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*Urban Dying and Death c.1830-1860*

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The Southwark Way of Death:  
Urban Dying and Death, c.1830-1860

Molly Martha Conisbee

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements for award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts, School of Humanities, August 2019.

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## Abstract

Through a detailed study of Southwark in the early to mid-nineteenth century, this thesis examines how a heterogeneous, but predominantly labouring community coped with high levels of mortality. Whilst it is well-documented that high mortality levels in all social classes prompted several decisions about migration, marriage, size of families, and inheritance, there is little historiography on what individuals and families did on a day-to-day level to manage the practicalities of dying and death. Furthermore, to date histories of dying and death have tended to focus on the divergent experiences of the wealthy or the pauper classes, whilst neglecting the large and socially diverse communities in the middle.

The thesis' original contribution is to address these gaps by analysing the numerous strategies adopted by these diverse middle groups, referred to in the thesis as the labouring class. It demonstrates that they made active and managed choices in their approaches to the different stages of dying and death through planning, saving and spending habits, domestic arrangements, burial choices, and even the language used to describe death. The impact of rapid urbanisation as well as public health and other legislative changes also played a significant role in how actions to manage dying and death changed over this thirty-year period, and these influences are also examined.

Through an assessment of primary qualitative and quantitative sources, including vestry minutes, poor law guardian's reports, coroner's jury verdicts, resident correspondence and burial records the thesis demonstrates that histories of dying and death can be productively assessed in relation to local ecologies, and their specificities of economy, culture, demographics and social capital.

## Dedication and Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the University of Bristol for awarding me a Deas Scholarship in order to pursue this research. As a mature student returning to university mid-career it would not have been possible for me to undertake my studies without this financial support.

Research is collaborative, and my gratitude and thanks must also go to archivists and librarians, particularly at London Metropolitan Archives, Southwark Archives, the Wellcome Library and Archives, British Library, and the University of Bristol Library.

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Beyond academic support, my thanks go to my family and friends who have offered support, encouraged my interest in social history and tolerated endless discussions about dying and death. Special thanks must go to Peter, and Olive the rescue dog, who arrived in the middle of it all, to remind us that in the midst of death, we are in life.

## Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

Signed: Molly Conisbee

Date: 6 August 2019

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## Introduction

In a review of 'Our Buried Bones', a travelling exhibition of skeletons from various archaeological digs that went from Glasgow's Hunterian Art Gallery to Bristol and Leeds museums during 2016 and 2018, the *Guardian* highlighted the skeletal exhibit of a 'tiny teenager' who had been given a parish funeral in Southwark's Cross Bones cemetery in the early to mid-nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Her bones carried the signs of tertiary syphilis and rickets. The exhibition's curator described her as one of 'the abject poor' for whom the Cross Bones was supposedly reserved, which included the bodies of prostitutes, suicides and other social outcasts.<sup>2</sup> The teenager, who was removed from her grave to make way for the 1990s London Underground Jubilee Line extension, was displayed as a representative of the innumerable and nameless nineteenth-century urban dead, whose short, helpless, painful and disease-riddled lives and early deaths often ended with pauper interment.

Such historiographical tropes have come to dominate much analysis of dying, death and disposal for urbanising communities like Southwark, particularly during the most intensive years of growth in the early to mid-nineteenth century. These narratives, often drawing on contemporary literary or social campaigning sources such as Charles Dickens and civil servant Edwin Chadwick, emphasise the miserable nature of labouring life and death in the faceless and expanding sprawl of the city, where lives were often framed and defined by privation, precariousness and exploitation.<sup>3</sup> In these contexts, individuals were sometimes portrayed as

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<sup>1</sup> Maev Kennedy, 'Bad to the Bone: skeleton exhibition reveals dietary disease across social divide', *Guardian*, 19 August 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2016/aug/19/our-buried-bones-exhibition-skeletons-dietary-disease> [accessed 13 May 2019].

<sup>2</sup> Kennedy, 'Bad to the bone'.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the death from a probable opium overdose, coroner's inquest and miserable burial of Nemo ('nobody'), in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* [1852-53] is mentioned in chapters four and five of this thesis as exemplifying Dickens's view of the general indifference towards a London pauper's death, and has been much quoted in other historiographical accounts. James Stevens Curl's *The Victorian Celebration of Death* (Newton Abbott: David & Charles, 1972), used the description of Nemo's burial ground as a literal example of the state of eighteenth and nineteenth-century cemeteries, p. 40; more recently Thomas Laqueur lists several iconic deaths (many of them based in Southwark) in Dickens, including seven 'unheroic' deaths in *Bleak House*, Little Nell in chapter 71 of the *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Paul in chapter 16 of *Dombey and Son*, and Eugene's demise in *Our Mutual Friend* – Thomas Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 409.



overwhelmed by the historical forces of social and economic change, rendering them passive in response to their lives and deaths. However, this thesis challenges this premise, arguing that rapidly urbanising Southwark was, if census and business records are examined, socially, culturally and economically extremely diverse.

