863), *Grey and Silver: Chelsea Wharf* (1864), *Battersea Reach from Lindsey Houses* (1864-1871), and *Chelsea in Ice* (1864) ([fig. 3](#)) are each a different treatment of the same prospect seen from Lindsey Row. But it is *Variations in Flesh Colour and Green* that is the focus of this article: a view painted from the balcony at Lindsey Row (and originally titled *The Balcony*), which Whistler commenced in 1864, first showed in 1870, and continued to rework until 1873 ([fig. 4](#)).



Figure 2.

James McNeill Whistler, *Brown and Silver: Old Battersea Bridge*, 1862-1865, oil on canvas mounted on masonite, 63.8 × 76 cm. Collection of the Addison Gallery of American Art (1928.55). Digital image courtesy of Addison Gallery of American Art / Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved).



Figure 3.

James McNeill Whistler, *Chelsea in Ice*, 1864, oil on canvas, 45.09 cm × 60.96 cm. Collection of The Lunder Collection, Colby College Museum of Art (2013.293). Digital image courtesy of The Lunder Collection, Colby College Museum of Art (all rights reserved).

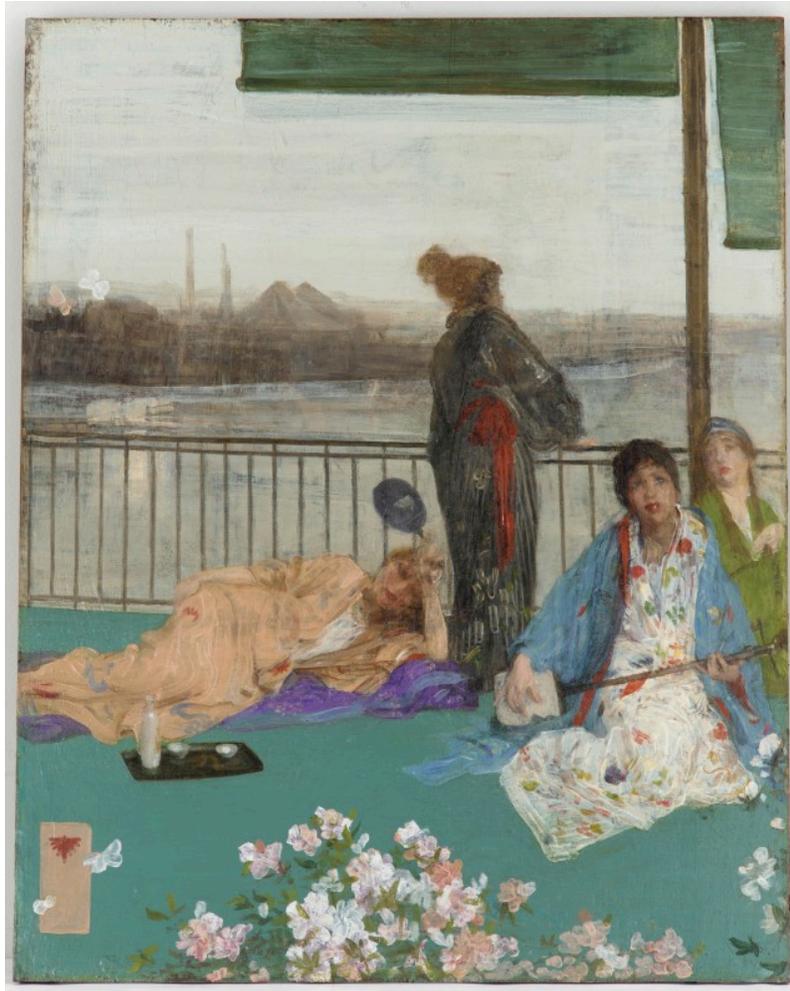


Figure 4.

James McNeill Whistler, *Variations in Flesh Colour and Green, The Balcony*, 1864–1873, oil on wood panel, 61.4 × 48.5 cm. Collection of the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Charles Lang Freer (F1892.23a-b). Digital image courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution (public domain).

Variations is a painting that has still not shaken off the shock of the new, and its viewer is confronted by a disruptive juxtaposition. The gulf between the painting's costumed and balconied foreground and its wilfully anti-aesthetic industrial background seems to have been set up to be deliberately unbridgeable. The wider, more catholic, gaze found in many of Whistler's previous paintings of the same scene is here replaced by a narrow and occluded view, framed by the structure of the eponymous balcony, its green sun blinds, and wooden railings. Within this enclosed space, a group of young women dressed as geishas pose with a Japanese tea service and musical instruments, and an ikebana spray of flowers.⁴ Out beyond the balcony's edge, the flattened surfaces of river and sky—both in similarly reduced grey

tones—are kept apart by a receding line of dark and smoking factory buildings, which stain and subdue the brighter palette used in the foreground.

Whistler's move to Cheyne Walk had coincided with his growing success as a society portraitist. *La Princesse du pays de la porcelain*, *The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks*, *The Little White Girl*, and *The Golden Screen* were all painted between 1864 and 1865. In each he had deliberately introduced Chinese and Japanese artefacts into portraits that were otherwise located within familiar English middle-class domestic interiors. Aileen Tsui sees these East Asian objects as symbolising an “unbridgeable cultural alterity and thus haunting enigma for Western viewers”.⁵ *Variations* is chronologically of a piece with these works, only here those same Japanese artefacts have been taken from their room settings, along with the kimonos, out onto a balcony—that interim, ambiguous space set between interior and exterior worlds. The effect seems to reinforce that other “alterity” (as presented here by Whistler) between Cheyne Walk and Battersea.

Part of this strangeness is the setting up of visual and social opposites in a way that had not been presented before. The figures in this elegantly leisured and enclosed foreground with its savours of orientalism and eroticism have set their backs to the other world across the water—that previously unpaintable zone of industrial toil—but it remains in sight to the viewer. In *Old Battersea Bridge* and *Battersea Reach* the Thames had teemed with traffic, whereas here the atomised foreground world floats above a waterway that has been eerily swept of craft and activity.⁶ Known geographical points that might permit the viewer to locate themselves have been excluded: Battersea Bridge is out of frame to the left; the familiar tower and spire of St. Mary's church is lost to sight behind the head and shoulders of the standing woman; and what in Whistler's previous paintings of the same view were identifiably the remaining lower brick courses of the circular Battersea horizontal mill have here been dissolved into an indeterminate spoil heap (fig. 5).



Figure 5.

William Woolnoth after Jacob Schnebbelie, *Battersea Horizontal Mill*, 1806, engraving. Collection of Lambeth Archives. Digital image courtesy of Lambeth Archives (all rights reserved).

Both in its original title, *The Balcony*, and in its compositional structure, *Variations* appears to play with the idea of the painter's viewpoint. Whistler's other paintings of the same scene exclude any sense of a viewing platform: one is merely aware of looking down from a vantage point. Writing to his picture restorer about *Battersea Reach*, he recalled that it "was very simply painted—long ago—one evening from my window".⁷ But in *Variations* he has stepped back to bring its structure into the composition, prompting consideration of the nature and function of a balcony that predates Whistler's occupancy and hints at a previous, now destroyed, prospect that it had once commanded. In brief, the seventeenth-century Lindsey House had been remodelled in the 1750s, then subdivided into the four houses of Lindsey Row in the 1770s. The balcony was a yet later Regency addition made by Marc Brunel (fig. 6). As such, it was part of the emerging picturesque tradition in architecture, and one that presupposed a view worthy of contemplation. Whistler's use of it here invites consideration of the changing nature of the prospect and the way that it can be depicted. What had been the scene that Brunel had viewed from its platform in 1815, as compared with the "post-picturesque" vision that confronted Whistler just fifty years later?



Figure 6.

Thomas Shepherd, Lindsey House, Showing the Balcony of Marc Brunel's House on Lindsey Row, 1850, watercolour. Collection of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Libraries (A146). Digital image courtesy of Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Libraries (all rights reserved).

The scale and nature of these changes to Battersea's riverfront that presented themselves to Whistler were recent and not uncontested. The historian Edward Brayley, writing in 1848, had noted "various large manufacturing establishments, chemical works, smelting furnaces &c. are extended along its banks; greatly to the annoyance of the market gardeners and florists, who complain grievously of the injury they sustain by the smoke and noxious vapours of the numerous steam engines now employed in this hitherto rural district".⁸ Here, it is the older agricultural economy that was seen as the injured party, but the destructive effect on the river view from Chelsea was equally marked.

Brayley's account of this "hitherto rural" state is contemporary with the artist Turner's residence at Davis Place. He moved to this cottage with Sophia Booth in 1846, on the smaller-scale western continuation of Cheyne Walk (now no. 119). It had equally commanding views over the Thames, which he had praised to the artist John Martin (also living at Lindsey Row in the 1840s): "Here you see my study: sky and water. Are they not glorious? Here I have my lesson, night and day".⁹ Turner had added a balustrade with railings to the roof, to allow him to view Battersea and the Thames while working in safety. He described the prospect east to Westminster and the City as his "English view", while that south and west over Battersea was his

“Dutch view”.¹⁰ Although Turner’s Dutch landscape was already starting to be compromised by the 1840s, its essential framework remained: a church spire set among windmills and water meadows amid the polder-like flatness of the Battersea common fields (fig. 7). From across the length of them the Thames was still clearly visible. “So clear was the air across Battersea Fields”, wrote George Grove recalling his childhood in the 1820s, “that we could see the coloured sails of the barges going up and down the river”.¹¹



Figure 7.

Robert Westall, Battersea Fields, 1848, watercolour, 21.5 × 75 cm. Collection of the Museum of London (64.110). Digital image courtesy of Museum of London (all rights reserved).

This landscape’s transformation into Whistler’s successor vision of dark and steeping industrial structures would be sudden. Robin Spencer has found in Whistler’s views of “forgotten or overlooked” London (“once stripped of its nocturnal fog and impressionist hatching”) a visual record of the unconsidered eighteenth-century city.¹² The statement works well for those earlier etchings of the riverside found in the Thames Set, but when one comes to his views of Battersea, this is a misreading of the landscape. Whistler was struck by the visual possibilities of its jarring incongruity without necessarily realising just how recently its change had come about.

What Whistler wilfully incorporated, others were actively avoiding. The guidebooks and river maps produced from the 1830s for Thames steamboat trippers detailed the route upstream from London to the picturesque destinations of Kew, Richmond, and Hampton Court. En route, the boats passed through the increasingly industrial *longueurs* of Battersea, where travellers were advised to avert their gaze. In 1849, the scene was one of “stores, warehouses, soap manufactories, timber yards, vinegar works or the filthy and squalid hovels of eel fishers and flounder catchers”.¹³ A decade later the fishermen had gone but the works and those other “objects that blot the landscape” had expanded into “a succession of factories ... with yards and quays and waggon-sheds, auxiliaries to the manufactories of gin, soap, starch, silk, paper, candles, beer and vitriol”.¹⁴

Industry in Battersea

Many of the titles Whistler gave to his etchings and lithographs of the 1870s can be described as impressionistic. *Battersea Dawn*, *Battersea Morn*, *Nocturne*, and *Battersea Early Morning* may not possess the absolute placelessness of the titles given to the nocturne paintings, but they still suggest a purposeful imprecision. This sense of unlocatedness is heightened by the disorientation implicit in the etching process, whereby the outline etched onto the copper plate becomes reversed when printed onto the sheet. In some works this is easily understood because of the familiarity of the view (the transposition of Santa Maria della Salute and San Giorgio Maggiore in the *Salute* nocturnes of Whistler's Venice Set, for example), but amid the vagaries of a less familiar South London, the reversal seems to augment a sense of topographic uncertainty.¹⁵

It is unusual, arresting even, to confront *Price's Candle Factory*, an etched view probably captured from a boat in mid-stream, whose loose lines and dry-point detail have the same fleetingness of the other etchings of the 1860s and 1870s, but which is firmly anchored to place both by the precision of its title and by the accuracy of its observation (in spite of the mirroring that puts the Cremorne railway bridge on the right of the picture) (fig. 8). This is confirmed by comparison with the earliest known photograph of Price's works taken just after its construction in the mid-1850s (fig. 9). The distinctive triple curved roofs of the candle rooms are recognisable in both images.



Figure 8.

James McNeill Whistler, *Price's Candle Factory*, 1876-1877, drypoint etching, printed in black ink on dark ivory Japan, 14.8 × 22.4 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1917 (17.3.71). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).



Figure 9.

Unknown, *Price's Candle Works*, circa 1856, albumen print. Collection of Wandsworth Heritage Service. Digital image courtesy of Wandsworth Heritage Service (all rights reserved).

Certainly, such topographic accuracy cannot always be expected in Whistler's work, particularly with the nocturnes, and he provided his own playful caveat to that when reflecting on Burne-Jones's testimony at the Ruskin libel trial. Of the criticism that there was absolutely no detail or composition in his nocturnes, he observed,

There is a cunning condition of mind that *requires to know*. On the Stock Exchange this insures safe investment. In the painting trade this would induce certain picturemakers to cross the river at noon, in a boat, before negotiating a Nocturne, in order to make sure of detail on the bank, that honesty the purchaser might exact, and out of which he might have been tricked by the Night! ¹⁶

To the east of St. Mary's church and the Cremorne railway bridge stood the Morgan Crucible works. This was the industrial locus that came to dominate Whistler's depictions of Battersea (although the name never appears in any painting's title). Standing immediately across the Thames from Lindsey Row, it was the factory backdrop to *Variations*, the much reprised and highly aestheticised foreground to many of the nocturne paintings of the 1870s, and a regular feature in many of Whistler's etched and litho-printed works.

Price's and Morgan, the companies behind these factories, had both begun as small family-run concerns using chemical and technological innovation to repurpose colonial raw materials into novel products. Price's used saponification to turn Sri Lankan coconut oil and Nigerian palm oil into stearine candles that burnt longer and more brightly than tallow. Morgan mixed Sri Lankan and Madagascan graphite with clay to mould durable heat-refractive crucibles. Both firms nimbly absorbed and exploited fresh materials, newer technologies, and industrial by-products to dominate their respective markets and provide large-scale local employment. In switching to paraffin wax for candle manufacture in the 1890s, Price's expanded to create engine oil and petroleum as by-products; Morgan repurposed its graphite to the emerging electrical industry to make carbon brushes, resistors, and carbon rods for arc lighting. At the end of the twentieth century both firms relocated out of London and sold their Battersea sites for housing: Morgan in the 1980s and Price's in 2000, each departure leaving almost no trace. ¹⁷

The Morgan Crucible works had come to Battersea in 1856. By 1862, a former porcelain works on the site had been rebuilt as a bespoke factory, which Whistler worked into the background of *Variations*. Morgan's works continued to expand further along the riverside, absorbing Brunel's sawmills, a vitriol works, a steamboat dockyard, May and Baker's chemical works, and a sugar factory. A prominent and ostentatious Italianate clock tower, known locally as "Ted Morgan's folly", was erected in 1872, and Whistler reprised its distinctive silhouette in many of his later paintings, where its lit tower often offers the single point of illumination within the penumbra of the nocturnes (fig. 10).



Figure 10.

James McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne in Blue and Silver*, 1872–1878, oil on canvas, 44.5 × 61 cm. Collection of the Yale Centre for British Art, Paul Mellon Fund (B1994.19). Digital image courtesy of Yale Centre for British Art (public domain).

By 1920, Morgan occupied eleven acres of river frontage, employed over four thousand workers, and was reputed to have the tallest factory chimney in southern England. During the war it set up “shadow” factories away from London, and after the 1956 Clean Air Act their polluting carbon brush manufacture was moved to Swansea. Morgan ceased manufacture at Battersea in 1971. It took fourteen years to redevelop the site; the initial proposal for office blocks was eventually replaced by the low-rise brick domesticity of the houses of Morgans Walk. It was the first of the big Battersea riverside factories to leave, and although the residential redevelopment was modest in comparison with the height and density of subsequent schemes, it set the template for the industrial exodus from riverside Battersea as land values increased and the return on mere manufacture became financially unattractive.

Earlier Visions of South London

Just because Whistler’s depiction of Battersea’s factory-scape in *Variations* was startlingly novel, it did not mean that South London’s riverside industry had never featured in British art. It appears as a motif in a number of socially realist paintings of the 1840s and 1850s, serving a quite different iconographic purpose. G.F. Watts’s *Found Drowned* (circa 1850) is

representative: it foregrounds the body of a drowned woman pulled from the Thames and framed by an arch of Waterloo Bridge, in which the silhouette of the Waterloo shot tower can be seen. The north bank of the Thames and the precarious public realm provided by its river bridges were well understood as spaces of last resort for the impoverished and for people contemplating suicide. The painting's title, *Found Drowned*, consciously echoes that of the regular column in *The Times*, which listed the names of Londoners who had died by suicide. In many instances, these were perceived as lone women seeking a way out of prostitution, poverty, or pregnancy. Their condition had been dramatised by Charles Dickens in *Oliver Twist* (1839) and *David Copperfield* (1849/50), and Thomas Hood achieved yet greater public awareness through his poem 'The Bridge of Sighs' (1844).

