

The Rookery

Exploring London's worst slum

Artist Jane Palm-Gold recently teamed up with the Museum of London Archaeology to investigate life in the 18th-century West End's 'citadel of vice and crime'. Just how bad was the notorious St Giles Rookery?

We live in muck and filth. We aint got no priviz, no dust bins, no drains, no water-supplies, and no drain or suer in the hole place.' Thus wrote the slum-dwellers of Church Lane, Carrier Street, and other courts of St Giles parish in a letter to *The Times* dated 5 July 1849.

Things were about to change. Victorian Britain was on the brink of a great post-depression boom, and much of the wealth generated in the decades to come would be spent on urban renewal. From 1850 onwards, Britain's industrial cities were to

ABOVE Tom and Jerry 'masquerading it' among the cadgers in the 'black slums' in the Holy Land, by George Cruikshank, 1821. Cruikshank's image captures the richness of the Rookery's social tapestry. We struggle to reconstruct it with mere fragments of historical, literary, and archaeological evidence.

RIGHT Sketch of a house in St Giles by an unknown 19th-century artist. An overcrowded district, the Rookery took its name from the supposed similarity between roosting rooks and its inhabitants, who lived in close proximity in the middle-rise tenements.

be transformed in the wake of an onslaught of official reports, reformist lobbying, and parliamentary acts. It is to the writings of this more conscientious mid-Victorian period that we owe much of our knowledge of the 18th- and early 19th-century Rookery.

Charles Dickens was among the critical commentators. He is known to have been familiar with St Giles – he visited the area several times under the protection of minders – and the labyrinthine warrens of crime, prostitution, and slum-living he creates in novels like *Oliver Twist* owe much to those experiences.

What Dickens saw was described by another visitor around the same time, the urban





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reformer Thomas Beames. The Rookery, he wrote in 1850, was 'like a honeycomb, perforated by a number of courts and blind alleys, cul-de-sacs without any outlet other than the entrance... In the centre of the hive was the famous thieves' public house called Rat's Castle.'

Here, according to Montague Gore, writing in *On the Dwellings of the Poor* in 1851, was the setting for poverty as extreme as any in Britain at the time. In the depths of St Giles,

the wretchedness of London takes shelter... Squalid children, haggard men, the long uncombed hair, in rags, with a short pipe in their mouths, many

ABOVE Archaeological excavations underway on the former Rookery site.

RIGHT A scene in St Giles, c.1840, by F. Pierdon. Early Victorian perceptions of the Rookery were informed by images such as this: the inhabitants were seen as an undifferentiated, impoverished, dangerous 'underclass'.



speaking Irish, women without shoes or stockings – a babe perhaps at the breast with a single garment, confined to the waist by a bit of string; wolfish-looking dogs; decayed vegetables strewn the pavement; low public-houses; linen hanging across the street to dry...

In one house, a hundred persons have been known to sleep on a given night... In these rooms are piled the wares by which some of the inhabitants gain their precarious living – oranges, herrings, water-cresses, onions, seemed to be the most marketable articles; and there were sweepers, cadgers or beggars, stray luggage-porters, etc lounging about...

The Victorian middle-class was fascinated, repelled, and terrified by slums like the Rookery. The very name was redolent of squalor and danger. It derived from the overcrowding in the jerry-built tenements that rose up around the courts, closes, and alleyways that formed the district: the denizens, it seemed, roosted there like rooks, side-by-side, one above the other.

Gin Lane

The parish of St Giles is an area of the West End centred on Bloomsbury and extending between Soho, Covent Garden, and Holborn to the south and Euston, St Pancras, and King's Cross to the north. Today, it is elegant, fashionable, and expensive. The street architecture is solidly late 19th and 20th century, with terraced town-houses, neo-Gothic and neo-Classical public buildings, blocks of municipal flats, and

RIGHT St Giles in the early 21st century. *A New Kind of Drunkenness is Lately Sprung Up Amongst Us*. Jane Palm-Gold, 2007.

BOTTOM RIGHT William Hogarth's *Gin Lane* (1751) is the most famous artistic representation of the St Giles Rookery. Modern artist Jane Palm-Gold, who sees a comparison between the gin craze of the early 18th century and the crack epidemic of today, has found inspiration in Hogarth's work.

the sprawling campus complexes of University College London, the School of Oriental and African Studies, and Birkbeck. There appear to be no clues in the contemporary urban archaeology to the district's past. The 18th-century slum seems to have been erased, without trace in the early 21st-century imprint. But has it?