Although Southwark's residents were broadly defined by Chadwick and others as a 'labouring population', this term could cover a wide range of employment and economic circumstances. Chadwick's best-selling *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* and *Supplementary Report into the Practice of Interment in Towns*, detailed the residences, lifestyles and burial habits of the 'labouring population', but he never really defined who these communities were.<sup>4</sup> In his account it appears that such groups could cover everyone from skilled workers and artisans to the virtually destitute. Therefore, the description 'labouring class' is used with reference to Southwark's population and communities in this thesis for several reasons.<sup>5</sup> Throughout, the thesis engages critically with Chadwick's definitions, but it also recognises his difficulties in pinning down notions of social class, particularly in the relatively fluid context of urban environments such as Southwark. Even after the changes required by the 1836 Registration of Births, Marriages and Deaths Act, burial returns collected for national mortality statistics separated 'gentry', 'tradesmen' and 'paupers' but lumped all other social groups together.<sup>6</sup> Whilst the early to mid-nineteenth century was a key period in the formation of the 'working class', which the thesis implicitly acknowledges, the nature of Southwark's working environment, which ranged from specialist trades and workshops, to highly casual manual labour, manufactories and piecework in the home, means that the sense of collective working identity and shared endeavour for

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<sup>4</sup> Edwin Chadwick, *Report into the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (London: Clowes & Sons, 1842) and *Supplementary Report into the Practice of Interment in Towns* (London: Clowes & Sons, 1843).

<sup>5</sup> See also Raymond Williams, 'Class' in *Keywords* (London: Fontana, 1976), pp. 51-59. As the thesis is not primarily an exploration of the histories of 'class', it rather acknowledges these limitations on sources and works instead with Williams' notion of the complexities of defining groupings with the mid-nineteenth century emergence of, for example, salaried/waged labour, such as clerical and service jobs. See also, Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1840-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, pp. 256-266.

improving the conditions of labour is hard to define.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, as an area of high migration where individuals and groups were often transitory in their residency, it appears that local social organising around clubs, benefit societies and other groups often selected identifiers such as geographical origin as central to shared solidarities, as much as the experiences of trade or working life.<sup>8</sup> As discussed in greater detail in chapter one of this thesis, the social and economic environment of Southwark was very mixed, and there is not always enough detail about individuals and groups to define their precise circumstances. Housing, access to education, healthcare, and cultural and social activities were varied.<sup>9</sup> When the term 'labouring' class is used in the thesis it is therefore with an acknowledgement that this covered a diverse range of material conditions and experiences. In the present context, the focus is on how these circumstances impacted on the strategies and actions that were adopted to care for the sick, dying and dead. The study of daily life and death in Southwark demonstrates that a wide range of practical and organised responses were developed to manage high levels of mortality, ranging from financial planning for periods of sickness or death, the use of professional assistance for care, and deliberation about funerals and burial choices. The management of death was a very live matter for the residents of the Borough in the early to mid-nineteenth century.

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<sup>7</sup> The founding of the National Union of the Working Classes in 1830 is an early use of the collective term 'working class', and the group had links in Southwark as outlined in chapter one of the thesis. As E.P. Thompson underlined in *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963) the late eighteenth century to the 1830s was critical to the formation of working-class solidarities and societies, and this is reinforced by some of the activities of Southwark residents. Nonetheless, there are no references in Southwark primary sources that refer to a/the local 'working class.' Therefore, for the purposes of this discussion, the thesis follows the line adopted by Jon Lawrence, *Me, me, me: The search for community in post-war England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), in which he argues that rather than imposing his interpretations of class on the primary sources he draws upon, he prefers the sources to offer their own insights into the making, unmaking and remaking of class, solidarities and notions of community over time.

<sup>8</sup> This is discussed in greater detail in chapter two of the thesis, where an analysis of benefits societies and philanthropic activities suggests that many groups organised around family origin or other forms of identity.

<sup>9</sup> Although relating to a later period, Andrew Davies, *Leisure, gender and poverty: Working-class culture in Salford and Manchester 1900-1939* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992), and Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An oral history of working-class women 1890-1940* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984) offer nuanced insights into working-class lives and experience in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Even the ‘tiny teenager’ exhibited in ‘Our Buried Bones’, exemplar of the apparently most hopeless, destitute and abused, made decisions about her end of days. It is highly likely that she was nineteen-year old Elizabeth Mitchell, who checked herself into St Thomas’s Hospital on 5 August 1851 for treatment.<sup>10</sup> She died there ten days later ‘under the physician’s care’, and her burial was conducted with full rites by local radical vestryman and clergyman John Day.<sup>11</sup> Whilst Cross Bones was regularly used for parish burials, it was also a consecrated site and widely used by Southwark St Saviour residents as an economical option for privately-funded interments as well. The site’s subsequent construction by contemporary curators and activists as the last resting place of the marginalised, forgotten and outcast, whilst fitting well-meaning resistance narratives that give primacy to ‘histories from below’ is in many ways an over-simplification of the cemetery and Southwark community’s many identities.<sup>12</sup> The modern interpretation of the Cross Bones risks at the same time romanticising and reducing the complexities of the heterogeneous nature of the urban plot.

The thesis supports a shift away from viewing responses to dying and death in a place like Southwark as coherent or homogenous. Instead it considers how active responses to dying and death, and ‘right’ treatment of the dead was strongly located in class, gender, locale, feelings of social displacement, and the adoption of multiple, sometimes competing, roles and responsibilities. The ways in which the dying and dead were organised for and supported were therefore under constant negotiation. By analysing how different social groups managed the dying and dead, we can better understand the complexities of our shifting historical relationships to death, and the role the dying and dead have played in different geographical, temporal and social contexts.

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<sup>10</sup> This was revealed by an episode of ‘BBC History Cold Case – Crossbones Girl’, aired on the BBC on 17 August 2010.

<sup>11</sup> St Thomas’s Admissions, 1850-1851, 15 August 1851, LMA/H01/ST/B/04.

<sup>12</sup> See the campaign website <https://crossbones.org.uk/> which describes the cemetery as ‘the outcasts’ graveyard for the area formerly known as The Mint, one of London’s poorest and most violent slums. [...] By the time it closed in 1853 Crossbones held the mortal remains of an estimated 15,000 paupers’ [accessed 13 May 2019].