In *Oliver Twist*, Nancy, the partner of the criminal Bill Sikes, voices the desperate situation to Rose Maylie while standing at the foot of London Bridge: "Look before you lady. Look at the dark water. How many times do you read of such as I, who spring into the tide and leave no living thing to bewail them. It may be years hence, or it may be only months, but I shall come to that at last".¹⁸ Similarly, David Copperfield overhears Martha Emmons contemplating suicide by the Thames at Millbank. Hablot Browne illustrated the scene: Martha looks from a low marshy bank next to Millbank prison across to the Lambeth waterfront, where "the clash and glare of sundry fiery Works upon the river-side, arose by night to disturb everything except the heavy and unbroken smoke that poured out of their chimneys" (fig. 11).¹⁹ Dickens's description and Hablot Browne's etching both have an almost proto-nocturne-ish quality. Curiously, Whistler etched the same view, by day, as *Millbank in the Thames Set*, using the same angled mooring posts to frame the view across to Lambeth (fig. 12).



Figure 11. Hablot Knight Browne, *The River*, illustration in *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens, 1850, lithograph. Digital image courtesy of Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved).



Figure 12. James McNeill Whistler, *Millbank*, 1861, etching and drypoint, printed in black ink on ivory laid Japan paper, 9.8 × 12.6 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1917 (17.3.55). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).

Augustus Egg's *Past and Present* triptych of 1856 sits firmly within this tradition. In the third frame, its precisely located “fallen” woman protagonist contemplates suicide by drowning from beneath the basement arches of the Adelphi (fig. 13). This was a fashionable terrace of houses built by the Adam brothers in 1770 on the north bank of the Thames below the Strand (and an early instance of the urban “riverside view”).²⁰ These arches raised its structure above the peaks of the Thames tides and provided a well-known refuge for people experiencing homelessness. When Egg first exhibited the painting, the *Art Journal* described the Adelphi arches as “the lowest of all the profound deeps of human abandonment in this metropolis”.²¹ In the painting, the woman looks out through their frame across to a dark line of factory buildings and chimneys on the Lambeth riverfront between Westminster and Waterloo bridges. In Egg's depiction, these factories operate as a symbolic backdrop, suggestive of alienation and poverty, while also being precisely delineated structures—ones that could be found on a map or located in a business directory.



Figure 13.

Augustus Egg, *Past and Present*, No. 3, 1858, oil on canvas, 63.5 × 76.2 cm. Collection of Tate (N03280). Digital image courtesy of Tate (CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0).

In early 1896, Whistler nursed his dying wife, Trixie, at the Savoy Hotel—just one hundred metres east of the Adelphi. There, his sixth-floor hotel room gave an elevated view across the water to the same line of factories seen in

Egg's painting. Whistler made multiple lithographs of the views, east and west to Waterloo and Westminster bridges, and a lithotint, *Thames*, that looked south to the same frontage that Egg had depicted through the Adelphi's arch (fig. 14). Katherine Lochnan, writing about these Savoy lithographs, observed that "like Mallarmé's poems, they are more suggestive than descriptive and have the quality of things remembered rather than things seen".²² Perhaps we can be more specific about the nature of some of these memories, particularly in relation to another poignant lithograph from the series. *By the Balcony* shows Trixie lying on the couch in their hotel room (fig. 15). Behind her the balcony window gives an oblique glimpse over the same factories of South London. It provides a distant topographic echo of Egg's *Past and Present* while also seeming to suggest a ghostly, exhausted and un-costumed reprise of the figures first found posed on a riverside balcony in *Variations*.

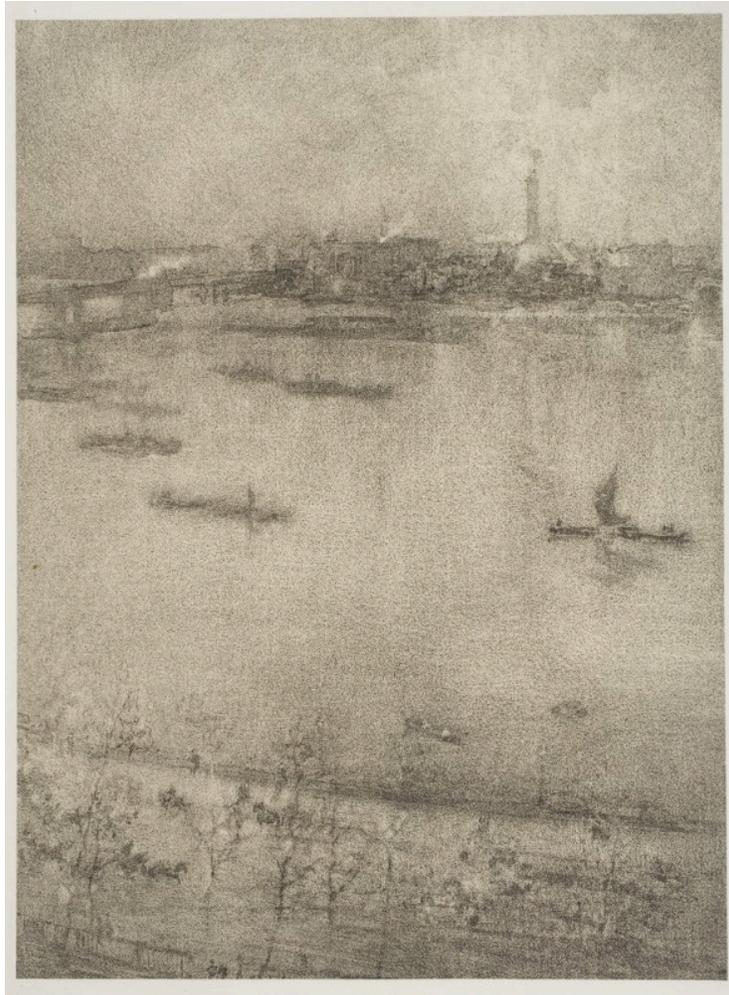


Figure 14.

James McNeill Whistler, *The Thames*, 1896, lithotint, 39.1 x 27 cm. Collection of the Davis Museum at Wellesley College (1973.12). Digital image courtesy of Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved).



Figure 15.
James McNeill Whistler, *By the Balcony*, 1896,
lithograph, 21.7 × 14.2 cm. Collection of the National
Gallery of Art, Washington, Rosenwald Collection
(1946.21.363). Digital image courtesy of Smithsonian
Institution (public domain).

“Faireyland”: Transformations of Battersea

What had been common to those earlier artworks and pieces of social-realist writing was their Thames-side locations, where the riverbank marked the limits of existence, both as the place to which the desperate had been driven, and as the means of their self-destruction. But, over and above the individual psychodramas, London’s river remained as a north-south divide, and in their final moments, all these women looked across the Thames to the alien indeterminacy of industrial South London.

Where Egg or Dickens had set women in front of factories to symbolise a failure of society or morality, in *Variations* Whistler set young women before a similarly industrial backdrop, though here grouped and costumed through the filter of Japonisme. In his “Ten O’clock Lecture” he sought to retrospectively conceptualise what he had been engaged in and to set out his position for a de-industrialised and amoral aesthetic definition of his art in the nocturnes, using the Battersea factory-scapes to make just this point. He spoke of the twilight hour,

When the evening mist clothes the riverside with poetry, as with a veil—and the poor buildings lose themselves in the dim sky—and the tall chimneys become campanile—and the warehouses are palaces in the night—and the whole city hangs in the heavens, and faireyland is before us.²³

In this statement, many rightly see Whistler stripping morality from his art and replacing it with the merely pictorial or compositional. Kathleen Pyne has described his “strategy of distancing and aestheticizing poverty” on behalf of potential middle-class patrons in order to arrive at “the completely veiled evasions of his semi-abstracted nocturnes of the early 1870s”.²⁴ It is clear, too, that Whistler, both by his own assessment and by that of his peers, was quite untroubled by the social and economic realities of his artistic subjects. Battersea’s factories in his paintings had quite another function and, as Mortimer Menpes observed, he “had no socialist instincts ... his only excuse for the masses was they were a blot of colour to be painted”.²⁵

Whistler was the first artist to bring these brooding industrial landscapes into the Royal Academy and the salon as art objects. The profusion of his depictions of its industrial frontages created such a powerful sense of Battersea as a visual entity, at a specific moment in time, that by the twentieth century the river to the west of Battersea Bridge was known to writers, journalists, and other artists as “Whistler’s Reach” (fig. 16). But while the name has endured, the buildings have not. The process of effacing the old industry at Battersea that commenced with the demolition and redevelopment of the Morgan site, and was especially active in the 1980s and 1990s, is now complete. A comprehensive slate-wiping of the old industrial monoculture has taken place, in which the factories have been replaced by an equally rarefied monoculture of exclusive residential riverside apartments. There is an intriguing parallel here between the erasure of the social and material realities of industrial Battersea that Whistler’s “faireyland” nocturnes engaged in from the 1870s, and the erasures of the late twentieth century driven by redevelopment and gentrification. The remedial works carried out at Morgan in 1982 prior to rebuilding on its

intensely polluted site required soil removal and replacement down to nearly eleven metres. Such total purgation is an effective metaphor for the scale and thoroughness of the regeneration that would follow. Consequently, a very different “faireyland is before us”, one in which the draughty stretch between Battersea and Wandsworth bridges has been filled with gated and balconied apartment blocks. Only St. Mary’s church and the Cremorne railway bridge remain as relics of an earlier sense of place—the fixed points which enable the viewer to align Whistler’s views with those of the riverscape today (figs. 17-20).



Figure 16.

Gordon Hales, Whistlers Reach, circa 1940-1950, oil on canvas, 50.8 × 59 cm. Collection of Watford Museum (2004.363). Digital image courtesy of Watford Museum (all rights reserved).

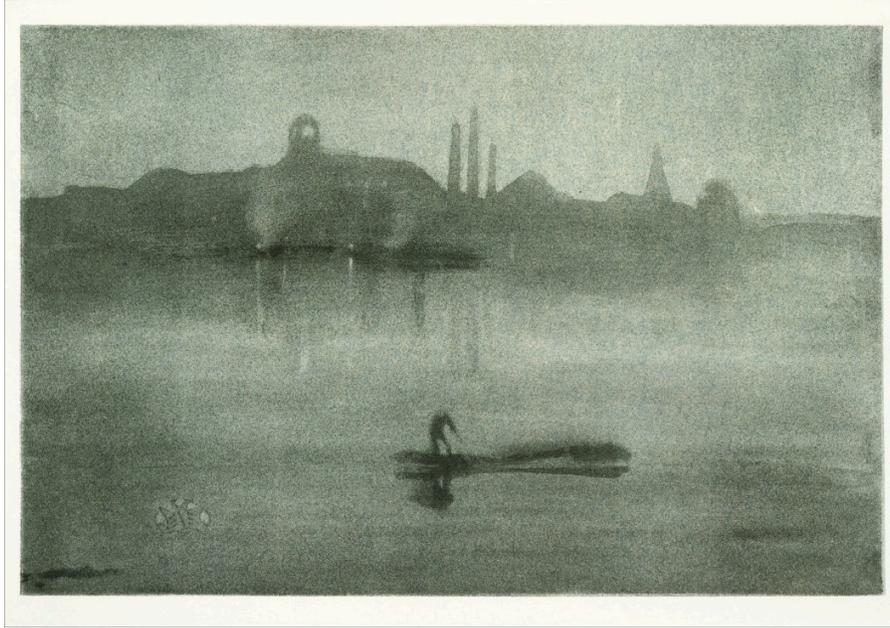


Figure 17.

James McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne: The Thames at Battersea (reversed)*, 1878, lithotint, 17.1 × 25.9 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1917 (17.3.159). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).



Figure 18.

Jon Newman, *The Same View of the Riverscape*, 2021, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Jon Newman (all rights reserved).



Figure 19.

James McNeill Whistler, *Price's Candle Factory (reversed)*, 1876–1877, drypoint etching, printed in black ink on dark ivory Japan paper, 14.8 × 22.4 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1917 (17.3.71). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).

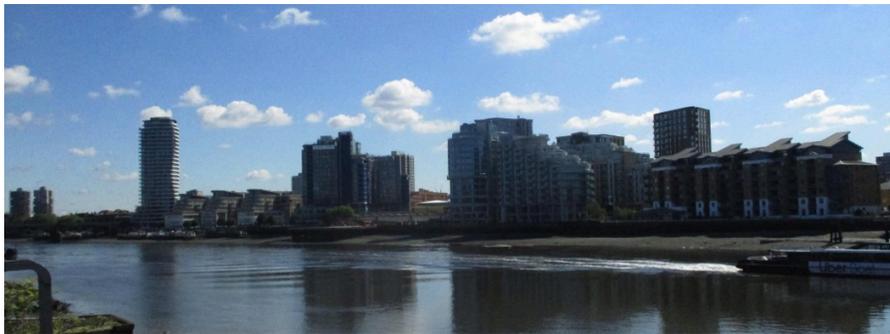


Figure 20.

Jon Newman, *The Same View of the Riverscape*, 2021, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Jon Newman (all rights reserved).

One public benefit from the redevelopment of Battersea's river frontage was the inception of the public right of way that would eventually become known as the Thames Path. One of its earliest sections was created with the development of the houses along Morgans Walk in 1984. The democratic access on both sides of the Thames and the unbroken views along "Whistler's Reach" that this now offers have also had the effect of concealing the limited nature of access to the Thames in the nineteenth century and the implicit privilege of Whistler's viewpoints. Unless one lived on Cheyne Walk with windows or balconies giving onto the river, there were surprisingly few

accessible viewpoints to it in the nineteenth century: Cremorne Gardens (the location of *The Falling Rocket* and *The Fire Wheel*), Battersea Bridge (the viewing platform for *Cremorne Lights*), and latterly the Chelsea Embankment. This helps explain why many of Whistler's works were sketched, etched, or first worked up from the stern of a hired boat. A further practical rather than visual explanation for the preponderance of views looking south to Battersea, rather than the reverse, would have been the difficulty of access to the private property of the fenced and walled wharves, mills, and manufactories on the Battersea shore.

If we find in the "Ten O'clock Lecture" a rhetoric for Whistler's aesthetic practices, then the *tabula rasa* language employed by developers to justify dismantling industrial Battersea—"an undistinguished and functionally obsolete industrial area"—and to obtain planning and zoning consent is the rhetoric of "tooth and claw laissez-faire urbanism".²⁶ The process of hyper-gentrification has now extended to the "Vauxhall, Nine Elms, Battersea opportunity area" east of Battersea Power Station.²⁷ Curiously, and surely unconsciously, the development brochures pepper their regeneration rhetoric with the language of the nocturnes. Embassy Gardens by Ballymore in Nine Elms is "a spectacular and radical transformation from inner city twilight zone to shining example of world class urban redevelopment. ... Industrial activity has given way to a stunning array of districts, both new and reinvented. ... What makes the Nine Elms opportunity so compelling is that it's virtually a blank canvas".²⁸ The emergence of campanili and palaces in Whistler's lecture, mutating Battersea into some twilight Italian Renaissance city state, conveyed how he believed his art was mediating the built reality, in a "spectacular and radical transformation" the equal of that promoted by developers today.

Bewilderingly, a secular and plutocratic version of Whistler's fantasy has come to pass. Adorning the apartment blocks that have replaced the tall chimneys, factory buildings, and warehouses of Morgan, Price's, and others, the serried balconies, once only found on a few of the grander houses on Cheyne Walk, are now commonplace. So, too, the privileged view that they offer, and that Whistler exercised from his balcony, is now a monetised attribute for every glassy riverside apartment building, wannabe-palazzo, new quarter, or landmark tower. The Battersea riverside at night, once pierced by the single beam of the lantern atop "Ted Morgan's Folly", is now lit up like a Christmas tree, illuminating its trajectory "from inner city twilight zone to shining example of world class urban redevelopment".

Footnotes

1 Carlyle to his mother, 12 June 1834. *Letters of Thomas Carlyle, 1826-1836*, ed. C.E. Norton (London: Macmillan and Co., 1889), 412-413.