Jane Palm-Gold is a modern artist with a strong interest in the rich urban history represented by St Giles. Probably the most famous depiction of the Rookery is Hogarth's *Gin Lane*, a print first published in 1751 as part of a campaign in support of legislation to control gin consumption.

Spirits-based alcoholism had become an epidemic between 1720 and 1750 because of a combination of desperate poverty and dirt-cheap liquor. At the time, about one in five of the residences in St Giles doubled as gin-shops.

Commentators were appalled by the consequences, noting that

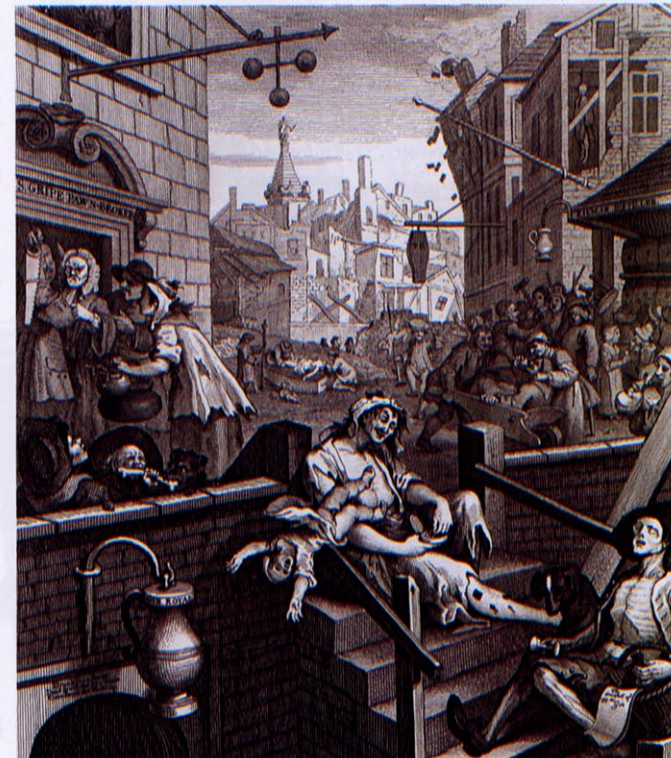
the great destruction made by brandy and geneva-shops, whose owners retail their liquors to the poorer sort of people, and do suffer them to sit tippling in their shops, by which practice they are not only rendered incapable of labour... but, by their bodys being kept in a continual heat, are thereby more liable to receive infection.

Mortality rates soared:

The diminution of births set out from the time that the consumption of these liquors by the common people became enormous... As this consumption hath been continually increasing since that time, the amount of the births hath been continually diminishing...

Crack Alley

By 1751, there was general protest. Henry Fielding's *Reasons for the late Increase of Robbers*, Hogarth's *Gin Lane*, and evidence of Bills of Mortality in parishes like St Giles prompted new legislation and more effective enforcement,





with heavy duties and licence fees designed to regulate and reduce spirit-consumption.

Jane Palm-Gold draws uncanny parallels between the gin-soaked debauchery of the 18th-century Rookery and the crack-dealers and drug-addicts of the lesser known backwaters of St Giles in recent times. For, amid the grand houses and public architecture of modern Bloomsbury, pockets of squalor have survived. Perhaps only with the opening of the new Central St Giles development in 2010 has the parish entirely transcended its slum-land past.

Palm-Gold spent six years researching material and sourcing images to recreate the life-stories of the inhabitants of the Rookery. This informed

ABOVE *The Funeral Procession of Madame Geneva... revised, Jane Palm-Gold, 2010.*



LEFT Trench 3 of the Museum of London excavation. The photo looks north from the top of St Giles Court.

her interpretation of the present, allowing her to juxtapose the misery of the gin craze with that of today's crack epidemic. The result – exhibited at the Coningsbury Gallery earlier this year – has been described as 'a multilayered psycho-geography that both mesmerises and disturbs'.

What has all this got to do with archaeology? Much more than at first appears. Palm-Gold integrated the results of archaeological investigation into her exhibition. The Central St Giles development followed rescue excavations by Museum of London Archaeology between 2006 and 2008. These took place at St Giles Court, which lies south of the line of New Oxford Street, north of St Giles High Street, and opposite the parish church and the site of the former leper hospital of St Giles-in-the-Fields. The excavation provided an opportunity to test the notorious image created by contemporary sources against the evidence of material remains.