## Summary of arguments

The original contribution of this thesis is to address a gap in research about how the urban labouring class managed their dying and dead. It shows that individuals and communities were not simply passive victims of circumstance, but that they also made active and managed choices about their lives and deaths, even under highly circumscribed, and sometimes terrible, conditions. The death of family members, friends and colleagues was an experience that few residents of insanitary, overcrowded, labouring districts escaped, but there were a variety of ways in which these conditions were responded to and coped with. The study of Southwark reveals examples of cooperation, neighbourly financial and emotional support, as well as death's important contribution to local economies and employment opportunities. Individuals and families, if resources allowed, might join any one of hundreds of sickness and funeral benefit clubs, groups that offered affiliations and solidarities based on trades, politics, or social activities as well as saving plans for medical assistance and funerals. Southwark's sick and dying, and their families, could benefit from the expertise of two major teaching hospitals, several philanthropic infirmaries and dispensaries, and parish-funded doctors and surgeons, facilities that only a large and growing population could support.<sup>13</sup> After death, there were numerous choices about the style and religious format of interment. As only around 6 per cent of burials were paid for and organised by the parish, 94 per cent of Southwark funerals involved some planning, which might include fundraising, aesthetic decisions about grave goods, and location of burial.<sup>14</sup>

The focus on the management of mortality in Southwark makes this study a contribution to local and social histories, as well as histories of dying and death. Despite the geographical boundaries of the thesis, this period of intense population

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<sup>13</sup> Brian Abel-Smith, *a History of the Nursing Profession* (London: Heinemann, 1960) describes the roles of 'Paid nurses and pauper nurses', pp. 36-49, Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) references nursing in the home, see particularly 'Nurses, Consultants, and Terminal Prognoses', pp. 98-118, Julie-Marie Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), also describes care for the sick and dying in working-class homes, pp. 27-65.

<sup>14</sup> Roughly 6 per cent of Southwark burials were 'on the parish', meaning that 94 per cent were privately funded. Minutes for the Board of Guardians, St. George the Martyr, Southwark 1837 - LMA/SOBG-2 and LMA/SOBG-3.

growth and social change in Southwark offers a broad canvas from which to explore these issues. The demographic characteristics of the Borough, with its high levels of inward migration, reveal varied if often casual employment opportunities, impacting on occupational and social structures, patterns of housing, health and poor relief, all of which contributed to diverse urban ecologies and neighbourhoods.<sup>15</sup> Whilst the findings of one place are not claimed as a basis for universal insights, the thesis can also be viewed as a case study of the dynamics between individuals, groups and their dying and dead at a time of rapid social and economic change. How the dying and dead were managed in this context reveals some of the processes by which the intensity of urbanisation was negotiated and disputed. Furthermore, it demonstrates ways in which legislative and other 'top down' influences, such as medical or public health interventions, could be understood and interpreted in quite local ways.

These specificities matter because, as the thesis argues, they expose the complexities and heterogeneities of supposedly ordinary lives and deaths, lives whose intricacies are so often elided from view, even by well-motivated contemporary campaigners fighting for the preservation of sites like the Cross Bones cemetery. The purpose here is not so much to enter the fray of historiographical and theoretical positions on notions of the 'everyday', and its contributions to social histories, as that has been richly debated elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> Rather it is to contribute to a growing body of work that exposes the diversity and

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<sup>15</sup> These particularities of Southwark are explored in much greater depth in chapter one of this thesis. Throughout the thesis the terms Southwark and Borough are used interchangeably. The area known as the Borough technically refers to the central area of Southwark, around the High Street and market, and was applied from the early medieval period to distinguish it as separate from the City of London. The principle parishes of Christ Church, St George the Martyr, St Saviour and St Olave, all formed parts of the Borough, and contemporaries often used the term 'Borough' interchangeably with specific parishes. A.D. Mills, *A Dictionary of London Place Names*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> There are several theoretical approaches to 'everyday history', ranging from the French post-war scholarship of Fernand Braudel, to the British History Workshop model which emerged in the 1960s, and developed several studies based on local, women's and working people's histories, many of which are referenced in this thesis. A fuller discussion of these is in the Appendix.

complexities of dying and death during different historical periods based on the particularity of social, economic, geographical and cultural contexts.<sup>17</sup>

Although the thesis does draw on statistical analyses, it also contends that numerical data and human experiences can run counter to each other. Southwark residents, men, women and children experienced dying and death, their own as well as those of loved ones, in a myriad of complex and individual ways. No attempt is made to explore issues such as fear of death, grief, or religious and emotional approaches to the end of life. These issues are worthy of full investigation in a separate thesis altogether, given the growth in secondary sources on the history of the emotions over the last decade or so.<sup>18</sup> Rather, the focus here is on what individuals and communities did, how they developed social structures, networks, and participated in acts of cooperation and dispute. In analysing their actions, or indeed passivity, in the face of high mortality levels, residents communicated something about their relationship to their experiences of life and its ends. It was their highly variegated, Southwark way of death.

### Historiographical contexts

Perhaps the universality and inevitability of death lends itself to the ambitions of broad, thematic approaches to the subject. Death scholarship often takes a wide, encompassing approach across geographical, cultural and temporal trajectories, or bases its analyses on large sets of long-range statistical, demographic and epidemiological data.<sup>19</sup> Studies that adopt a social approach tend to bifurcate

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<sup>17</sup> For example, Julie Rugg *Churchyard and Cemetery: Tradition and Modernity in Rural North Yorkshire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), Julie-Marie Strange *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty*. See also Rob Boddice, *The History of Emotions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), Barbara Rosenwein and Ricardo Cristiani, *What is the History of Emotions?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), William M. Reddy, 'Historical Research on the Self and Emotions', *Emotion Review* 1, 4 (2009), 302-315.