- 2 Letter to Sir William Hamilton, 8 July 1834. John Veitch, *Memoir of Sir William Hamilton* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1869), 127.
- 3 Wenceslaus Hollar's oblique aerial panoramas of London and Westminster, taken from church towers and windmills in Lambeth and Southwark and published between the 1640s and the 1670s, are arguably some of the earliest examples of what by the early nineteenth century had become an established direction of view. A later instance can be seen in Turner's *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons* (1834).
- 4 These Japanese flower and leaf motifs, first encountered in *Variations in Flesh Colour and Green*, continue to intrude at the bottom of the frames of some of the nocturnes of the early 1870s, for example *Nocturne in Blue and Silver* (1871-1872) and *Nocturne in Blue and Silver: Cremorne Lights* (1872).
- 5 Aileen Tsui, "Whistler's *La Princesse du pays de la porcelaine*: Painting Re-Oriented", *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 9, no. 2 (Autumn 2010): 41.
- 6 X-rays of *Variations* "show numerous alterations: for instance, a ship's masts may have been visible to the left of the standing woman". Margaret Macdonald and Patricia de Montfort, *An American in London: Whistler and the Thames* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2014), 89.
- 7 Whistler to Stephen Richards, 12 June 1892, cited in "Battersea Reach", *The Paintings of James McNeil Whistler. A Catalogue Raisonné* <https://www.whistlerpaintings.gla.ac.uk/catalogue/display/?mid=y045&xml=tec>
- 8 Edward Brayley, *A Topographical History of Surrey*, Vol. 5 (London: G. Willis, 1850).
- 9 S.M. Ellis, *Mainly Victorian* (London: Hutchinson, 1924), 79.
- 10 Sophia Booth to J.R. Archer, cited in James Hamilton, *Turner, A Life* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997).
- 11 Charles L. Graves, *Life and Letters of Sir George Grove* (London: Macmillan, 1903), 5.
- 12 Robin Spencer, "The Aesthetics of Change: London as Seen by James McNeill Whistler", in *The Image of London* (London, Trefoil Publications, 1987), exhibition catalogue, 49.
- 13 John Fisher Murray, *A Picturesque Tour of the River Thames* (London: H.G. Bohn, 1849), 20.
- 14 Mr. and Mrs. S.C. Hall, *The Book of the Thames from its Rise to its Fall* (London: Arthur Hall, Virtue, and Co., 1859), 395.
- 15 John Siewert cites a different instance of such topographical imprecision: when *Nocturne in Grey and Silver* (1873-1875), depicting the Morgan Crucible works seen from Chelsea, was hung at an exhibition in Pittsburgh in 1897, it was mis-titled *Westminster Palace in Fog*. John Siewert, "Art, Music, and an Aesthetics of Place in Whistler's Nocturne Paintings", in *Turner Whistler Monet: Impressionist Visions* (London: Tate, 2004), exhibition catalogue, 157.
- 16 Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (London: William Heinemann, 1890), 15.
- 17 Jon Newman, *Battersea's Global Reach, the Story of Price's Candles* (London: History and Social Action Publications, 2009).
- 18 Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (London: Richard Bentley, 1838), 40.
- 19 Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1850), 47.
- 20 John Summerson, *Georgian London* (London: Pleiades, 1947), 122.
- 21 Christopher Wood, *Victorian Painting* (Boston: Bullfinch Press, 1999), 53.
- 22 Katherine Lochnan, "Turner, Whistler and Monet: An Artistic Dialogue", in *Turner Whistler Monet: Impressionist Visions* (London: Tate, 2004), exhibition catalogue, 33.
- 23 *Mr. Whistler's "Ten O'clock"* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1888).
- 24 Kathleen Pyne, "Whistler and the Politics of the Urban Picturesque", *American Art* 8, no. 3/4 (Summer-Autumn 1994): 60-77.
- 25 Mortimer Menpes, *Whistler as I Knew Him* (London: A & C Black, 1904), 49.
- 26 Monte Vetro development proposal, 1998. *Monte Vetro Luxury Living in London*, <https://montevetro.org.uk/history.php>; Deyan Sudjic, *The Edifice Complex* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), 119.
- 27 The Vauxhall, Nine Elms, Battersea Opportunity Area was created to support the delivery of "a high density mixed use development" of 16,000 new homes, 20,000-25,000 jobs ... and "significant public realm improvements and substantial social infrastructure". Vauxhall Nine Elms Battersea Opportunity Area Planning Framework_GLA, March 2012.
- 28 Embassy Gardens Host Brochure (Ecoworld and Ballymore, [2019]), <https://ecoworld.my/ecoworldsg/assets/brochures/Embassy%20Gardens%20Host%20Brochure.pdf>.

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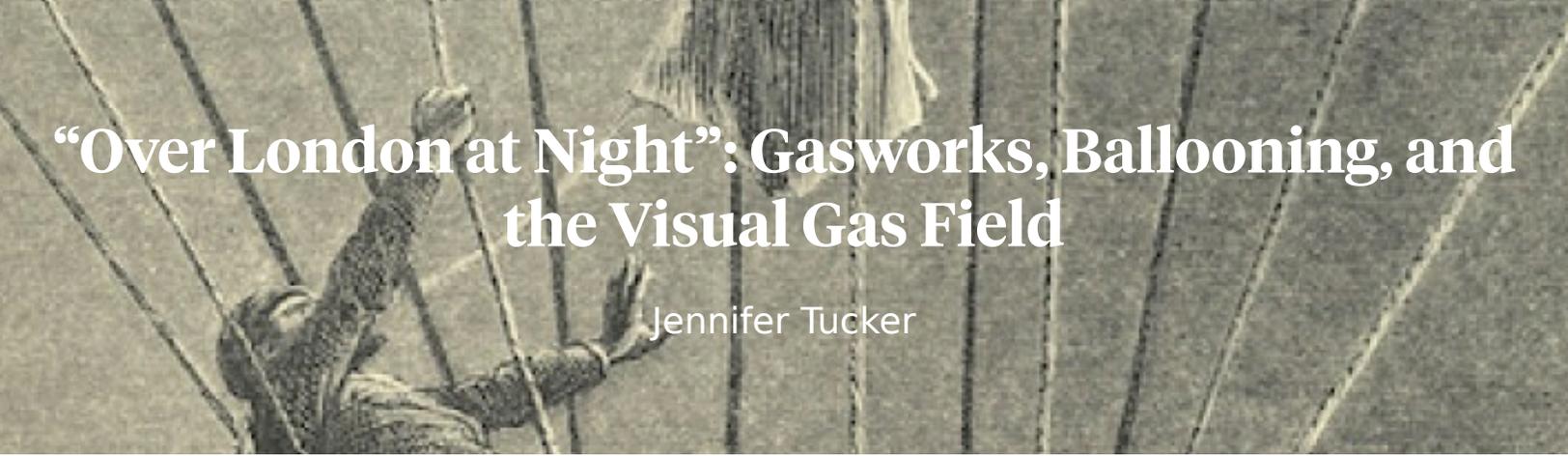
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“Over London at Night”: Gasworks, Ballooning, and the Visual Gas Field

Jennifer Tucker

Abstract

In 1865, the scientist James Glaisher described the way that gaslights illuminated the outline of the serpentine river Thames when seen from a balloon: “On leaving Charing Cross I looked back over London, the model of which could be seen traced—its squares by their lights; the river, which looked dark and dull, by the double row of lights on every bridge spanning it”. The Thames began to change dramatically in the early nineteenth century as a direct result of the establishment of the gasworks along the river. This article explores some of the historical forces through which the Thames became a key site where gas manufacture and ballooning came together to provide new forms of experience and spectacle; and economic opportunity as well as deadly physical risk and toxic effluent. Gas in London applied a material force, exerting a presence both through the positioning of human observer in the aerial landscape, and as a pictorial subject of art and visual documentation, rendered through fine art, watercolors, maps, and other visual records. Consideration of what I call here “the visual gas field” suggests that the docklands of the nineteenth-century Thames were not only connected by its waters, but also by a form of energy that bridged earth, air, and water with far-ranging impacts on the river’s ecology, the people who lived and worked on it, and the ways in which the river was seen and imagined.

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Cite as

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Introduction

In H.G. Wells's 1897 novel *The Invisible Man*, when asked how he achieved invisibility the eponymous protagonist replies that he discovered a "general principle" relating to "pigments and refraction", which, when applied, made him "almost as invisible as a jet of coal gas or [as] hydrogen is in air".¹ Most gases, though, are transparent (not invisible)—the molecules are physically small and loosely bonded—and they can have other physical properties such as taste, and smell. Some even take vivid hues. Chlorine, for example, is a greenish yellow; bromine, reddish brown; iodine, dark purple; and chlorine dioxide a potent yellow.

The Invisible Man was one of the era's finest studies of the conflicts between communitarianism and individualism, a theme also central to considerations of Victorian infrastructure and public space, and few modern industries captured the tensions of early nineteenth-century British industrialization—the romance and the ruin—quite as well as the manufacturing of gas along the banks of the Thames.² As historian of the early Thames gas industry Leslie Tomory has pointed out, "Gas was part of the reshaping of the urban infrastructure in the nineteenth century that created the modern city through the construction of water, sewage, rail, road, electricity, telegraph, and telephone infrastructures".³

Examining the co-creation of the industrial infrastructures of the River Thames and the gas manufacturing industry—that is, the way in which the concept of the River Thames evolved in tandem with industrial expansion—reveals the visible presence of an otherwise inappreciable state of matter with no fixed shape, and no fixed volume. To understand the Thames in the early nineteenth century, it helps to consider the physical and visual properties of industrial gas, taking into view their material and aesthetic manifestations in urban circuits of energy.⁴ This article examines how gas manufacture in Regency and early Victorian London changed the urban landscape, and helped recast the material forms and perspectives of nineteenth-century art and visual culture.⁵ I use the term "visual gas field" to denote the rich and varied artworks and illustrations that convey how the gas industry became present in the landscape in and around the Thames from the 1810s onwards. By visual gas field, I mean the intimate interconnections—between energy, work, and leisure, as well as risk and reward—that characterize an awareness of gas, its dangers, and its infrastructure, and that seeped into the fabric of its enjoyment and perceived modernity. Gas in London applied a material force, exerting a presence both through the positioning of a human observer in the aerial landscape, and as a pictorial subject of art and visual documentation, rendered through fine art, watercolors, maps, and other visual records. Following this reading, late

nineteenth-century artworks such as *Bird's Eye View of London and Westminster* (1884) (fig. 1) by Wyllie and Brewer, an engraving depicting a balloon flight 1,500 feet over London, as well as the much later work *Daylight by Night* (ca. 1931) (fig. 2), which illustrated the cover of a Gas Company book prepared for the annual meeting of stakeholders, can be thought of as part of this “visual gas field”, despite their differences of genre, media, and audience.



Figure 1.

W.L. Wyllie and H.W. Brewer, *Bird's-Eye View of London and Westminster*, taken from a balloon 1,500 feet above Westminster, in *The Graphic*, May 1884, 1884, hand-coloured engraving, 87 × 112 cm. Digital image courtesy of Christie's Images (all rights reserved).

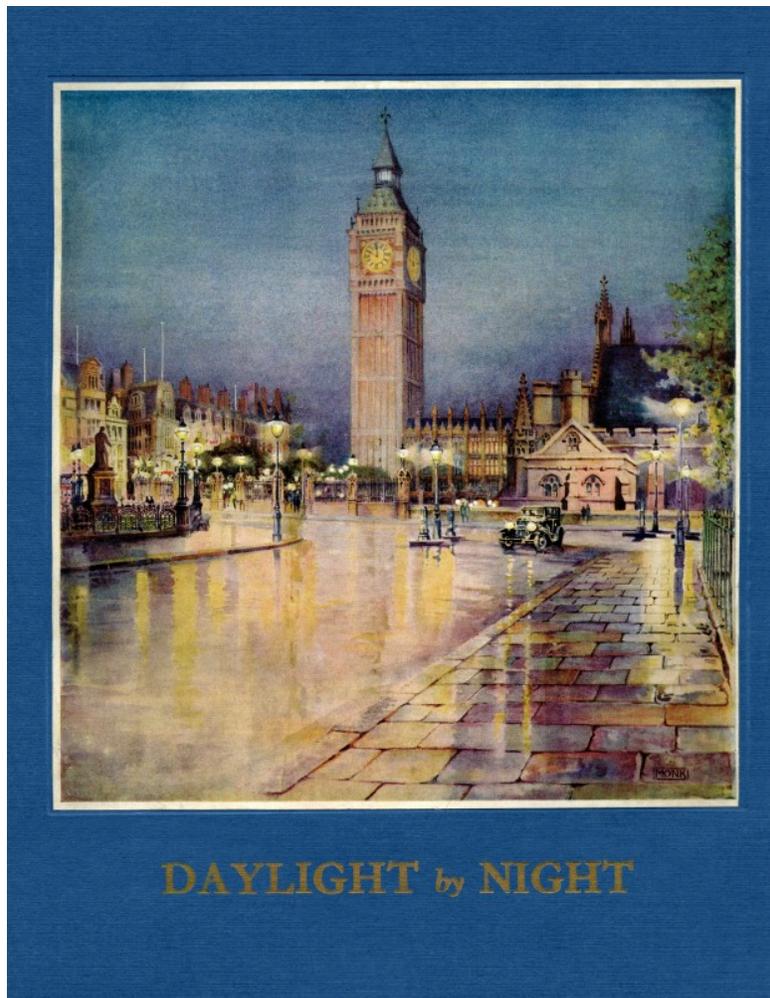


Figure 2.

William Monk, *Daylight by Night: A Record of Some of the Modern Installations of Gas Lighting in Important Thoroughfares in Great Britain*, cover design, (London: The British Commercial Gas Association, 1931), watercolour. Digital image courtesy of William Monk / The British Commercial Gas Association (all rights reserved).

Rivers, because of their connection to the world's first gas manufacturing industries, are also valuable sites for the study of what the historian and feminist scholar Michelle Murphy terms "chemical relations", a concept that she uses to study industrial chemical violence in the form of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) that persist and circulate in the air, land, and water, and in people's bodies.⁶ Gas engineering networks produced visual effects that environmental historian Rob Nixon has termed "slow violence", denoting violence happening over months, years, and decades rather than a single act of violence confined to a moment.⁷ In a related way, the Thames was enmeshed in histories of chemical infrastructures that combined the sometimes violent realities of manufacture, labor exploitation, colonialism,

capitalism, and pollution with powerful conditions of possibility, such as light, heat, food, and beauty: “fairy-tale” settings, for art, government diplomacy, and aesthetic creation.

Gas lighting was one of the key innovations contributing to the convenience and safety of urban life in Britain’s booming Victorian cities. London’s gas-light system began in 1812 and reached most of the metropolis by the 1830s.⁸ Virtually all gas for fuel and lighting was manufactured from coal and supplied households via municipally owned piped distribution systems. The coal was brought in by sea and fed the gasworks that lined the banks of the Thames. These industries manufactured the gas that gradually displaced oil as the predominant source of fuel for street lighting, and eventually for heating and cooking uses.⁹ The giant cylindrical expanding tanks, rising and falling with the arrival and depletion of gas, became a striking feature of the Victorian urban landscape (figs. 3-5). Gasholders were built in large numbers around the country from the 1850s and were especially prominent along the south bank of the Thames.

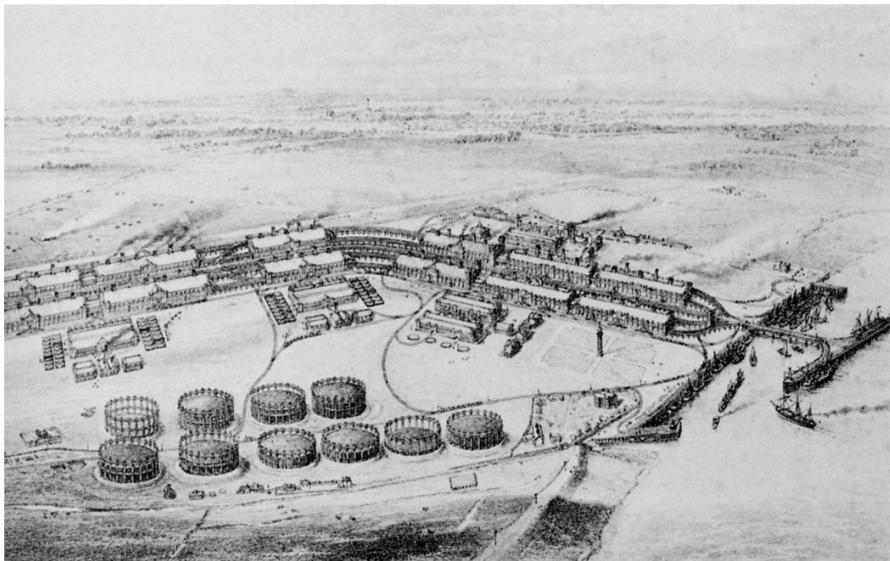


Figure 3.