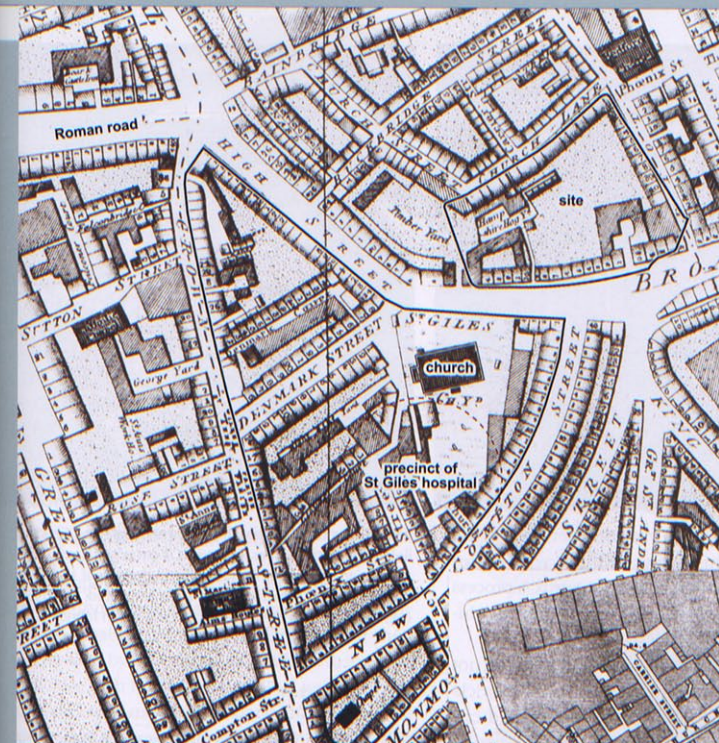
Virtual archaeology

The problem for the archaeologists was the perennial one confronting all excavators of sites within long-established modern cities. Redevelopment is frequent, and tends to involve deeper machine-cutting of basements and foundations that scoops out existing material, leaving only small islands of masonry and deposits as testimony to earlier phases. Typically, the drains, patches of surfacing, short stretches of wall stump, and truncated rubbish accumulations that are found provide but a partial impression of what was there.

The problem is compounded when the object of study is the poor. They either colonise existing masonry buildings or inhabit small, ephemeral, jerry-built structures with shallow foundations, thin walls, and extensive timberwork. In consequence, phases of low-grade occupation can be archaeologically invisible, or very hard to trace.

Artefact assemblages may not help much for similar reasons. The poor have far fewer and less durable possessions. And what they do have is often recycled – is an old piece of quality plate in a later context the heirloom of a grand house or something salvaged from a dump?

The archaeology of an 18th-century slum underneath a 19th- and 20th-century city is not likely to amount to much. With such fragmentary remains, even to complete a basic ground-plan, let alone to attempt three-dimensional reconstruction, means to draw heavily on the historical sources.



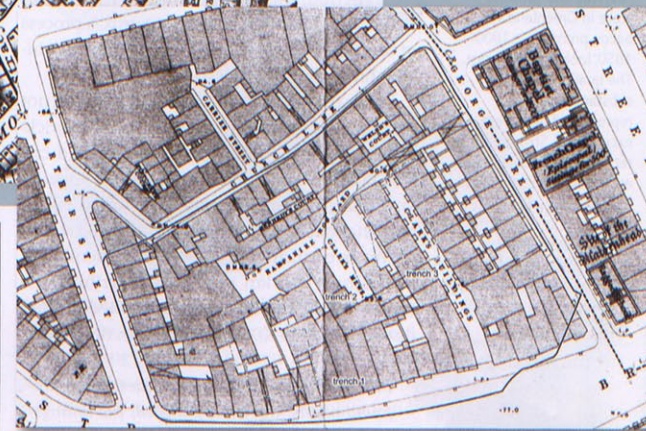
LEFT AND INSET The location of St Giles Church and leper hospital and the original Roman Road, as shown on Horwood's map, compiled in 1792-1799. The outline of the excavation site has been superimposed. Inset is a detailed view of the excavation site, as shown on the 1871 Ordnance Survey map. **BELOW** Before the slum: this fragment of late 16th-century glass beaker, from either Venice or northern Europe, is a rare find in London and testimony to the relative grandeur of St Giles before the late 17th century.