<sup>19</sup> For example, Philippe Ariès's *The Hour of Our Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), presents a 1000-year sweep of predominantly French death history. Curl's *The Victorian Celebration of Death* concentrates on the development of the cemetery as exemplifying the nineteenth century obsession and class-stratification of death, Jonathan Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture* (London: Allen Lane, 1988) analyses the literary and cultural experience of dying and death. Geoffrey Gorer's *Death, Grief and Mourning* (London: Cresset Press, 1965) was an early, and important contribution to the psychology of loss, but as a highly individual experience and without the historical long view. Ralph Houlbrooke's *Death, Ritual and Bereavement* (London: Routledge,

between monographs based on the experiences of the wealthy, middle class and well-connected, or those who were marginalised by the state or authorities and buried as paupers.<sup>20</sup> There is relatively little research on what might be best described as the 'ordinary deaths' of those described in the nineteenth century as the labouring classes, exploring the histories of, for example how these individuals, families and communities organised the practicalities involved in coping with death, and how local material or social conditions shaped their behaviours and actions.<sup>21</sup> It is therefore these latter issues which this thesis addresses.

Although published over thirty years ago, Philippe Ariès's immense and ambitious *The Hour of Our Death* remains much-referenced by subsequent historiography.<sup>22</sup> Ariès began researching his book in the early 1960s, the decade in which, according to fellow French historian Michel Vovelle, the study of death was 'rediscovered'.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the work of Ariès is inseparable from the context of the 1960s and 1970s, when academic debate about death was increasingly framed by issues such as the growing role of medical intervention in dying and death, the changing ways in which people were dying, such as automobile accidents or diseases associated with greater longevity and changing physical environments, and an increasing awareness of

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1989) and *Death, Religion and the Family in England 1480-1750* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) and Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* base their studies on the experiences of the middle class and wealthy. Peter C. Jupp and Glennys Howarth (eds) offer a useful survey in *The Changing Face of Death: Historical Accounts of Death and Disposal* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), as does Allan Kellehear's *A Social History of Dying* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Thomas Laqueur's *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014) adopts a cultural studies approach, rather than linear historical narrative. See also Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty*, for working-class experiences, and attitudes towards 'everyday' dying and death have come from archaeological and material research, such as Sarah Tarlow's *Bereavement and Commemoration: An Archaeology of Mortality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) and Mike Parker Pearson's *The Archaeology of Death* (Stroud: The History Press, 2009), which analyse objects found in grave sites as indicative of changing rituals and attitudes towards dying and death.

<sup>20</sup> See for example, Julian Litten, *The English Way of Death: The Common Funeral Since 1450* (London: Robert Hale, 1991), which despite its title is largely focused on the burial practices of the well-to-do, Houlbrooke's *Death, Ritual and Bereavement* and *Death, Religion and the Family in England 1480-1750*, Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*. Ruth Richardson explores pauper interment extensively in *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (London: Routledge, 1987), see also Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty*. Thomas Laqueur argues that the politics of pauper burial relates to the development of capitalism and consumer culture, in 'Bodies, Death and Pauper Funerals', *Representations*, 1 (1983), 109-131.

<sup>21</sup> Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty*, Julie Rugg, *Churchyard and Cemetery*, and Tarlow, *Bereavement and Commemoration*.

<sup>22</sup> Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*.

<sup>23</sup> Michel Vovelle, 'Rediscovery of Death Since 1960', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 447 (1980), 89-99.

social and economic disparities in life expectancy between countries and classes.<sup>24</sup> In the US, death scholarship of this period often focused on psychoanalytic investigations, formulated around notions that contemporary society encouraged the repression and/or denial of mortality.<sup>25</sup> Ariès predominantly bases his assumptions about 1000 years of dying and death from a Eurocentric perspective, although even this broad frame elides important geographical, social and religious differences. Moreover, his focus on funerary monuments and architecture invariably limits most of his reference points to the wealthy, who were more likely to leave such expensive structures behind. More recent overview accounts such as Alan Kellehear's *A Social History of Dying*, W.M. Spellman's *A Brief History of Death* and Thomas Laqueur's *The Work of the Dead*, have, in distinctive ways, argued for broader platforms for our understanding of the contexts of dying and death, in order to restore a greater sense of social and cultural balance to their analyses.

In the context of British historiography, the 1960s and 1970s were also significant for research into dying and death, but from a different perspective to that of French and US scholarship. Post-war urban reconstruction and gentrification revived an interest in preserving eighteenth and nineteenth-century architecture and objects, and this included cemeteries, grave goods and other items of mourning. Such studies were often authored by architectural experts and museum curators, rather than historians.<sup>26</sup> James Stevens Curl's *The Victorian Celebration of Death* was both social history and an appeal to preserve decaying cemeteries and graveyards for their historical and architectural merit.<sup>27</sup> The Friends of Highgate Cemetery was founded in 1975 for precisely these reasons. Curator John Morley's 1972 *Death, Heaven and the Victorians* primarily focused on physical objects to underline his narrative about

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<sup>24</sup> Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, Grief and Mourning*, also for example, Ivan Illich, *Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health* (New York: Pantheon, 1976), Michael Harrington, *The Other America* (London: Macmillan, 1962).

<sup>25</sup> Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973). Becker posthumously won the Pulitzer Prize for his book, in which he argued that human civilization is a defence mechanism against the reality of mortality.

<sup>26</sup> James Stevens Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death*, John Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians* (London: Studio Vista, 1971).