Artist's impression of the Gas Light and Coke Company's plant at Beckton, in Trevor I. Williams, *A History of the British Gas Industry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), plate 6, 1877, drawing. Digital image courtesy of British Gas Corporation Archive (all rights reserved).

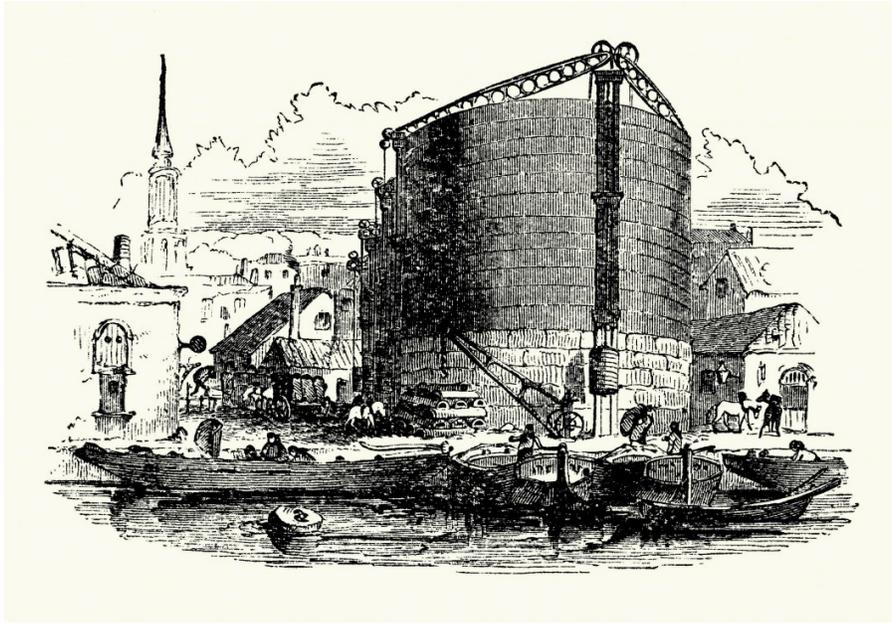


Figure 4. Victorian Gasworks along the Thames, circa 1890s, engraving. Digital image courtesy of M&N / Alamy Stock Photo (all rights reserved).



Figure 5. Dollond Terrace: A View Looking Down Towards 2-12 Dolland Street terrace housing, Lambeth, with the Kennington Gasworks, *formerly the South Metropolitan Gasworks*, on the horizon, photograph. Collection of the London Metropolitan Archives. Digital image courtesy of London Picture Archive (all rights reserved).

Coal gas was also used to inflate balloons, from which observers had a radically new perspective on the London metropolis. Anyone who has flown into London will appreciate the majestic view from the air of the Thames snaking through the city. Some criticized gas lighting for disturbing the tranquil beauty of the nocturnal world, for bringing the ugliness of industry into refined urban spaces.¹⁰ But for others, gaslit London was a beautiful and romantic sight.

In 1865, 56-year-old Greenwich Observatory astronomer and meteorologist James Glaisher made a night ascent in a coal-gas-filled balloon over the gaslit streets of London. Stern, disciplined, not especially well-liked by his scientific peers nor known for light-hearted banter, Glaisher nevertheless described his view that night of a “starry spectacle” a mile below in terms so exquisite, personal, even wistful and tender that they might have belonged to a young romantic artist or poet. He wrote: “On leaving Charing Cross I looked back over London, the model of which could be seen traced—its squares by their lights; the river, which looked dark and dull, by the double row of lights on every bridge spanning it”. “It seemed to me”, he continued, “to realize a wish I have felt when looking through a telescope at portions of the Milky Way; when the fields of view appeared covered with gold-dust, to be possessed of the power to see those minute spots of light as brilliant stars; for certainly the intense brilliancy of London this night must have rivalled such a view”. The Commercial Road—constructed between 1802 and 1806 to carry traffic from the West and East India docks to the City of London—was illuminated like “a line of brilliant fire”. Glaisher published an account of his flight in his 1871 book *Travels in the Air*, a collection of essays by fliers such as the French aeronaut Camille Flammarion, and included a lithographic print showing an aerial view of gaslit London with the serpentine Thames at its center, over which is superimposed a graph showing the path of his balloon (fig. 6).¹¹ Along the horizontal axis are the locations of the balloon over the earth, as it travels through the night sky: from the Isle of Dogs in the bottom left, to Marble Arch at the right.

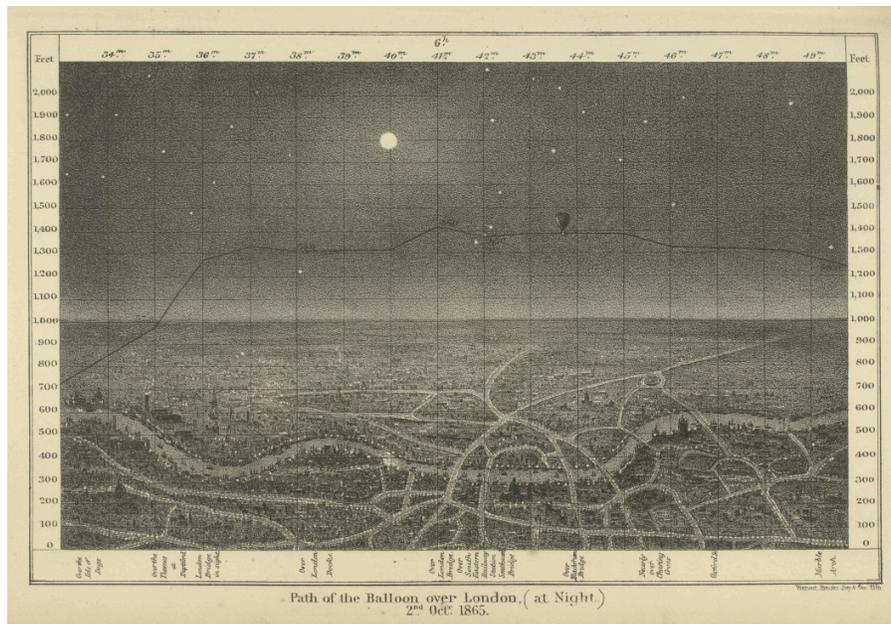


Figure 6.

Over London at Night, in James Glaisher et al., eds., *Travels in the Air* (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1871), 81, 1865, lithograph. Collection of the National Library of Scotland. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland (all rights reserved).

Ballooning was then—as it is now—a source of curiosity and inspiration, for diverse and complex reasons. Victorians lifted ballooning into a narrative of progress, seeing it as a powerful new tool for understanding the relationship between humans and the environment. ¹² Gas light appeared widely in Victorian art and literature as both technologically advanced and beautiful: part of a world of enchantment, and a complex source of contradictory desires, for—and against—life in the spotlight. Yet ballooning over the Thames—as a technology of distant seeing and experience—was utterly inseparable from an industry whose infrastructure was embedded along the river, in the gritty, smelly, industrial worlds of Britain’s expanding early public gasworks, emanating from urban areas along the Thames such as Westminster, Vauxhall, Deptford, Greenwich, and Woolwich. ¹³

As Johana Godfrey has shown, the morbidity of the Thames was captured in the opening scene of Charles Dickens’s last completed novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, published in 1865. Dickens’s narrator’s image of “the tender river” where characters die violently presents a competing image to James Glaisher’s wondrous view of the Thames in “Over London at Night”. In the narrator’s opening of *Our Mutual Friend*, Gaffer Hexam—a waterman who makes his living by finding and retrieving dead bodies from the

Thames—pulls a corpse out of the river at night and berates his daughter: “It’s my belief you hate the sight of the very river. ... As if it wasn’t your living! As if it wasn’t meat and drink to you!” ¹⁴

Arrival of Gasworks on the River Thames

Over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, watery spaces like the Thames bore the demand of energy systems on land. The Thames began to change dramatically in the early nineteenth century as a direct result of the establishment of the gasworks along the river. Around this time, the gas networks began to supply ever-widening districts of the city, north and south of the Thames, as depicted in two mid-twentieth-century colored maps of the gas network districts (figs. 7 and 8).

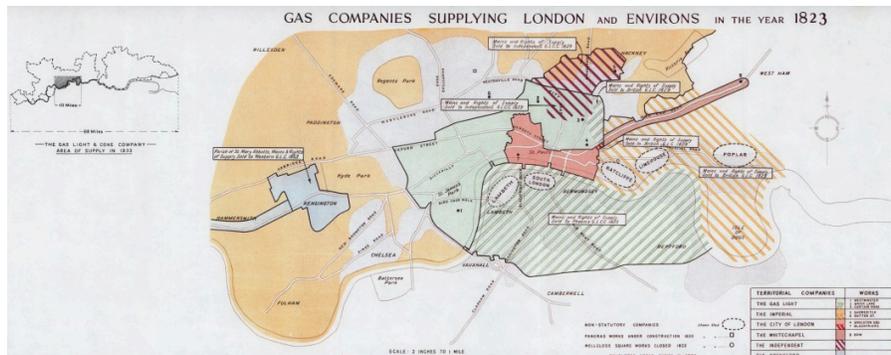


Figure 7. Map of Gas Undertakings: Gas Companies Supplying London and Environs in the Year 1823, in Stirling Everhard, *The History of the Gas Light and Coke Company 1812–1949* (London: A & C Black Publishers, 1992), facing page 96. Digital image courtesy of A & C Black Publishers (all rights reserved).

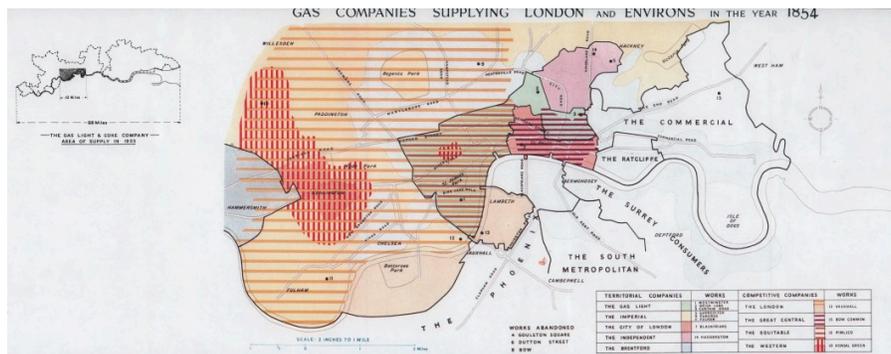


Figure 8. Map of Gas Undertakings: Gas Companies Supplying London and Environs in the Year 1854, in Stirling Everhard, *The History of the Gas Light and Coke Company 1812–1949* (London: A & C Black Publishers, 1992), 176. Digital image courtesy of A & C Black Publishers (all rights reserved).

The possibilities of coal gas had first been explored in the eighteenth century. In 1792, Scottish engineer and inventor William Murdoch (1754–1839), one of the first to apply coal gas to the purpose of artificial illumination, used coal gas to light his own house, at Redruth in Cornwall, as well as a steam carriage he used to travel between the various mines he managed. In 1798, Murdoch illuminated part of the Soho Foundry of Messrs. Boulton, Watt, and Co. in Birmingham.¹⁵ In 1803, the entrepreneur Frederick Albert Winsor (later anglicized to Winsor) arrived in London from Brunswick, Germany, and proceeded to make many public physical demonstrations to prove his knowledge of gas. He flooded the capital with pamphlets on gas lighting and lectured on the subject at the Lyceum Theatre. In 1804, he obtained a patent for an improved apparatus for extracting air, oil, pitch, tar, and acids from coke and charcoal. The inflammable gas could be used to produce light and heat. In 1807, Winsor lit Pall Mall with his product, a project launched with an elaborate public display.¹⁶

The Manchester engineer Samuel Clegg (1781–1861), widely known for his technical contributions to gas manufacturing, was another early innovator and used gas to light factories in Halifax and Manchester.¹⁷ The wet lime purifier that he developed (the better-known dry process did not appear until later) was designed to separate hydrogen cyanide and hydrogen sulfide (fig. 9). (If not removed, hydrogen sulfide could lead to the formation of sulfuric acid, which corroded gas fittings and property inside houses). In use after it was introduced by Clegg in 1812, the wet lime purifier had drawbacks: it produced a waste product known as “Billy Blue”, a blue wet lime waste that was sharply pungent, which created problems for transportation and removal.

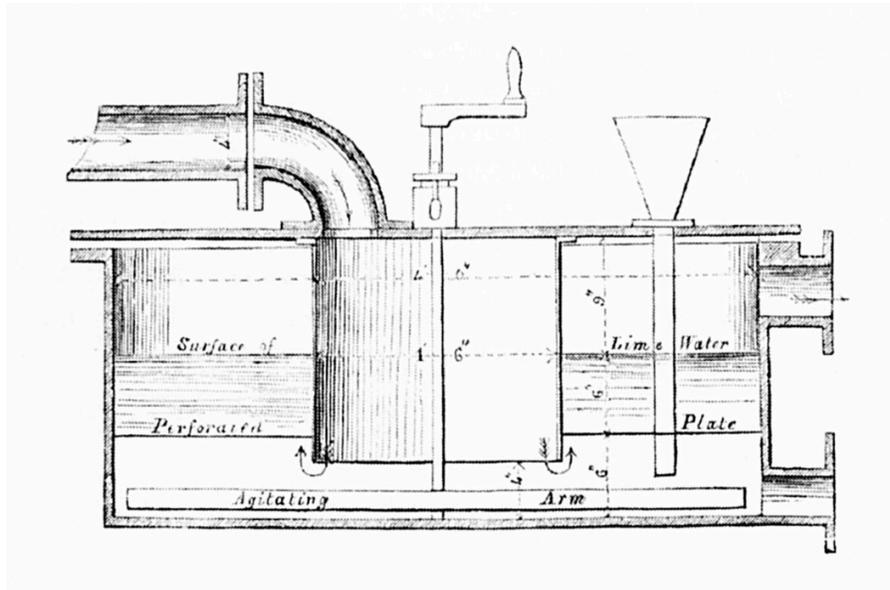


Figure 9.

Samuel Clegg, Design for a Wet-Lime Purifier (cross section), in Samuel Clegg, *A Practical Treatise on the Manufacture and Distribution of Coal-Gas* (London: John Weale, 1841), fig. 5, circa 1820. Digital image courtesy of British Gas Corporation Archive (all rights reserved).

The London and Westminster Gas Light and Coke Company was incorporated in 1810 and was granted a Royal Charter in 1812. It built the first gasworks along the banks of the Thames, and by 1815, thirty miles of gas lines had been laid.¹⁸ Gas distribution was through cast iron mains (some of them made from recycled musket barrels), with the pressure regulated by valves (referred to as 'governors') (fig. 10). Public street lighting was expanded to Westminster Bridge on 31 December 1813. Festive public illuminations took place throughout Britain. A seven-story Chinese Bridge and Pagoda lit by 10,000 gas burners was erected in St. James's Park to celebrate the end of the war with France in 1814 and the centenary of the ascension of the House of Hanover to the British throne (fig. 11).¹⁹ Unfortunately, the gas-illuminated pagoda formed the centerpiece of a huge firework display and caught fire during the celebrations, causing two deaths and a number of injuries to the men who were supervising the display, and showing again that gas could mean both entertainment and risk.

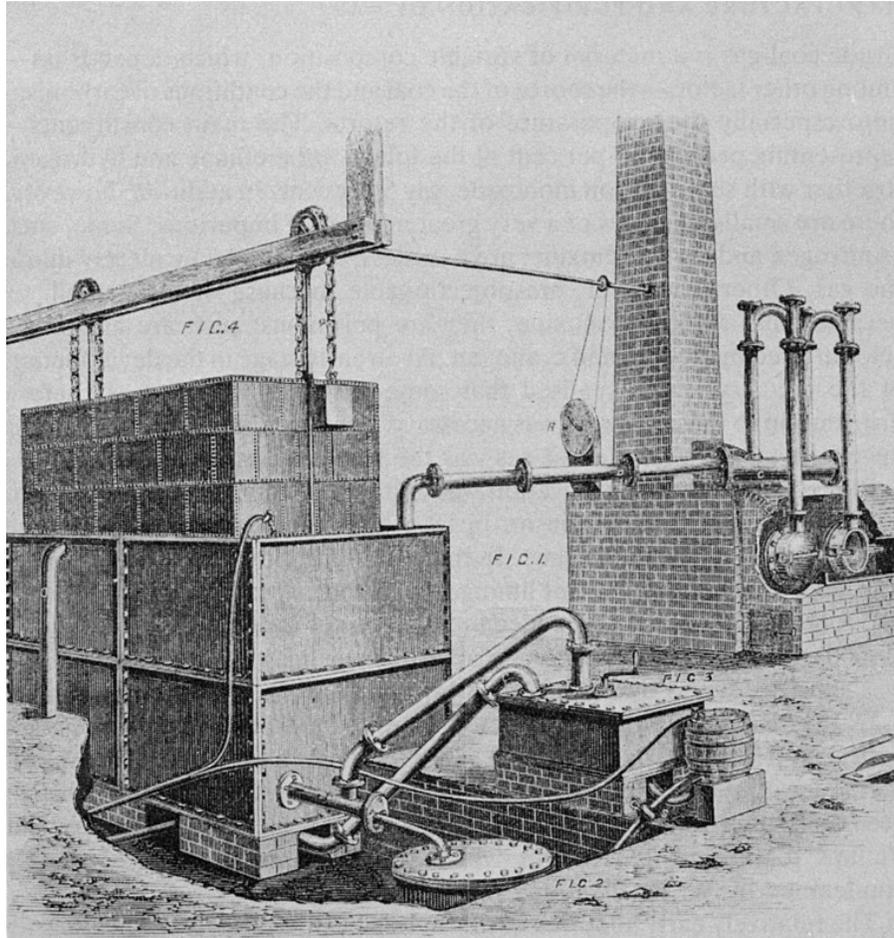


Figure 10.