Yet this too is archaeology. Our aim is to create a picture, as fully as we may, of the material context and expression of past people's lives. This informs us about those lives in ways that both complement and augment the insights available from historical sources. But this work of picture-making need not depend solely on physical remains. In the absence of other evidence, we are entitled to use contemporary images and descriptions to make our pictures more complete.

This 'virtual archaeology' meshes easily with the anthropology of the changing city that an artist like Jane Palm-Gold is exploring. It means archaeology bursting through disciplinary constraints. It involves archaeology, history, anthropology, and art – along with what Palm-Gold calls 'psycho-geography' – interacting to produce rich new insights into the urban experience, past, present, and ever-changing.

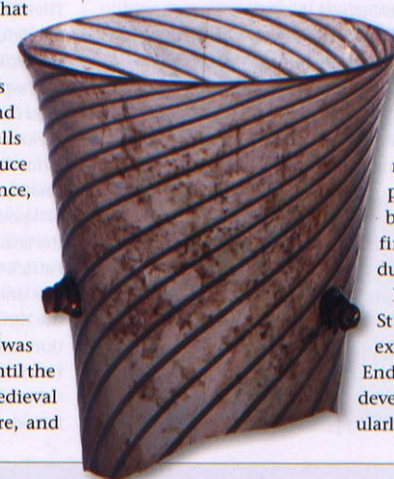
From urban fringe to refined living

What was clear from the excavations was that St Giles lay outside the urban area until the mid 16th century. Throughout the Medieval period, it was used for gardens, pasture, and



rubbish-dumping. One of the drainage ditches uncovered may be that recorded as having been created by one William Blemonde, the local estate-owner, in the early 13th century. His estate was called 'Blemondsberi' (now Bloomsbury). Development as a residential district is recorded from c.1539, and although no direct evidence for houses of this period was found, the artefact assemblages were of common household finds, perhaps representing loss or dumping in back gardens.

From the early 17th century onwards, St Giles was on the edge of the suburban expansion of London. The Tudor West End had been little more than ribbon development along the main roads, particularly along Fleet Street and The Strand, and



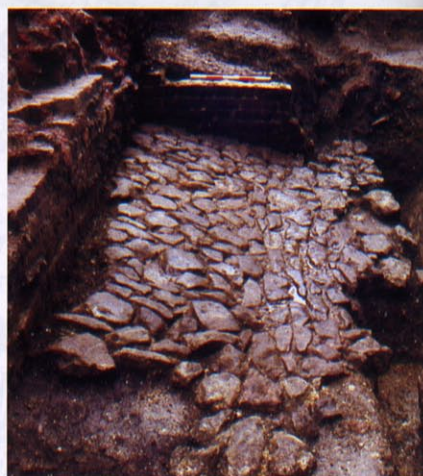


ABOVE View of a stairway and sawdust store in Greenland's bacon premises, c.1800-1850, looking north-east. The quality build and substantial survival represented here were exceptional. Structural remains were usually more ephemeral and truncated. **BELOW** King of the Beggars in St Giles. A contemporary picture of one of the colourful denizens of the Rookery by Thomas Lord Busby, early 19th century.



In the dingiest streets of the metropolis are found rooms, the walls panelled, the ceilings beautifully ornamented... the chimney-pieces models for the sculptor. The names of the courts remind you of decayed glory – Villiers, Dorset, Buckingham, Norfolk, telling of stately edifices which once stood where you bow beneath the impure atmosphere of a thickly-populated court...

It is a recurring pattern through urban history: inner-city suburbs belong first to the rich, but as they move out to new districts – to larger houses of more fashionable design in more spacious and cleaner surroundings – the growing mass of the urban poor colonise the crumbling mansions. Redevelopment thereafter is partial and haphazard. Open space is built over and improvised upper storeys are added. Gardens and backyards disappear. Courts, alleys, and streets are reduced to a gloomy network of narrow passageways.



ABOVE The cobbled yard of the former Eagle and Child. Belonging to the earlier Rookery, it is cut, significantly, by a Victorian sewer. This illustrates both the extent to which original rookery structures have been truncated, and the eventual Victorian drive to upgrade the urban fabric.

Slumming it

Over 2,000 houses were rated in the parish of St Giles at the end of Charles II's reign (1685). Just 30 years later, the total had risen to over 3,000. This rapid and uncontrolled expansion gave the area its distinctive character as a 'honeycomb'. Blome's map of 1720 shows its appearance at this time. Thereafter, until the late 19th century, the area remained largely unmapped, making the changing urban morphology of the Rookery in this period an archaeological *terra incognita*.