<sup>27</sup> The Friends of Highgate Cemetery was founded in 1975, and similar groups for Kensal Green and Tower Hamlets in the 1980s. <https://highgatecemetery.org/about/history>



a nineteenth century obsession with death as a form of mass-culture consumerism.<sup>28</sup>

The focus on the material cultures of death has continued to be influential, and recent studies by archaeologist Sarah Tarlow and literary critic Deborah Lutz have also focused on the objects of nineteenth-century burial and bereavement respectively.<sup>29</sup> Lutz argues that the retention of keepsakes, such as hair and teeth in jewellery, portraits and ornaments, served a reliquary function for individuals and families who, given high mortality rates, were deeply intimate with death.<sup>30</sup> Tarlow, who focuses on a broader social demographic than Lutz's literary middle classes, argues that daily items placed as grave goods in Victorian burials, such as children's toys, or a favourite plate or cup, are also suggestive of a kind of domesticity of death.<sup>31</sup> Although such studies can run the risk of objectifying interpretations of attitudes towards dying and death in rather generalised and class-bound ways, the paraphernalia and ritual of funerals and mourning has remained central to British studies of the histories of dying and death.

Those histories of dying and death that have concerned themselves with the social and cultural aspects of mortality have, at least in the UK context, tended to focus on two extreme ends of the economic spectrum, the wealthiest or the poorest sections of society.<sup>32</sup> Intentionally or not, these groups have been most likely to bequeath the most extensive documentation about their deaths for historians to draw on. David Cannadine defined a 'much-biographed elite' whose wills, diaries, correspondence and other testaments, help to reveal their attitudes towards sickness and death, as represented through deathbed scenes, religious beliefs and funerary arrangements.<sup>33</sup> Several book-length studies focus on these experiences, including

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<sup>28</sup> Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians*.

<sup>29</sup> Deborah Lutz, *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), Tarlow, *Bereavement and Commemoration*.

<sup>30</sup> Lutz, *Relics of Death*.

<sup>31</sup> Tarlow, *Bereavement and Commemoration*.

<sup>32</sup> Litten, *The English Way of Death*, Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, Houlbrooke, *Death, Ritual and Bereavement and Death, Religion and the Family in England 1450-1750*, Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*, Strange, *Death, Grief and Mourning*.

<sup>33</sup> David Cannadine, 'War and Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain', in *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death*, ed. By Joachim Whaley (London: Europa, 1981), pp. 187-242 (p. 241).

Pat Jalland's *Death in the Victorian Family*, Ralph Houlbrooke's *Death, Religion and the Family in England 1450-1750*, and Julian Litten's *The Common Funeral Since 1450*, which despite its title is largely focused on the deaths of the aristocracy and well-to-do.<sup>34</sup>

At the other end of the economic spectrum, albeit through the mediation of poor law records and parish doctor's and guardians' case notes, there is also extensive historical documentation detailing pauper death and burial.<sup>35</sup> Surviving local sources often provide records such as the costs and running of workhouse infirmaries, as well as arrangements made for parish interments, down to details of coffin design and suppliers, undertaker's fees, and rates for local clergy. The bureaucracy associated with the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, means that transcripts of poor law guardian interviews and petitions can record in quite some detail the experiences and circumstances of individuals and their families, when requesting assistance.<sup>36</sup> For Thomas Laqueur such accounts underlined a growing attitude about the 'bureaucratic worthlessness' of the pauper classes, encapsulating 'the stage for the great nineteenth-century conversation about the new commercial and industrial order, about what would become of society [...] in the age of the cash nexus.'<sup>37</sup> The study of nineteenth-century pauper deaths and funerals continues to reverberate with political significance for historians, such as Ruth Richardson in her much-referenced *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, and Elisabeth Hurren in her research on the symbolic forms and functions of pauper funeral in the nineteenth century.<sup>38</sup> However, studies of local interactions between paupers, guardians and the rate-paying community suggest a greater diversity of experiences than such accounts sometimes allow. Petitions to poor law guardians sometimes reveal that individuals and families were capable of being quite assertive and articulate about

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<sup>34</sup> Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, Houlbrooke, *Death, Ritual and Bereavement*, Litten, *The English Way of Death*.

<sup>35</sup> Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, Laqueur, 'Bodies, Death and Pauper Funerals', also Elizabeth T. Hurren, and Steve King, 'Begging for a Burial: Form, Function and Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Burial', *Social History*, 30 (2005), 321-341.

<sup>36</sup> Lynn Hollis Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People 1700-1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>37</sup> Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*, p. 316.

<sup>38</sup> Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, Hurren and King, 'Begging for a Funeral'.

their requirements, complaining when they were not met.<sup>39</sup> The precarious nature of casual work, or the financial pressures of sickness or widowhood or old age were, at least in the context of Southwark, often sympathetically handled by local guardians, and recognised as situations that could easily push an individual or family into need. Some guardians, such as Southwark radicals John Day and Charles Anderson, used their position to actively campaign against the poor laws.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, Douglas Brown argues that in certain urban contexts, there was a well-established and embedded relationship between local tradespeople, producers and workhouse inmates, leading to a relatively empathetic and non-punitive environment towards paupers.<sup>41</sup>

These examples expose some of the limitations in taking too broad an approach towards death histories, and this thesis argues that local studies can reveal other dimensions to managing the urban dying and dead. In *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain 1870-1914*, Julie-Marie Strange argues for the importance of assessing different cultures of bereavement and their inextricable relationship to economic and social conditions.<sup>42</sup> Strange focuses on grief and mourning, contending that a fixation on the details of funeral arrangements, pauper or private, has distorted our understanding of the variegated nature of responses to death, particularly in the context of working and poorer communities who may have left few or no written records about their experiences. The historiographical elision of the commercial and emotional aspects of interment has inadvertently stripped away more nuanced, human narratives of loss, particularly in histories of working-class communities.<sup>43</sup> The thesis builds on Strange's argument for developing other social and historical categorisations beyond burial, pauper or otherwise, to assess actions in response to dying and death in the nineteenth century. Even in a predominantly labouring area

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<sup>39</sup> Hollis Lees, *Solidarities of Strangers*.