Gas Works Constructed by Samuel Clegg for Ackermann's Repository of Fine Arts in the Strand, 1812, in Trevor I. Williams, *A History of the British Gas Industry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), fig. 1. Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum (all rights reserved).



Figure 11.

After Frederick Calvert, *A View of the Chinese Bridge in St James's Park*, 1814, hand-coloured etching and aquatint, 41.7 × 49.2 cm. Collection of The British Museum (1880,1113.2380). Digital image courtesy of Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

The coming of gas was welcomed not only for its festive powers of illumination but as an essential public service. By 1820, gas lighting was being installed in Paris, and in Manchester by 1824. As the leading mid-twentieth-century historian of the British gas industry Stirling Everard put it in *The History of the Gas Light and Coke Company, 1812-1949*, "London was a city of narrow streets, courts and alleyways, full of dark corners that at night provided hiding places for petty thieves and pickpockets. ... The more progressive Authorities were quick to see the advantages of brightly lit streets in preventing crime, particularly if the lighting could be obtained at lower cost than that of oil. The coming of gas was hailed as an event of major importance, and the new industry was welcomed as an essential public service".²⁰ An 1823 poster for gas lighting emphasized the new mastery it would give customers over the environment: it shows a man jumping out of bed, turning up the gas light, and aiming his gun at an intruder, all in a single instant (fig. 12).²¹ Initially city authorities granted monopolies, but increasingly after 1830, multiple licenses were granted. This led to ruthless competition, which ranged from predatory pricing to the sabotage of rival firms' gas mains.²²

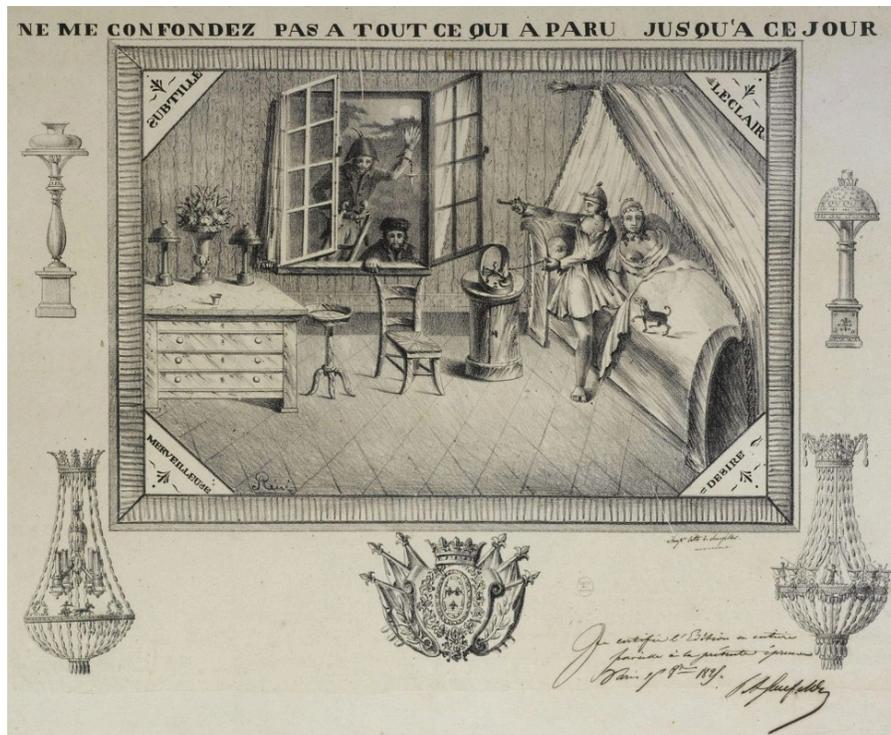


Figure 12.

René, *Ne me confondez pas a tout ce qui a paru jusqu'a ce jour*, 1829, lithograph, 42 × 52.5 cm. Collection of Musée Carnavalet, Paris. Digital image courtesy of Musée Carnavalet, Paris (CC0 1.0)

Noxious Neighbors

The development of the gas industry created urgent environmental problems, making it particularly unwelcome to the human and animal residents of the Thames and its banks, who were—in the words of historian Vanessa Taylor—“involuntary neighbors” of riverside energy infrastructure.²³ Gas production and distribution introduced noxious odors and caused disruption as engineers tore up the streets to lay mains. Gas itself is transparent, but its effects were all too tangible. Gasworks belched coal smoke from their furnace chimneys almost constantly, and emitted ground-level smoke and fumes whenever the retorts were opened to be cleaned of coke and loaded with fresh coal.²⁴ A hand-colored etching and aquatint by W. Read, illustrating men at work in a gasworks at Brick Lane, London, was the frontispiece of the 1821 volume of the *Monthly Magazine* (fig. 13).²⁵ It depicts gasworkers laboring at night to syphon off the crude gas generated in the retorts—containers in which coal or other material was heated in ducts and channels in order to manufacture gas. The scene of coal being transformed into gas by heating is almost mystical, even nightmarish, with its portrayal of workers encased by machinery, dynamical pipes, clouds of fumes, and reddish flames, and supervised by a shadowy overseer. The

artist's use of color dramatizes a scene that conveys the tension of chaos versus process and control; orange-red flames open towards the workers, who lunge against them like soldiers holding a line. The art historian Francis Klingender, discussing this print in relation to other contemporary illustrations that "gave industry the image of Hell", wrote that Read's aquatint offered an "infernal sight".²⁶



Figure 13.

W. Read, Drawing the Retorts at the Great Gas Light Establishment at Brick Lane, frontispiece in *The Monthly Magazine*, February 1821, 1821, aquatint, 19.6 × 24.7 cm. Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia (public domain).

Gasworks had especially adverse effects on rivers. Works were typically located adjacent to rivers to simplify the disposal of fluid waste products, which contained sulfuric acid, tar, and ammonia among other substances. In London, these went straight into the Thames, poisoning aquatic life and contributing to the demise of livelihoods that depended on fishing. The effluent from the gasworks was described as a "great evil" by many; and the full extent of the problem was elaborated by Thomas B. Simpson in *Gas-Works: The Evil Inseparable from Their Existence in Populous Places, and the Necessity for Removing Them from the Metropolis, as has been done in Paris*, published in 1866—a book that left little to the imagination about where Simpson stood on the issue.²⁷ The book included comments from the press and evidence from physicians on the poisonous and destructive effects of gasworks; parliamentary inquiries; and local petitions that criticized metropolitan gas companies for manufacturing gas in cities, suburbs, and other places where there were dense populations. Simpson made gas

production visible to readers not through visual representations but through vivid prose descriptions of ever-present calamity and “terrific proof”: from violent explosions with “causes which may occur at any moment of the day or night” that spread ruin “with the rapidity, and with a hundred times the destructiveness, of a terrific lightning-stroke”;²⁸ to more gradual forms of violence, such as “sanitary mischief”, stench, and injurious effects on health that, Simpson acknowledged, were still not clearly understood by medical science.²⁹ For Simpson, the gasholder was a “useful but terrible monster”, despite the common view, still current in 1866, that it was a marvelous “wonder”.³⁰

As urban historian Jean-Baptiste Fressoz has suggested, the general picture of a postmodern “risk” society as opposed to the “progress” society of the nineteenth century must be questioned, given that industrializing societies of the nineteenth century were also often well aware of the risks brought by innovations. Indeed, he shows that a critical attitude toward technological progress appeared in the writings of opponents of gas lighting. Indeed, in 1865, following a fatal disaster at the London Gas Light Company works at Nine Elms in Vauxhall, near the present site of the Battersea Power Station, a reporter for the *Morning Herald* contrasted the vigilance of the public with regard to precautions around the “deadly” manufacture of gunpowder with the casual way that explosive gas materials were accumulated in the heart of the city, observing the “alarming fact” that London “is sprinkled from its centre to its outskirts with these prodigious bombshells [gasholders], which may explode mysteriously at any moment of the night or day, with awful havoc to human life and to property”. No one in the region of a gasholder was safe: “Millions of feet in cubic feet are filled, every twenty-four hours, with the detonating force, and a flaw of workmanship, a trifle of omission, the inadvertence of a minute, or an error in mechanical judgement, may make a suburb tremble and crowd an hospital with sufferers”.³¹ Following the inquest into the deaths of ten workers from the gas factory (seven men on site, three who died later at the hospital), a *Daily Telegraph* reporter urged on 4 November 1865 that the issue of gasworks at Vauxhall be brought before Parliament, saying that “The awful gas explosion at Nine Elms, with all its horrible accompaniments of sudden death, mutilation, widespread terror, individual misery, and wholesale destruction of property” demanded the “serious attention” of the House of Commons.³² The *Evening Standard* (2 November 1865) supplied even more graphic details, pointing out that while the London Gas Company’s gasometer had been praised as “faultless in point of construction”—“made with all the modern improvements, of the best material, and in the most perfect possible manner”—this “triumph of gas engineering” was now a “shapeless wreck, its stout iron sides are torn to ribbons, or crumbled up like pasteboard”, and with damage to property within a mile of the scene of the explosion that

showed “its effect upon the locality”. London city dwellers could not help but be reminded, the *Evening Standard* reporter concluded, of “the dangers of crowded cities in the days of chemical science and mechanical discovery”.³³

Whereas the Thames was once a rich source of fish and food, supporting the livelihoods of thousands of people, the gassing of the river affected neighborhoods and neighbors, and fish populations began to dwindle and collapse. By the late 1820s, many of those who fished in the Thames and their families faced food scarcity and starvation due to the decline in local fish populations.³⁴ Antagonistic relations over fish, property, smells, and other risks and disturbances were mediated by law and contracts, patents, petitions, and parish churches, and labor strikes generated further challenges.³⁵ Already in the 1820s, for example, the City of London Corporation had filed nuisance lawsuits against the gas companies. In liberal nineteenth-century England, it was thought that regulation would tie the “invisible hand” from working as it should. An example of this, noted by Fressoz, is the Dorset Street gas factory, located in Spitalfields, East London, which was forbidden to use the river to get rid of its liquid wastes, and obliged to use dry lime in place of water lime for gas purification. As a result, its gas was less pure and more dangerous for consumers. A local nuisance that killed fish had been suppressed but, as Fressoz noted, the gas that the company now distributed to its customers was even more dangerous.³⁶

In August 1820, a group of Thames fishermen and their families and other allies petitioned the lord mayor, the oldest fishermen complaining that—as they recorded—it was “no longer possible for fish to live in the river, in consequence of the offensive stuff which flows into the Thames from the pipes formed by the Company to let off the refuse”.³⁷ The Courts of Conservancy visited the outfall pipes of the gasworks, had the Thames dragged to collect soil, and collected bottles of effluent to show the mayor. Their representatives conducted experiments at Thameside, including one in 1821 in which numerous fish died in the mayor’s presence after only one minute’s exposure to “gas-water” (also called “scum”) containing residuum from the gasworks. (An eel survived for only four minutes.) At the Croydon assizes in July 1821, the directors of the South London Co. were found guilty of causing a nuisance, but since they had taken steps to reduce the flow of effluent, the judge fined the directors only £5 each.³⁸

The rest of the decade saw many more cases of gas pollution, indictments, and convictions as the City of London strove to control gas industry pollution. But the gas companies simply paid the fines, made some temporary changes, and then returned to the release of toxic effluent.³⁹ By the end of the 1820s, the failure to control gas pollution had wreaked havoc on the Thames fishery: the number of fishing boats had halved, and the salmon

catch, which used to be 10,000 a year, had disappeared completely. One newspaper reporter made the utilitarian argument that “the advantages derived from gas considerably overbalance the profits and convenience of the Thames fishery”, while recognizing that “the mischief done to the poor fishermen has been unparalleled”. ⁴⁰

The problems of the gas industry were not confined to fish. London residents faced noxious smells and the risk of explosion. More than sixty gas explosions in London were reported in newspapers between 1815 and 1858; many more are likely to have occurred. ⁴¹ Sir William Congreve, the inventor of gas meters used for measuring the volumetric flow of gases, was appointed by the government in 1822 to investigate the danger of gasworks explosions; for example, their vulnerability to attack by anti-monarchical revolutionaries. Congreve was not a disinterested observer, however, since he had a financial interest in the Gas Light and Coke Company. Specialists in these emerging fields hired to undertake government studies for public institutions often had financial ties to the same interests. ⁴²

This controversy led to the first regulation of gas lighting in 1823, following an investigation by the House of Commons Select Committee, which heard evidence from scientists and engineers as well as industry representatives. As gas mains began to radiate across the city, concern also widened that with the wonders of new gas technology came new dangers, and the need for public regulation. Gas regulation acts were passed in 1847 and 1859, but the “gas agitation” (as it became known) grew stronger after a deadly explosion at the Nine Elms Gas Works in 1865 ([fig. 14](#)). ⁴³ In 1872, a London Gas Board was finally established to control the quality of gas. By the end of the nineteenth century, some of the iron gas containers were bigger than St. Paul’s Cathedral. Whereas medieval churches had been the icons of an earlier Thameside age, these huge gasholders were the visible components of a new technological-urban system, whose physical infrastructure dominated the landscape. They included the gasworks where tons of coal were gasified daily and where a network of mains originated, with branches spreading out under city streets and feeding gas lamps in streets, homes, shops, parks, and public buildings. The many different aspects of gas manufacture were perhaps hidden to the majority of consumers; however, for gas workers who labored around the clock, and struggled for the right to an eight-hour day, gas was a complex and interconnected industry ([fig. 15](#)).

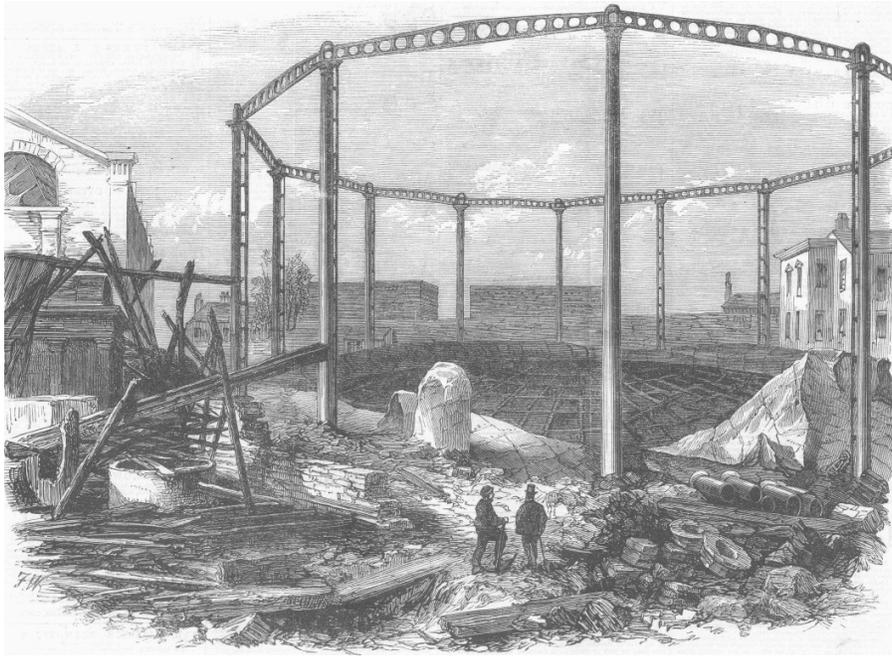


Figure 14.

News Engraving (from a photograph) of the Nine Elms Disaster, in *Illustrated London Times* 47, no. 1342, 11 November 1865, 465, 1865, engraving, 23.9 × 17.4 cm. Digital image courtesy of Antiqua Print Gallery / Alamy Stock Photo (all rights reserved).