Most of historical sources are relatively late; we know least about the Rookery when the gin craze was at its height in the first half of the 18th century. The evidence for the first half of the 19th century is much fuller, although it is tainted by stereotypical demonisation of the urban poor; even those of the respectable classes sympathetic to their plight lived in fear of them.

Not without reason. The slums were breeding grounds of diseases like consumption, dysentery, small pox, typhus, and cholera. Slum-dwelling pickpockets, muggers, and criminal gangs worked the fashionable streets; Tower Hamlets magistrate Patrick Colquhoun estimated that London's criminal underworld numbered 115,000 at the end of the 18th century, about one in eight of the population, and these were domiciled overwhelmingly in the old rookeries.

Even after the Metropolitan Police Force was founded in 1829, 'Peelers' – nicknamed after Sir

RIGHT The material culture of an 18th- and early 19th-century urban slum: artefacts from the Rookery, excavated at Central St Giles, 2006-2008.

Robert Peel, the Conservative Home Secretary who established the force – often refused to continue the chase once criminals had bolted back into the slums. Not only would it be impossible to find their prey there, but they were at immediate risk of attack. When, in 1840, officers entered St Giles to arrest a gang of counterfeiters, the result was a full-scale street battle that raged for hours.

Holy Land and Blackbirds

Contemporary accounts, then, are coloured by fear of 'the underclass'. Much, though, is clear. Many of the inhabitants were Irish. Driven from their native land by poverty under Anglo-Irish imperial rule, the Irish formed an unskilled working-class that provided much of the basic muscle-power of the industrial revolution. The Irish quarter of St Giles – 'The Holy Land' as it was known – is estimated to have housed around 6,000 adults and 3,000 to 4,000 children in 1816. Less well-known is that St Giles seems also to have housed London's first distinct black community, known as the 'St Giles Blackbirds'.

Not all were poor, however. Archaeologists discovered an exceptional assemblage discarded during the filling of a cesspit within the area of Kirkman's Brewery. This included a rare group of dry-bodied stonewares and whitewares from the Staffordshire potteries, and a diverse range of pearlware and creamware forms: high-status material, perhaps collectively representing the rubbish dump of a fairly grand 18th-century residence.

Altogether, the crockery and bottles, the ointment pots and sanitary wares, the bone buttons and metal thimbles, the clay and glass marbles, the clay tobacco pipes, the baby's glass feeding-bottle, the ceramic fuddling cup, and the bone needle-holder found on the site during the excavations point to a more socially diverse population than the impression of an undifferentiated mass of the urban poor conveyed by many of the historical sources. Perhaps Dickens is the true guide, for his London poor are nothing if not colourful and variegated.

Overcrowding seems to have peaked in the first half of the 19th century, partly because new roads like New Oxford Street reduced the area of the



slum, displacing residents, many of whom were reluctant to leave the area and simply migrated into surviving parts of the warren. And still, in this period, drainage, sewage, water-supply, and rubbish-disposal remained largely unregulated and unreformed. The population became increasingly packed together in ever more festering squalor.

Jane Palm-Gold's research and art have not only re-energised study of the notorious St Giles Rookery. They have done two other things of great value. They have demonstrated the immense value of multi-disciplinary approaches to urban history. And they have enlightened us about social problems and moral panics in our own contemporary urban context. @

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The archaeological investigations were generously funded by Stanhope Plc, Legal & General and Mitsubishi Estates. Gordon Malcolm (project manager, MOLA), Sian Anthony (senior archaeologist, MOLA), Nigel Jeffries (ceramic specialist, MOLA) and Dr David Green, of King's College London, have been key players in the formulation of this project. Thanks are due to artist Jane Palm-Gold and Museum of London Archaeology staff Andy Chopping, Nicola Kalimeris, and Lucy Whittingham for help in the preparation of this article.

ABOVE High-quality glasswork found during the excavations.

FURTHER INFO

For more information on Museum of London Archaeology, see the website www.museumoflondonarchaeology.org.uk.

The Museum of London Archaeology monograph on the Central St Giles excavations is now available: *Medieval settlement to 18th-/19th-century rookery: excavations at Central St Giles, London Borough of Camden, 2006-8*, by Sian Anthony, MOLA Archaeology Studies Series 23, price £9, available via the MOLA website www.museumoflondonarchaeology.org.uk/Publications.