<sup>40</sup> John Day and Charles Anderson who both served variously as vestrymen and poor law guardians appear regularly in meeting minutes complaining about the poor laws both in principle and execution. Minutes for the Board of Guardians, St. George the Martyr, LMA/SOBG-2 and LMA/SOBG-3.

<sup>41</sup> Douglas Brown, 'Supplying London's Workhouses in the Mid-Nineteenth Century', *The London Journal*, 41 (2016), 36-59.

<sup>42</sup> Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty*.

<sup>43</sup> The phrase 'working class' is used here as Strange writes about the later nineteenth century, by which point this term was more commonly used than 'labouring class.' See footnote 4.

like Southwark, most deaths did not take place in the workhouse, and most funerals were not paid for by the parish but funded by individuals and families. Whilst statistics on this issue are variable and not comprehensive, in any given year from 1830 to 1860, only around 6 per cent of interments in the Borough were paid for through the rates.<sup>44</sup> This means that roughly 94 per cent of interments were planned and funded by individuals, families and communities. Yet the preparation for and execution of these often modest but nonetheless private events, remain under-researched in much death historiography about the nineteenth century, a gap that this thesis will address.

### Southwark, urbanisation and mortality c.1830-1860

Popular perceptions of living and dying in nineteenth century Southwark, and other labouring London communities, owe much to Charles Dickens. An ardent critic of the dire conditions produced by unchecked urban growth, Dickens often used the lives and deaths of his characters in his fiction and journalism not just as plot devices, but as a commentary on the atomisation, passivity, deprivation, and despair that the city embodied for many of its inhabitants. Describing, for example the demise of a 'dropped child' and the deaths of several old men in his essay *A Walk in the Workhouse*, he portrayed their ends of life as anonymous and unceremonious, to the extent that the names of the dead were swiftly confused or forgotten.<sup>45</sup> So associated was Dickens with death scenes that music magazine *The Orchestra* published a gently mocking column called 'Dickens on Death', noting that 'allusions to death [...] must be familiar to all readers of his'.<sup>46</sup> Such representations have been influential on historiography about the period, John Morley noting that Dickens's 'works are a major source for almost all aspects' of nineteenth century life and death, particularly of the poor and pauper classes.<sup>47</sup> James Stevens Curl used the description of a Southwark cemetery in *Bleak House* as a literal account of nineteenth-century burial sites, observing that 'it could have fitted many

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<sup>44</sup> Minutes for the Board of Guardians, St. George the Martyr, various – LMA/SOBG-2 and LMA/SOBG-3.

<sup>45</sup> Charles Dickens, 'A Walk in the Workhouse', *Household Words*, 29 July 1870.

<sup>46</sup> *The Orchestra*, 29 July 1870, p. 295.

<sup>47</sup> Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians*, p. 11.

churchyards of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>48</sup> Historiographies focused on Victorian dying and death have also drawn on Dickens's descriptions of everything from the inadequacies of hired nurses, to the corruption of undertakers and the funeral industry, the indifference of the clergy, and even theological constructions of the nineteenth century afterlife.<sup>49</sup> Leaving aside the issues that arise in using fiction as a basis for historical analysis, this thesis argues that there are other important aspects of life and death in a nineteenth-century labouring district like Southwark that add nuance or might even directly contradict Dickensian tropes of poverty, criminality, and despair. Histories of dying and death can be circumscribed by a preoccupation with appalling conditions that do not always stand up to scrutiny, as demonstrated by the case of Southwark. Whilst terrible circumstances were undeniably endured by many, such singular analysis fails to account for other aspects of life and death in heterogeneous and fluid urban environments, and the range of experiences and responses prompted by these.

Dickens was one of several writers to suggest that urbanisation had the potential to cause early death and that this reality shaped and controlled aspects of the lives and experiences of individuals and communities.<sup>50</sup> From the late 1830s William Farr's development of a statistical basis for assessing mortality as part of his role at the General Registrar Office (GRO), armed public health and sanitary reform analyses and campaign groups with the numbers to prove that urbanisation created the conditions of poverty, disease and early death. Several reports into the lives and deaths of the urban labouring classes had emerged by the mid-nineteenth century, often based on these new statistical frameworks, which allowed first-hand observation to be supplemented with numerical analysis.<sup>51</sup> This approach was taken

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<sup>48</sup> Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death*, p. 40.

<sup>49</sup> Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, Michael Wheeler, *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>50</sup> Novels such as Mrs. Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855), Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849), Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (1850), Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* (1852) and *Hard Times* (1854).

<sup>51</sup> Texts such as John Duncombe's *A Peep into the Holy Land* (1835), or James Grant's *Sketches in London* (1838) use death to draw attention to social disparities in life and death, Grant in particular was a campaigner against the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Racy accounts of poverty living suffused Watts Phillips's *The Wild Tribes of London* or G. A. Sala's *Gaslight and Daylight* (1859). George Godwin, who was also editor of *The Builder*, made links between physical and moral urban topographies in *Town Swamps and Social Bridges* (1861), and Thomas Archer and Thomas Beames

in Edwin Chadwick's *The Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population*, published in 1842, which was quickly followed by his *Supplementary Report into the Practice of Interment in Towns* in 1843, which are assessed in chapter three of this thesis.