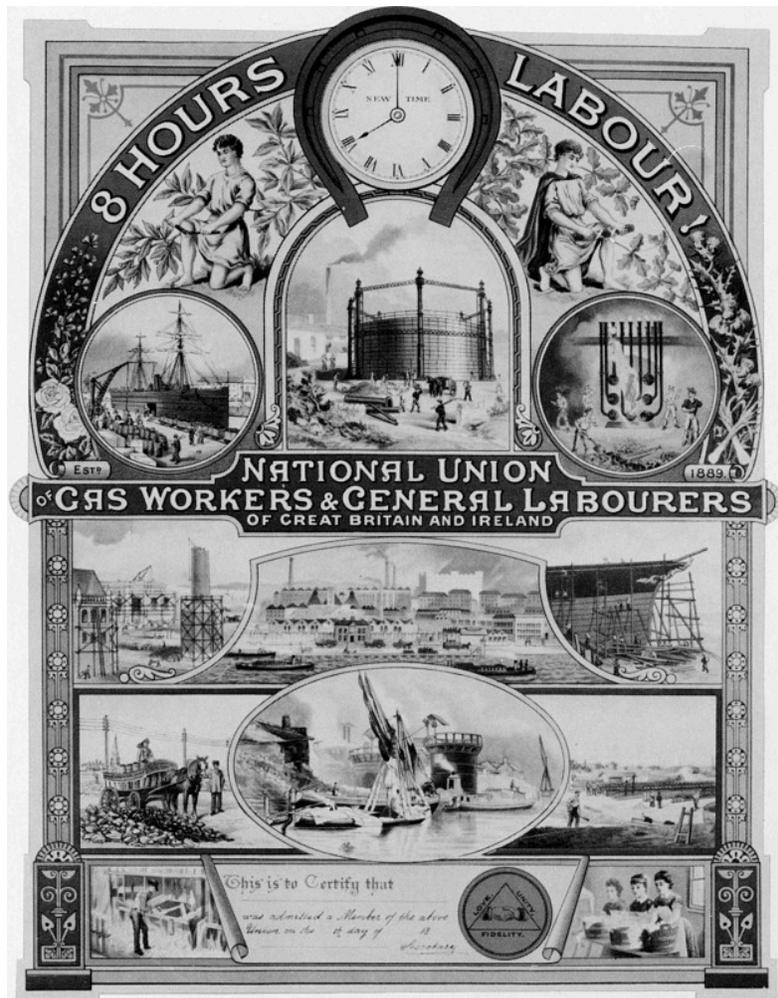


Figure 15.

Certificate of the National Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers, with the clock at the top denoting the achievement of the eight hour day, in Trevor I. Williams, *A History of the British Gas Industry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), frontispiece, unknown. Digital image courtesy of British Gas Corporation Archive (all rights reserved).

A “Fairy-tale Palace”

Gas, then, pervaded the worlds of leisure, entertainment, and work along the Thames in the nineteenth century, shaping and structuring life along its serpentine, dynamic waterways. An awareness of gas infrastructure and its risks seeped into the fabric of its enjoyment and modernity as well. Even as gasworks were poisoning the Thames, a cheery message came from the impresarios of gas lights, who included manufacturers, distributors, and many of the gas industry’s new and growing number of consumers. Many

praised the results of gas lighting as a modern phenomenon that was, simultaneously, magical. A German traveler to London in 1820 compared the “whole of London at night” to “a fairy-tale palace”:

All the streets of London, as well as most shops, public buildings and many private houses are illuminated [with gas lights], so that the whole of London at night resembles a fairy-tale palace. For this beautiful and beneficent invention, a daughter of chemistry, we have the English to thank. ⁴⁴

Because of gaslit streets, the Thames and its surrounding docks became the source of new, modern desires and urban spectacle. Gas was also the progenitor of balloon views that created the very conditions for seeing the city in new ways. ⁴⁵

The Thames was the conduit to Vauxhall and its pleasure gardens on the southern bank. The Spring Garden was opened to the public shortly after the Restoration, probably in 1661, and it evolved into one of the four great London gardens of the eighteenth century. It was laid out with walks and arbors and garden alleys; there was a rotunda, an orchestra, and triumphal arches. Music performances were added; by the 1680s it was well known—and a little notorious—for fashion, intrigue, and sexual encounters. Samuel Pepys recorded in his diary how, on 7 June 1665—“the hottest day that ever I felt in my life”—he took water to the Spring Garden at Fox-hall and there stayed, pleasantly walking, eating lobster and syllabub, until late in the night. ⁴⁶

By the early 1800s, according to a late nineteenth-century historian of London pleasure gardens, Vauxhall Gardens was—with its “great concourse of high and low, its elaborate concerts, its lamps and brightly painted supper-boxes”—much larger and grander than the simple garden in which Pepys had rambled, and crammed with commercial entertainments, though some delights (gardens, food, and music) remained. Even before the age of gas, over 1,500 lamps enabled festivities to continue well into the night. Firework displays were a regular feature. The area was connected to the northern bank of the Thames with the completion of the Vauxhall Bridge in 1816. On 28 May 1822, it received the designation “The Royal Gardens, Vauxhall” and welcomed more than 137,000 visitors. The event featured emblematic illuminations, with over 11,000 lamps, and was a place associated with “idyllic sociabilities” and mixing of high and low culture. ⁴⁷ After nearby gasworks opened in 1832, one of its chief attractions became the launch of balloons filled with coal gas supplied by a special pipe ([fig. 16](#)).

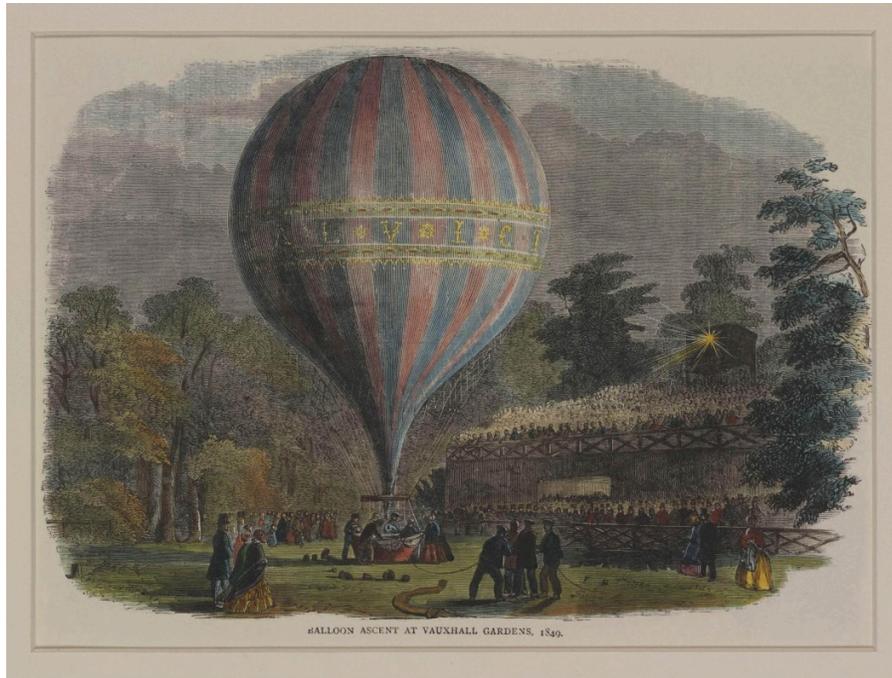


Figure 16.

Anonymous, Balloon Ascent at Vauxhall Gardens in 1849, in Thornbury et al., *Old and New London, 1873-1878*, Vol. 6, 463, 1870s, hand-coloured engraving, 18.4 × 26.2 cm. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (E.4770-1923). Digital image courtesy of Victoria & Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).

Hundreds of nineteenth-century travelers soon ascended into the air in coal-gas-filled balloons, seeking aerial, panoramic views of the Thames and surrounding countryside.⁴⁸ Aerostatic vision—the gaze from a balloon or airship—was a “powerful form of elevated view”, writes historian Jonathan Potter. It “corresponded” in many ways with “the far-seeing vision of the panorama”, which created “an illusion of tangible reality”; and with magic lantern shows, particularly the phantasmagoria, which “openly made visible the ephemeral, intangible, and even the invisible (e.g. spirits and ghosts)”.⁴⁹ Historians Martyn Barber and Helen Wickstead note that “Visibility over the capital was often commented on by balloonists, along with the more breathable air encountered at altitude”.⁵⁰ Aerial views, they write, “are sometimes understood as inherently map-like and surveillant as if the airborne viewer always saw in a certain way”. Yet, they note, early balloonists and their passengers “describe a London whose aspects could be revealed or disguised, elevated or debated, by different kinds of viewing”.⁵¹

Other visual technologies multiplied and commodified aerial views. The first successful aerial photograph was taken in December 1858 by the French photographer Nadar, when he captured an image in a glass plate while aloft

in a hydrogen-gas-filled balloon tethered a couple of hundred feet above the outskirts of Paris. Five years later, he launched the world's largest hydrogen-gas-filled balloon, *Le Géant*, which contained a printing room and photographic office—a reminder that the visual gas field includes not just images of gas production but also gas enabling the production of images. The first photographs over England were made that same year, during an ascent over the River Medway in May 1863 by the Italian-born scientific instrument maker Henry Negretti (1818–1879), a flight that began at a gasworks in Lower Sydenham.⁵² Patrick Ellis suggests that the “Panstereorama”, a form of nineteenth-century urban relief model placed on display as a public spectacle, served “as a proxy for the view obtained from the increasingly popular balloon trip”.⁵³

It is often remarked that new technologies, such as the balloon, gave expression to new ways of seeing, which were being articulated in nineteenth-century literature, social reform, art, and other visual discourses.⁵⁴ Yet study of the “techniques of the observer”, to use Jonathan Crary's term, can only take us so far in understanding the complex links that connected seeing, industrialization, and hierarchies of vision in nineteenth-century society. For example, the way that new technologies of seeing—from photography to printmaking to ballooning and more—were by-products of new industrializing, extractive processes merits more study. In this case, new experiences of aerial seeing are, as I have suggested, themselves, the by-products of the dramatic expansion of the London manufacture and distribution of gas.

Ballooning at Vauxhall (1830s–1850s)

The first balloons that lifted off from Vauxhall at night were based on the heated air concept pioneered by the Montgolfier brothers, who inspired intense interest in ballooning across the world following their first ascent in a hot-air balloon, made in Paris in 1783. By about 1800, however, hot air balloons were displaced by balloons that mixed hydrogen and air, and by the 1830s, those were displaced by coal gas balloons that used a mixture of hydrogen, carbon monoxide, methane, and other calorific gases. Although balloons were associated with airiness, escape, and Romanticism, they were also a part of the Industrial Revolution, and rapidly became entirely dependent on gas manufacture. Vauxhall was a key site where gas manufacture and ballooning came together to provide new forms of experience and spectacle.

Experiments in using coal gas to fill balloons began in earnest in the 1780s. It was realized that a gas lighter than air, such as hydrogen (discovered in 1766 by Henry Cavendish, an English natural philosopher and chemist, and

termed by him “inflammable air”), was a useful alternative to hot air, and the Belgian natural philosopher Jan Minckelers, a professor at the University of Louvain, examined the possibilities of using coal gas for ballooning. In 1784, Cavendish filled an old gun barrel with powdered coal and heated it to produce gas. This was used to fill a small, unmanned balloon, which made a flight of twenty-five kilometers. ⁵⁵

The eighteenth-century proprietors of Vauxhall Gardens seized on the attractive possibilities of balloons as urban entertainment early on. In 1787, the park’s newly decorated balloon rooms were opened, designed for socializing at ascents. On 20 June 1802, a Grand Gala was held at Vauxhall Gardens that featured a free-floating hot air balloon ascent by the balloonist, inventor, and official Aeronaut of France, André-Jacques Garnerin (1769–1823)—an event complete with fireworks. Garnerin followed up the extravaganza with a balloon journey of three hundred miles, starting from Vauxhall; his student, Jeanne Geneviève Labrosse, whom he later married, was in the late 1790s one of the first women to pilot a balloon, and widely thought to be the first woman to parachute from a balloon, from an altitude of 900 meters. ⁵⁶

The star aeronaut along the Thames at the time was the most celebrated British balloonist of his generation: Charles Green (1785–1870). In 1821, Green made the first ascent in a balloon filled with carburetted hydrogen gas (or coal gas), from the new gas mains in London, to mark the coronation of George IV ([fig. 17](#)). That particular trip ended in crisis as he had to be rescued, but his future ascents, which were far more successful, attracted hundreds of thousands of spectators over the next three decades. ⁵⁷



Figure 17.

The New London Bridge, as it Appeared on Monday, August 1st, 1831, at the Ceremony of Opening by their Majesties, showing a balloon possibly piloted by Charles Green, witnessed by William IV, published August 15, 1831 by J. McCormick, 1831, coloured engraving. Collection of the Library of Congress (LOT 13405, no. 4 [P&P]). Digital image courtesy of Library of Congress (public domain).

The very operation of filling the balloon with gas, which often took several hours, was a modern urban spectacle and form of public entertainment that required considerable supporting labor, led by predominantly working-class men. Contemporary images of workers inflating gas balloons capture the interconnection of labor, risk, infrastructure, and leisure that permeates the visual gas field. Balloon inflation was itself the subject of art and visual record in the nineteenth century, with several depictions of balloons being filled with gas prior to their ascent in illustrations, including engravings that are reproduced in Glaisher's book, *Travels in the Air*.⁵⁸ Eager audiences often had to wait quite a long time for balloons to fill with coal gas; the material presence of the gas becoming visually apparent to audiences only as the volume of the balloon expanded. The smells given off, like the stench of rotten eggs, as well as the creaking sounds of ropes and pulleys and shouts of workers holding the lines, also made the coal gas a tangible presence. In one print, men are shown in the interior of the balloon, seemingly pointing to an audience outside who are visible only as shadowy figures—an image that captures a kind of pressure from an audience, almost as if waiting impatiently behind a stage curtain for a spectacle (fig. 18).

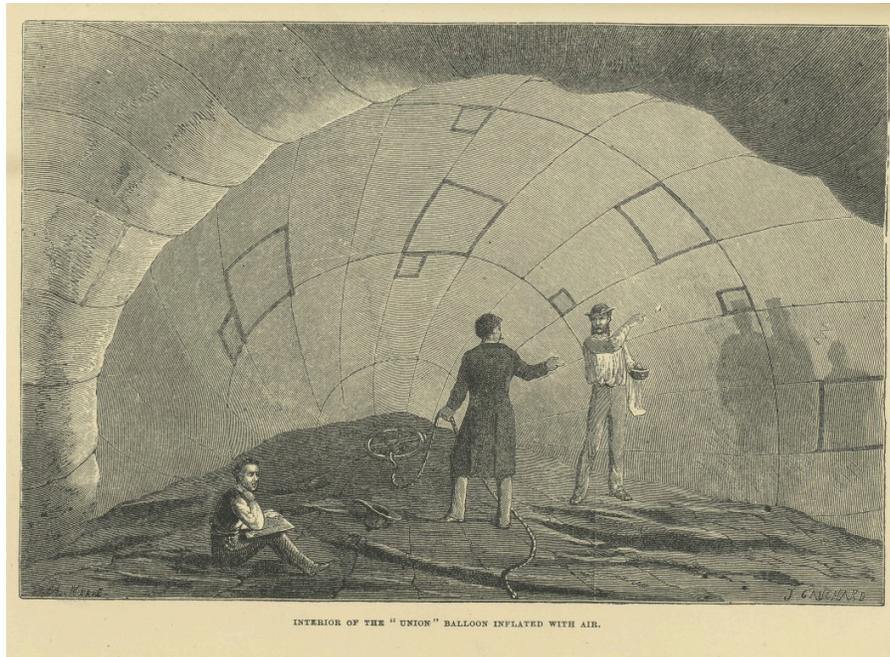


Figure 18.

F.J. Gauchard, Interior of the "Union" Balloon Inflated with Air, in *Travels in the Air* (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1871), 357, 1865, woodcut engraving. Collection of the National Library of Scotland. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland (all rights reserved).