Chadwick's reports were widely read by his contemporaries and tapped into social ambivalences about urban growth in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Economic and population growth were not necessarily constructed as either inevitable or desirable in the first half of the nineteenth century. Boyd Hilton reports that 'only after 1850 [did] the concept of economic growth [come] to be seen as a[n] "unequivocally positive" thing'.<sup>52</sup> Asa Briggs described the 'horror and fascination' that urban growth inspired in contemporary observers, it created 'a system of life constructed on a wholly new principle.'<sup>53</sup> London was described as 'the Great Wen',<sup>54</sup> a 'polypus'; a 'vast irregular growth...perhaps likest to the spreading of a coral reef' and an octopus.<sup>55</sup> This deployment of shapeless, creaturely, parasitic, threatening and bodily metaphors was sometimes extended to the growing populace of urban centres, who had been degraded by their ghastly and insanitary circumstances. Indeed, fears that urban life was causing a degeneration in human biological development would ferment into a full political inquiry by the late nineteenth century.<sup>56</sup>

That early to mid-nineteenth century urban infrastructure signally failed to keep pace with the numbers of people migrating to towns and cities is undisputed. This created enormous stresses on housing, water supplies, drains, and burial sites. Any

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described concerns about social disorder in their respective *The Pauper, the Thief and the Convict* (1865) and *The Rookeries of London* (1850).

<sup>52</sup> Boyd Hilton, *A mad, bad, dangerous people? England 1783-1846* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006), p. 123. Gareth Stedman Jones, in *Outcast London: A Study of the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) situates this change slightly later, in the 1860s, due to the influence of Utilitarian thinking. Chadwick was a pupil and friend of Jeremy Bentham and was influenced by his ideas, see Samuel Finer, *The Life and Times of Sir Edwin Chadwick* [1952] (London: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>53</sup> Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 12.

<sup>54</sup> William Cobbett habitually referred to London as the 'Great Wen' or sometimes simply 'Wen' - 'Came from the Wen through Croydon. It rained nearly all the way.' *Rural Rides* [1822-26] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001), p. 73.

<sup>55</sup> Patrick Geddes, quoted Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, p. 12.

<sup>56</sup> See for example Bénédict Morel's *Treatise on the Degeneration of the Human Species* (1857), Ray Lankester, *Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism* (1880), Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (1892), H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (1895) or *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896).

economic opportunities presented by the move of individuals and families to an urban context were countered by increasingly difficult living and dying conditions. Physical hardships are evidenced in Southwark through analyses of several Southwark Cross Bones skeletons by the Museum of London in the early 1990s, which revealed a high incidence of diseases related to malnutrition and privation, including rickets, caries and osteo-arthritic problems.<sup>57</sup> Such tangible evidence of the toughness of working life in the early to mid-nineteenth century is an important anchor in any assessment of the circumstances in which Southwark communities lived and died, and familiar terrain in studies of the social and material conditions of the period.

The collateral cost of growth for urban communities is described by Simon Szreter in terms of the 'four Ds': disruption, deprivation, disease and death.<sup>58</sup> These are determined through the profound cultural, emotional and practical adjustments imposed by a rapidly changing physical and geographical environment. Furthermore, increasing competition for resources between groups within these expanding communities could amount to a set of destabilizing and health-threatening circumstances, including high mortality rates.<sup>59</sup> This puts the development of urban areas at the heart of an important and much-contested debate about the standard of living, and to what extent life improved or worsened for communities because of the changes wrought by the economic and social shifts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A detailed analysis of this question is beyond the present scope.<sup>60</sup> However, there is an important role to be played by the dying and dead in assessing this issue, as mortality statistics are to some extent an

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<sup>57</sup> Megan Brickley, Adrian Miles and Hilary Stainer, *The Cross Bones Burial Ground, Redcross Way, Southwark, London: Archaeological Excavations (1991-1998) for the London Underground Limited Jubilee Line Extension Project* (London: MoLAS, 1999).

<sup>58</sup> Simon Szreter, 'Economic Growth, Disruption, Deprivation, Disease and Death: On the Importance of the Politics of Public Health for Development', *Population and Development Review*, 23, (1997), 693-728 (p. 694).

<sup>59</sup> Szreter, 'Economic Growth, Disruption, Deprivation, Disease and Death', p. 694.

<sup>60</sup> There is a prodigious literature on this topic, and whether the standard of living improved for people during the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries remains highly contested. A great number of nineteenth-century analysts contributed to the debate, including Dickens, Thomas Carlyle, Benjamin Disraeli, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and an assessment of their views is beyond the present scope. A good overview of the debate is Emma Griffin, 'Winners and Losers: Living through the Industrial Revolution', *A Short History of the Industrial Revolution* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), pp. 143-160.

indicator of standards of living. Nonetheless, mortality data before the mid-nineteenth century remains fragmentary in places.<sup>61</sup> Geographer and demographer Robert Woods' conjectural estimates argue for a very gradual increase in life expectancy between 1811 and 1911, but with very little change between the 1820s and 1870s.<sup>62</sup> Szreter and Graham Mooney contend that this model is too overarching, and that as life expectancy was geographically nuanced, a simple conflation of urbanisation and high mortality is inadequate.<sup>63</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly different urban contexts demonstrate that affluent residents in wealthier areas enjoyed longer life spans than poorer residents in deprived places. A disaggregation of available statistics from the 1850s onwards does suggest little marked improvement in life expectancy before the 1870s, even if data prior to the 1850s is based largely on 'plausible estimates.'<sup>64</sup> The case of Southwark illustrates value in the analyses of Woods, and Szreter and Mooney. Death rates varied considerably from parish to parish, but statistics also show that the average age at death hardly changed during the 1830s to 1860s and child mortality rates remained stubbornly high, at a little over 50 per cent, throughout the period.<sup>65</sup>

These statistical assessments of urban mortality reveal relatively little about how communities coped with their circumstances during this period of unprecedented expansion. James Vernon has argued that population growth and the mass migrations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had tectonic effects.<sup>66</sup> Mobile populations created societies of 'distant strangers', who had to renegotiate all kinds of social and practical structures to cope with the new heterogeneities of their

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<sup>61</sup> Simon Szreter and Graham Mooney analyse this debate in 'Urbanisation, mortality and the standard of living debate: New estimates of the expectations of life at birth in nineteenth century British cities', *Economic History Review*, LI (1998), 84-112.