The process of inflation, and its depiction in these illustrations, points to public fascination with the balloons, and the possibilities offered by this new form of transportation. In a basic sense, the balloon gave form to a formless gaseous substance. Although its chemical and flammable properties were widely known, the invisibility of gas challenged public perceptions of how this substance could exist in the known/visible world. In the illustration *Filling a Balloon*, men form concentric circles around the balloon, suggesting both its impending expansion and the necessity for surveillance (fig. 19). In *The Swallow Balloon*, one observes how gas can wreak havoc with the direction and shape of the balloon, which floats askance alongside neatly lined gasholders (fig. 20). An image of a balloon within the glass structure of the Crystal Palace again reinforces both its size and technical properties, as the invisibility of gas corresponds to the transparency of the modern glass structure (fig. 21). Combined, these renderings show how the balloon was both a modern marvel that could be leveraged and enjoyed for aerial transport, and a technological feat that corralled and visualized the invisible substance flowing under the streets of London. ⁵⁹



Figure 19.

Filling a Balloon, in *Travels in the Air* (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1871), 78, 1865, woodcut engraving. Collection of the National Library of Scotland. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland (all rights reserved).

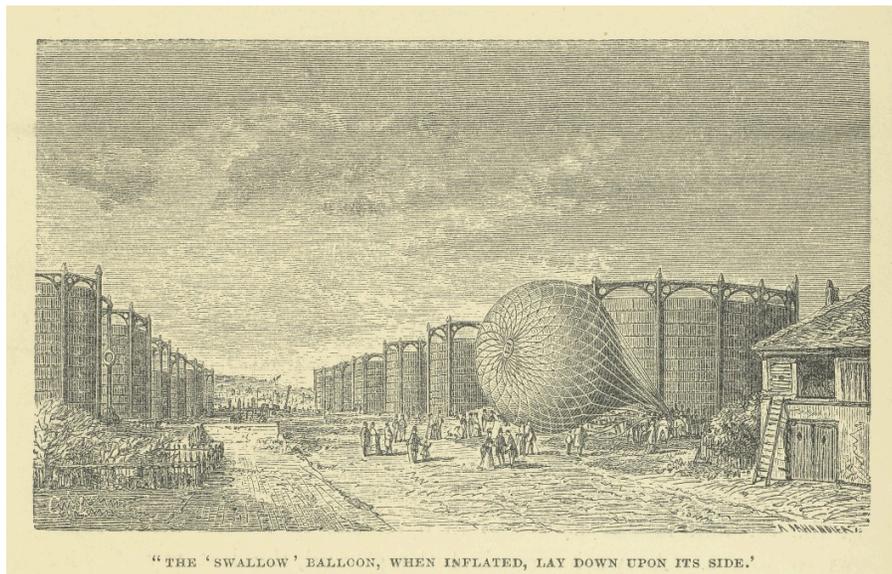


Figure 20.

C. Laplante, The Swallow Balloon, When Inflated, Lay Down Upon Its Side, in *Travels in the Air* (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1871), 346, 1865, woodcut engraving. Collection of the National Library of Scotland. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland (all rights reserved).

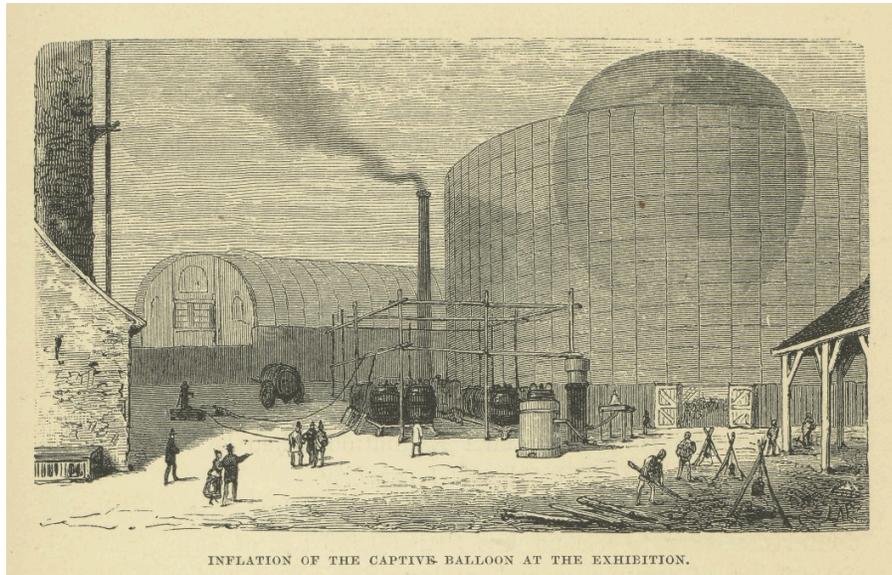


Figure 21.

C. Laplante, Inflation of the Captive Balloon at the Exhibition, in *Travels in the Air* (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1871), 253, 1865, woodcut engraving. Collection of the National Library of Scotland. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland (all rights reserved).

Central to the success of the balloon experience—a journey that could be pleasurable, but also frightening and perilous—was how well the aeronaut managed the gas, which was released to descend the balloon. An illustration reproduced in the book *Travels in the Air*, published in 1871, shows James Glaisher’s historic high ascent—where the aeronaut Henry Coxwell (1819–1900) is clinging to the hoop, trying to release the gas valve by using his teeth (his hands were frozen) to pull the rope that opened it and so lower their descent and save their lives (fig. 22). The incident dramatized the general lack of control over the balloon: the “erratic and relatively ungoverned movement of the machine”.⁶⁰ Green went on to make hundreds of ascents from Vauxhall Gardens, with spectators from diverse backgrounds paying an admission price to watch. In 1836, he launched from Vauxhall Gardens and landed eighteen hours later and five hundred miles away in Weilburg, in the Duchy of Nassau—a world distance record that held until 1907. The balloon was renamed the *Royal Nassau*, and a new balloon hall, with a specially built hangar to allow for its inflation under cover, opened soon after. Interestingly, as coal gas was not produced in Nassau, the return journey had to be made by carriage.

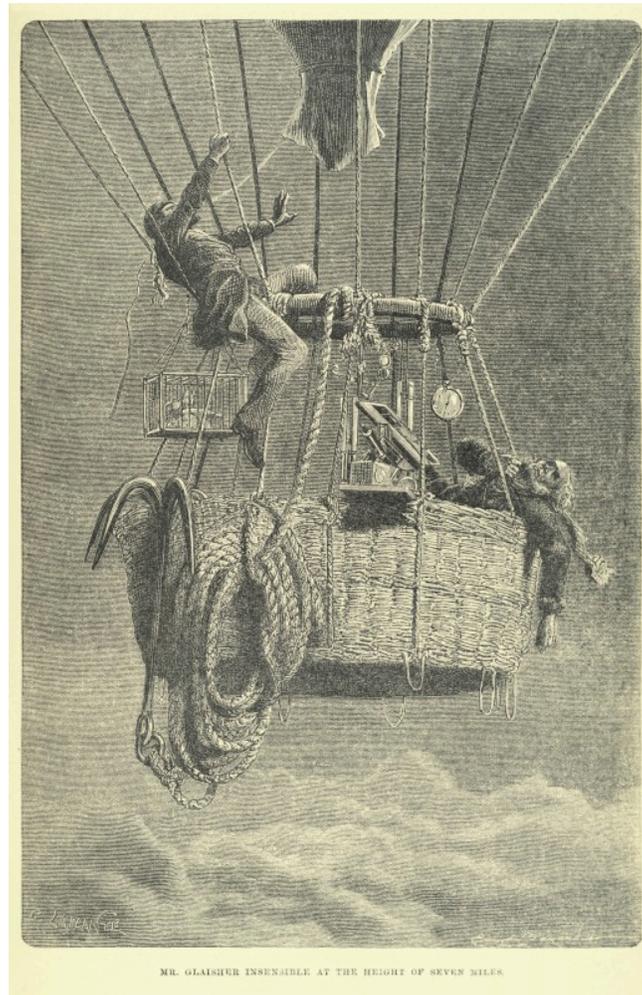


Figure 22.

C. Laplante, Mr Glaisher Insensible at the Height of Seven Miles, in *Travels in the Air* (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1871), 55, lithograph. Collection of the National Library of Scotland. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland (all rights reserved).

Accounts of Green's adventures are traceable through the scattered records of Victorian popular shows, such as a one-page printed advertisement from 1850 announcing that Green would ascend in a balloon while seated on a horse. In 1852, he ascended with the journalist and social reformer Henry Mayhew, who wrote perhaps the best-remembered narrative of a balloon journey over the Thames. For Mayhew, whose groundbreaking survey of London's working class, *London Labour and the London Poor*, was published as a book in 1851, around the same time as his flight with Green, the balloon offered a point of view that transcended the local perspective, a bird's-eye view that could literally see the city and its interlocking parts. In "In the Clouds', or, Some Account of a Balloon Trip with Mr. Green", published in the *Illustrated London News*, 18 September 1852, Mayhew wrote a vivid account

of the evening voyage, which began in the bright pleasure grounds of Vauxhall Gardens and ended in a Surrey swamp: "I had seen the world of London below the surface, as it were, and I had a craving to contemplate it far above it—to behold the immense mass of vice and avarice and cunning, of noble aspirations and humble heroism, blent into one black spot". And indeed, as the famous *Royal Nassau* balloon rose into the air, the geography of the lives of the costermongers, oyster sellers, flower girls, hawking butchers, and pickpockets whose activities Mayhew recorded in *London Labour and the London Poor* came into undifferentiated view.⁶¹ He acknowledged curiosity about the "histories, habits, natures, and impulses" of the slum-dwellers of Jacob's Island, located on the south bank of the Thames. This area had been popularized by Dickens in *Oliver Twist* (1837–1839), before many dwellings in the area were cleared for new development in the 1860s. But it had initially been "merely idle curiosity"—not sociological zeal—"that took me into the air", Mayhew declared. He confessed to experiencing the "most exquisite delight I ever experienced", peering over the wicker basket above the fields of Surrey. The adventure was not seamless, and he recalled the experience in passages that convey the presence of gas in their imaginative repertoire, as he and friends floated in the air: "Above us reeled the great gas-bag like a monster peg-top, and all around the car were groups of men holding to the sides of the basket". He remarked:

The houses below looked like the tiny wooden things out of a child's box of toys, and the streets like ruts. To peer straight down gave you an awful sense of the height to which the balloon had already risen, and yet there was no idea of danger, for the mind was too much occupied with the grandeur and novelty of the scene all around to feel the least alarm. As the balloon kept on ascending, the lines of buildings grew smaller and smaller, till in a few minutes the projections seemed very much like the prominences on the little coloured plaster models of countries.⁶²

It was then, Mayhew exclaimed, that "we could see the gas lights along the different lines of road start into light one after another all over the earth, and presently the ground seemed to be covered with little miniature illumination lamps, such as may be seen resting on the grass at the sides of the gravel walks in suburban gardens of amusement. The river we could see winding far away, undulating, as it streamed along, like a man-of-war's pennant, and glittering here and there in the dusk like grey steel".⁶³ Furthermore, the bridges across the Thames appeared "almost like planks; while the tiny black barges, as they floated up the river, appeared no bigger than insects".⁶⁴

Balloons mostly carried passengers over metropolitan landscapes, revealing panoramas, and seeing the spread of cities, with their growing populations and new industries: factories, slums, parks, docks, city sights and smells and sounds. Observers who made balloon ascents from Vauxhall and other gas-supplied points along the river created verbal and visual descriptions of the Thames and its rapidly changing environs, observing towns illuminated by gas light and evidence of pollution. Passengers who ascended with Green occasionally left photographic and other visual and documentary records of environmental transformation in places that were far beyond London. After a balloon journey by Green and others over Belgium, an artist depicted the nocturnal scene of smoking chimneys lit up below; the sounds of the factories being the only sounds the passengers heard in their night voyage over the industrial landscape, when the skies were as dark, as one said, as a “mass of black marble” (fig. 23).⁶⁵ Such images testify to how the aerial views enabled by gas were also what was required to comprehend the emerging scale of industry itself.

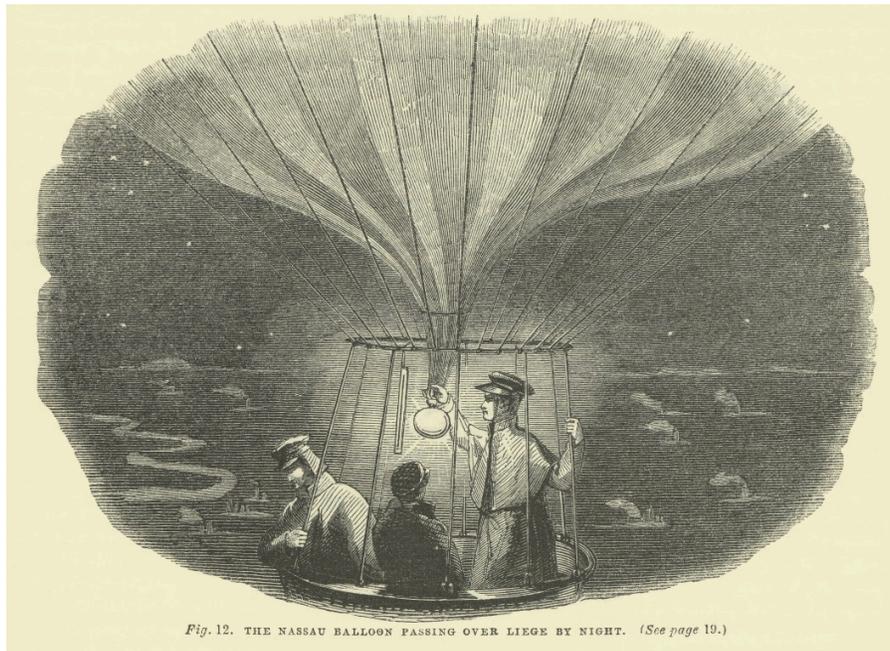


Figure 23.

Night Voyage to Nassau: The Nassau Balloon with the Aeronaut Charles Green Passing Over Liege at Night, with Smoking Factories Below, in *Cyclopaedia of Useful Arts, Mechanical and Chemical, Manufactures, Mining, and Engineering*, by Charles Tomlinson, Vol. I (London: James S. Virtue, 1886), Fig. 12, circa 1836, woodcut engraving. Wellcome Collection. Digital image courtesy of Wellcome Collection (public domain).

The coal-gas-filled balloon also enabled new visions of the heavens for observers who could afford to ascend. The French meteorologist and fervent champion of the balloon Camille Flammarion commented in the 1870s on the sounds of the river when he was airborne in a balloon: “The air is the first

bond of society ... the great medium of sound, the liquid channel in which our words travel, the vehicle of language, of ideas, and of social communication".⁶⁶ Flammarion once wrote, about the experience of observing the atmosphere from the vantage point of a balloon, that "Such are the last and grandest of the phenomena which we have to contemplate in this gallery of the works of the Atmosphere".⁶⁷ Ballooning not only made possible new scientific investigation of the atmosphere, but also spurred a new emotional engagement with the "ocean of air" above our head: "Atmosphere" was—and is—still defined both as an "envelope of gases" surrounding the earth or another planet, and as the "pervading tone or mood of a place, situation, or work of art".⁶⁸

Among the most enduring aerial views of London as seen from a balloon were those of the Thames. On 31 March 1863, on a flight that he made from Crystal Palace one mile high, James Glaisher—in a rare moment when he was not making scientific observations on meteorological phenomena in the upper atmosphere—described the "winding Thames, leading the eye to the white cliffs at Margate and on to Dover" as "sharply defined". "All the docks were mapped out", he continued, "and every object of moderate size was seen with the naked eye". What struck him was the regularity of the scene: "Taking a grand view of the whole visible area beneath, I was struck with its great regularity: all was dwarfed to one plane; it seemed too flat even, even artificial". The "effect of the river scenery in this respect was remarkable", he stated: "the ships, visible even beyond the Medway, looked like toys". He used metallic imagery to describe the river's surface appearance: "Towards Windsor the Thames looked like burnished gold, and the surrounding water like bright silver".⁶⁹

This description of the Thames as "orderly", even "metallic", relates to other ways (social, scientific, industrial) of imagining and understanding the city. It looks forward to artist Maya Lin's wall work, *Silver Thames*, representing an aerial view of the waterway, in which the image of the Thames is made of either recycled silver or steel pins, with the wall forming the surrounding land, enabling viewers to see this, and other, rivers both as interconnected wholes and as dynamic, sculptural forms (fig. 24).⁷⁰ The industrial riverscape also points to the important role the river played in the economic and cultural identity of Britain. In thinking about the integration of technology into history and physical landscapes, a useful concept is that of "throughlines", as discussed by photographer Richard Misrach and landscape architect Kate Orff in their book *Petrochemical America*. In their collaboration to engage histories of the chemical corridor in Louisiana, an area of heavy chemical industry since the late nineteenth century, they made and responded to photographs of industry that built on, and among, living communities with their own histories—and the co-relations of humans,

industry, and animals. As Misrach put it, “We started to think about this very simple photograph in many different dimensions—going back in time and understanding that this was a former indigo plantation that then became sugarcane, and although it was empty today was once teeming with slave labor and then with plantation workers”.⁷¹ Their goal as artists—and ours as social and cultural historians—is to reveal the complexity of environmental systems and stories embedded in the landscape. Orff calls this approach searching for “throughlines” into “stories about zones around the world that are now going through the same cycle of extraction-based industry, waste, displacement, and resistance, whether in the Nigerian Delta, or the rice fields and fishing grounds of Myanmar”. Industrialization, on this reading, resulted not simply from technological changes, but rather from a series of political defeats that led to the consolidation of capitalist and colonial modernities.



Figure 24.

Maya Lin, *Silver Thames*, 2012, recycled silver, cast 1 of 3, edition of 3 (2 APs), 48.26 × 198 × 1 cm. Collection of The Alford Collection of Contemporary Art at Rollins College Cornell Fine Arts Museum (2013.34.088). Digital image courtesy of Maya Lin Studio, courtesy Pace Gallery (all rights reserved).

Coal-Gas London

Though colorless, coal gas was most certainly a visible presence in the riverscape. Prominent features of the skyline in nineteenth-century London, including the dome of St. Paul’s Cathedral, the Parliament building, and Tower Bridge, continue to be visually notable in London today. Some of the largest structures of that skyline, however, are no longer present or survive

only as skeletal frames. These landmarks were the gasholders of the manufactured gas industry, built to store a day's supply of gas for an increasingly "light-hungry" metropolis.⁷² The establishment of gasworks materially recast the bank of the river and affected the placement of the observer in relation to the city and its surrounding landscapes. It evolved the river into a conduit for both modern entertainment and deadly risk. Consideration of the visual gas field shows that these "involuntary neighbors" of the nineteenth-century Thames were not only connected by its waters, but also by a form of energy that bridged earth, air, and water, with far-ranging impacts on the river's ecology, the people who lived and worked on it, and the ways in which the river was seen and imagined.

Footnotes

- 1 H.G. Wells, *The Invisible Man* (London: C. Arthur Pearson, 1897), ch. 19. See also Nathaniel Otjen, "Energy Anxiety and Fossil Fuel Modernity in H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*", *Journal of Modern Literature* 43, no. 2 (Winter 2020): 118-133.
- 2 On the manufacture of gas along the Thames, see esp. Leslie Tomory, "Building the First Gas Network, 1812-1820", *Technology and Culture* 52, no. 1 (Jan. 2011): 75-102; Tomory, "Gaslight, Distillation, and the Industrial Revolution", *History of Science* 49, no. 4 (2011): 395-424. On the connection of water quality and the Thames in the eighteenth century, see Tomory, "The Question of Water Quality and London's New River in the Eighteenth Century", *Social History of Medicine* 27, no. 3 (2014): 488-507. Gasworks produced coke by heating coal in enclosed chambers. The flammable gas that was given off was stored in gasholders, to be used domestically and industrially. The gas was commonly known as "town gas" since underground networks of pipes ran through most towns. It was replaced by "natural gas" (initially from the North Sea oil and gas fields) in the decade after 1967. Other by-products of coke production included tar and ammonia, which were important chemical feedstock for the dye and chemical industries, with a wide range of artificial dyes being made from coal gas and coal tar.
- 3 Leslie Tomory, *Progressive Enlightenment: The Origins of the Gaslight Industry, 1780-1820*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012, 1.
- 4 Although the gas industry was among the first of a new wave of technologies of the Industrial Revolution, its origins and effects on art, environment, and urban life have been much less studied than those of other industries such as textiles, coal mining, and railways. The implications for art and visual culture of the close links between coal gas manufacturing and ballooning have been relatively unmarked. Important exceptions include Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), and Nicholas Robbins, "Oceans of Air: Lands and Climate in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic, 1774-1784" (PhD diss., Yale University, 2019).
- 5 On nineteenth-century art and industry generally, see Nead, *Victorian Babylon*; Kate Nichols, Rebecca Wade, and Gabriel Williams, eds. *Art versus Industry? New Perspectives on Visual and Industrial Cultures in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016); and Francis D. Klingender, *Art and the Industrial Revolution* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1968), among others, including authors in this volume. See also Peter Thorsheim, *Inventing Pollution: Coal, Smoke and Culture in Britain since 1800* (Ohio University Press, 2018); and Jennifer Tucker, "Dangerous Exposures: Work and Waste in the Victorian Chemical Trade", *International Labor and Working-Class History* 95 (July 2019): 130-165.
- 6 Michelle Murphy, *Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty: Environmental Politics, Technoscience, and Women Workers* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
- 7 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).
- 8 See Thomas Newbigging, *The Gas Manager's Handbook; Consisting of Tables, Rules, and Useful Information for Gas Engineers, Managers, and Others Engaged in the Manufacture and Distribution of Coal Gas* (London: W.B. King, 1874), esp. 159-164.
- 9 In France some argued that the country should conserve its coal stocks for producing steam and iron (rather than distilling it for gas light).
- 10 Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, "The Gas Lighting Controversy: Technological Risk, Expertise, and Regulation in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London", *Journal of Urban History* 33, no. 5 (2007): 734.
- 11 James Glaisher, ed., *Travels in the Air* (London: Richard Bentley, 1871).
- 12 Barbara Stafford, *Voyage into Substance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984); Jennifer Tucker, "Voyages of Discovery on Oceans of Air: The Image of Science in an Age of 'Balloonyacy'", *Osiris* 11: *Science in the Field* (1996): 144-176; Jonathan Potter, *Discourses of Vision in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), esp. 47-68; Robbins, "Oceans of Air".

- 13 The gas-light industry along the River Thames began in the 1810s, but the Thames-based gas industry dates back much further. Rich records and traces of its origins extend our historical knowledge of the technological, ecological, sociocultural, and visual histories of gas.
- 14 Doctoral student Johana Godfrey (English Department, Northwestern University) discusses the excavation of the Thames riverbank by working-class antiquaries as being central to the “sedimented spaces” and nonsequential narratives in Charles Dickens’s later fiction, including *Our Mutual Friend*, in “Sedimented Space, Nonsequential Narratives, and Working-Class Antiquaries in Dickens’s Later Fiction” (paper presented at the Interdisciplinary Nineteenth-Century Studies conference (“Nineteenth-Century Strata”), Salt Lake City, Utah, 27 March 2022).
- 15 Janet Thomson, *The Scot Who Lit the World: The Story of William Murdoch, Inventor of Gas Light* (Eastbourne: Gardners Books, 2003).
- 16 Trevor I. Williams, *A History of the British Gas Industry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 4–9.
- 17 Stirling Everard, *The History of the Gas Light and Coke Company, 1812–1949* (London: Ernest Benn Ltd., 1949), 15–20, 56–74.
- 18 Maps in Everard, *The History of the Gas Light and Coke Company*.
- 19 Tomory, “Gaslight, Distillation, and the Industrial Revolution”.
- 20 Everard, *The History of the Gas Light and Coke Company*, 33.
- 21 Source: Musée Carnavalet, Estampes; reproduced in Fresso, “The Gas Lighting Controversy”, 735.
- 22 Everard, *The History of the Gas Light and Coke Company*, 49.
- 23 Vanessa Taylor, “Watershed Democracy or Ecological Hinterland? London and the Thames River Basin, 1857–1989”, in *Rivers Lost, Rivers Regained: Re-thinking City-River Relations*, ed. Martin Knoll, Uwe Lübken, and Dieter Schott (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017), 63–81. There is a broad global literature on rivers and the environment. See, for example, Christopher F. Jones, *Routes of Power: Energy and Modern America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); and Shellen Xiao Wu, *Empires of Coal: Fueling China’s Entry into the Modern World Order, 1860–1920* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).
- 24 Everard, *The History of the Gas Light and Coke Company*; Williams, *A History of the British Gas Industry*.
- 25 Discussed in Klingender, *Art and the Industrial Revolution*, 126. The print was conserved in a collection of prints and books documenting the early history of the gas industry, amassed by Sir Arthur Elton, a pioneer of the British scientific documentary film industry.
- 26 He further noted that it was around this time that “for the first time in their long history an artist selected coal-mines as a subject for systematic study”, selecting Thomas H. Hair’s *Sketches of the Coal Mines in Northumberland & Durham*, a volume of etching after his own drawings. Klingender, *Art and the Industrial Revolution*, 126–127.
- 27 Thomas B. Simpson, *Gas-Works: The Evil: The Evil Inseparable from Their Existence in Populous Places, and the Necessity for Removing Them from the Metropolis, as has been done in Paris* (London: Freeman, 1866).
- 28 Simpson, *Gas-Works*, 8.
- 29 Simpson, *Gas-Works*, 11.
- 30 Simpson, *Gas-Works*, 11.
- 31 *Morning Herald*, 2 November 1865, quoted in Simpson, *Gas-Works*, 17–18. These remarks, and Simpson’s book, followed the fatal gas explosion at the London Gas Light Company works at Nine Elms on 31 October 1865. The site had two gasholders, each holding about a million cubic feet of gas. One of these exploded and was completely destroyed; the other caught fire but did not explode. Seven men were killed at the scene, and many more were injured.
- 32 Simpson, *Gas-Works*, 21.
- 33 Simpson, *Gas-Works*, 21–22.
- 34 Emily Irwin, “The Spermaceti Candle and the American Whaling Industry”, *Historia* 21 (2012): 45–53; Stephen Croad, *Liquid History: The Thames Through Time* (London: Batsford, 2003); Gavin Weightman, *London’s Thames: The River That Shaped a City and Its History* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005); Alwyn Wheeler, *Tidal Thames: History of a River and Its Fishes* (New York: Routledge, 1979).
- 35 For archival records see, among others, the Institution of Gas Engineers & Managers, now located in Kegworth, Derbyshire. Leslie Tomory and other historians have made close examination of newspapers, legal records, and unpublished archives from court cases from the period, brought by Thames fisheries against the emerging gas companies. Further light is needed on how industrial pollution of the Thames was regarded in the law, revealing how local authorities moved against gas pollution, however ineffectively. This also will deepen our understanding of the colorful visual language invented to describe “gas-impregnated” oily waters in legal, scientific, and popular culture.
- 36 Fresso, “The Gas Lighting Controversy”, 747.
- 37 Minutes of the Court of Conservancy (MCC), LMA Document CLA/036/01/008, Session for Surry [sic], 8 September 1821. Discussed in Leslie Tomory, “Environmental History of the Early British Gas Industry”, *Environmental History* 17, no. 1 (2012): 41.
- 38 Tomory, “Environmental History of the Early British Gas Industry”, 42–43.
- 39 Tomory, “Environmental History of the Early British Gas Industry”, 43.
- 40 Tomory, “Environmental History of the Early British Gas Industry”, 44.

- 41 Accidents discussed in Fressoz, "The Gas Lighting Controversy", and by others.
- 42 British Parliamentary Papers, 1823, 7, 13, 32. Discussed in Fressoz, "The Gas Lighting Controversy", 733–735.
- 43 Discussed in Fressoz, "The Gas Lighting Controversy", 744. ("Gas agitation" was Simpson's phrase, in *Gas-Works*.)
- 44 Johann Hecke, *Reise durch die Vereinigten Staaten von Nord-Amerika in den Jahren 1818 und 1819, und Rückreise durch England*, Vol. 2 (Berlin: Petri, 1820–1821), 286.
- 45 On new ways of seeing and the effects on nineteenth-century art and visual culture see, among others: Jonathan Potter, *Discourses of Vision in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Seeing, Thinking, Writing* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Nead, *Victorian Babylon*; and Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).
- 46 Warwick Wroth, *The London Pleasure Gardens of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1896), 1.
- 47 Wroth, *The London Pleasure Gardens*, 286–326, 287.
- 48 Tucker, "Voyages of Discovery on Oceans of Air". Robbins, "Oceans of Air".
- 49 Potter, *Discourses of Vision in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 47, 51. Panoramic descriptions of balloon views were common, and by 1858 a patent for aerial photography had been filed by the French photographer Nadar (Gaspard-Félix Tournachon), the best-known aerial photographer of the nineteenth century. See Adam Begley, *The Great Nadar: The Man Behind the Camera* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017). For a detailed description of the relationship between balloons and aerial photography, see Denis Cosgrove and William L. Fox, *Exposures: Photography and Flight* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 23–51.
- 50 Helen Wickstead and Martyn Barber, "'One Immense Black Spot': Aerial Views of London, 1784–1918", *London Journal* 35, no. 3 (November 2010): 241.
- 51 Barber and Wickstead, "'One Immense Black Spot'", 236.
- 52 Barber and Wickstead, "'One Immense Black Spot'", 244.
- 53 Patrick Ellis, "The Panstereorama: City Models in the Balloon Era", *Imago Mundi* 70, no. 1 (2018): 79–93. Martyn Barber reproduced a remarkable photograph of Parliament and the Thames taken from the balloon *Corona* on 22 May 1909 in his book *A History of Aerial Photography* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2011), fig. 3.29 (The book includes a chapter about Victorian and Edwardian balloons.)
- 54 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).
- 55 Henry Cavendish, "Experiments on Air. By Henry Cavendish, Esq. F.R.S. & S.A.", *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 74 (1784): 119–153, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/106582>; David Phillip Miller, *Discovering Water: James Watt, Henry Cavendish and the Nineteenth-Century "Water Controversy"* (New York: Routledge, 2017).
- 56 See Christopher Hatton Turnor, *Astra Castra: Experiments and Adventures in the Atmosphere* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1865).
- 57 Discussed in Turnor, *Astra Castra*; Glaisher, *Travels in the Air*. On Victorian aeronauts, see L.T.C. Rolt, *The Aeronauts, 1783–1903* (London: Walker & Co., 1966), and Patrick De Oliveira, "The Ascending Republic: Aeronautical Culture in France, 1860–1914" (PhD diss., Princeton, 2017).
- 58 Glaisher, *Travels in the Air*, 78.
- 59 At the same time, they also point to the material source of this gas—coal—as another way of thinking about the ramifications for nineteenth-century society and the environment, and on the many ways that coal was transformed into energy, lighting, pollution, labor, entertainment, and mobility.
- 60 Glaisher, *Travels in the Air*, 21; Tucker, "Voyages of Discovery on Oceans of Air".
- 61 Henry Mayhew, "'In the Clouds', or, Some Account of a Balloon Trip with Mr. Green", *Illustrated London News*, 18 September 1852, 224.
- 62 Mayhew, "In the Clouds".
- 63 Mayhew, "In the Clouds".
- 64 Mayhew, "In the Clouds".
- 65 Camille Flammarion, quoted in Glaisher, *Travels in the Air*, 207.
- 66 Camille Flammarion, *The Atmosphere* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1873), 23.
- 67 Flammarion, *The Atmosphere*, 453.
- 68 *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "atmosphere (n.)", accessed 28 March 2022, <https://www.oed-com.ezproxy.wesleyan.edu/view/Entry/12552?rkey=fa4zXQ&result=1>.
- 69 Glaisher, *Travels in the Air*, 79.
- 70 Shalini Le Gall discusses this work in "Framing Environment in an Exhibition of Whistler's 'Thames Set'", in *Artful Encounters: Sites of Visual Inquiry*, ed. Christina Smylitopoulos (Guelph, ON: Bachinski/Chu Print Study Collection, School of Fine Art and Music, University of Guelph, 2021), 53–74].

- 71 Richard Misrach and Kate Orff, *Petrochemical America* (New York: Aperture, 2014). They discuss the “complex web of industrial and ecological and human stories” that give rise to images. “Richard Misrach and Kate Orff Discuss Petrochemical America” (interview by Melissa Harris, 17 September 2021) may be accessed at *Aperture*. <http://aperture.org/blog/richard-misrach-and-kate-orff-in-conversation/2/>.
- 72 Tomory, “The Environmental History of the Early British Gas Industry”, 1; Chris Otter, *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain 1800–1910* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Hollis Clayson, *Illuminated Paris: Essays on Art and Lighting in the Belle Époque* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Nead, *Victorian Babylon*; Everard, *The History of the Gas Light and Coke Company*. Coal was transformed into energy, lighting, pollution, and mobility by its modifications in gas manufacture. Early attempts to regulate pollution from gasworks were coincident with attempts to regulate air pollution in London and elsewhere (1820–1821). See Peter Thorsheim, *Inventing Pollution: Coal, Smoke and Culture in Britain since 1800* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2018); Ben Pontin, “Integrated Pollution Control in Victorian Britain: Rethinking Progress in the History of Environmental Law”, *Journal of Environmental Law* 19, no. 2 (2007): 173–199; and Adam Markham, *A Brief History of Pollution* (London: Earthscan, 1994), which notes fourteenth-century statutes touching on air pollution in England from the burning of coal.

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