<sup>62</sup> Robert Woods, 'The effects of population redistribution on the level of mortality in nineteenth century England and Wales' in *British Population History: From the Black Death to the Present Day*, ed. Michael Anderson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 281-358.

<sup>63</sup> Mortality data in E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The Population History of England: A Reconstruction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) explains some of the challenges in use of parish data in determining population, especially before robust census data, which is why they caveat their text 'a reconstruction'. Mortality was higher in city populations, as public health problems were generally more pronounced. P. 475.

<sup>64</sup> Szreter and Mooney, 'Urbanisation, mortality and the standard of living debate', p. 92, Wrigley and Schofield, *The Population History of England*.

<sup>65</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, pp. 256-266.

<sup>66</sup> James Vernon, *Distant Strangers: How Britain Became Modern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).



neighbourhoods.<sup>67</sup> The old ties and financial, business and cultural systems of the parish were fragmented by population movement, or further loosened by insufficient resources for growing numbers of people. Crowded living conditions, increasing numbers of women working outside the home, and individuals dying far from their places of birth, all required the development of new kinds of solidarities. Alternative networks, structures, bureaucracies, and organisations had to be constructed both formally and informally.

Vernon's thesis rests on the transience of communities, but this experience clearly did not apply to all urban populations. Indeed, a recurrent tension in Southwark was often between settled residents of the Borough and newcomers, or those merely passing through, a central theme of chapter five of this thesis. How Southwark communities organised, cooperated or disputed, can reveal several aspects to the processes of urbanisation, not just based on mobility or states of transition. Vernon's categorisation of 'distant strangers' might in this context be sometimes nuanced as 'distant relatives' as a useful construct for understanding how different solidarities were formed or fragmented and helped to foster institutions and arrangements to manage local life, politics and institutions. The thesis argues that Southwark communities also demonstrated these kinds of relationships of intimacy and distance in their management of high mortality levels.

In this latter regard, for a thesis exploring how an urban population coped with high mortality rates, the timeframe c.1830 to 1860 has been identified for several reasons. For Southwark these were the most intensive decades of migration-induced population increase, leading to great pressure on housing, local infrastructure and, of significance for this study, burial space. The rapid urbanisation of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries meant that for large numbers of people moving to the Borough conditions were dire, and expedited disease and early death due to overcrowding, filthy water and drains, and inadequate facilities and infrastructure. The social improvements associated with urban growth, such as better housing and sewerage, would not begin for Southwark

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<sup>67</sup> Vernon, *Distant Strangers*.

until the last quarter of the century, by which point the rate of population growth had slowed considerably after its peak year of 1860.

Furthermore, the 1830s opened with Southwark experiencing a severe outbreak of cholera, a disease which for various reasons framed much debate about dying and death during the first half of the nineteenth century. The disease's much-anticipated arrival in Great Britain was presaged by reports of very high death tolls and riots on the continent, where outbreaks in Sweden, Russia and Austria in the 1830s had resulted in violent protests aimed at the authorities.<sup>68</sup> Already experiencing a period of domestic instability, with charged debates about political reform, cholera's ability to kill its victims in a few undignified hours, and its seemingly arbitrary patterns of infection and choice of victim, led some contemporaries to make analogies with the social upheavals caused by the plague.<sup>69</sup> Whilst it is impossible to assess the extent to which the communities of Southwark feared either insurrection or annihilation, a signifier of cholera's ongoing cultural grip is suggested by its recurring mention throughout the early to mid-nineteenth century, in vestry minutes, articles, local bills and posters, and surviving correspondence from residents and parish medical professionals. It was also one of the few recurring diseases that, at least in Southwark, appears to have merited a coroner's inquest. Indeed, no other disease was so frequently cited for its potentially devastating qualities, even though there were many more prolific killers, such as typhus and tuberculosis.<sup>70</sup> The regularity of its recurrence in the Borough was, the thesis argues, a significant factor in shaping attitudes towards the dying and dead, especially throughout its years of most intense outbreaks, in 1831-32, 1846-49 and 1854-56.

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<sup>68</sup> Dr David Barry and Dr William Russell, *Papers relative to the disease called Cholera Spasmodica in India, now Prevailing in the North of Europe* (London: Winchester & Varnum, 1831), Wellcome Collection.

<sup>69</sup> See for example, Michael Durey, *The Return of the Plague: British Society and the Cholera 1831-32* (Dublin: Gill & MacMillan Humanities Press, 1979), Pamela K. Gilbert, *Cholera and Nation: Doctoring the Social Body in England* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), Norman Longmate, *King Cholera: The Biography of a Disease* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1966), R.J. Morris, *Cholera 1832: The Social Response to an Epidemic* (London: Croon Helm, 1976).

<sup>70</sup> Typhoid, typhus, influenza, tuberculosis, whooping cough, dysentery and other conditions killed far more people than cholera in the nineteenth century. Statistics suggest that 'in London, about one third (of deaths) were due to tuberculosis...a malady with...horrific symptoms.' Boyd Hilton, *A mad, bad, dangerous people?* P. 574.

Cholera both directly and indirectly influenced several legislative changes between 1830 and 1860, impacting on the treatment of the dying and dead, and the ability of their friends and family to care for and dispose of them. Legislative changes included the 1848 Public Health Act, to improve the cleanliness and sanitation of towns and cities, including stronger central powers to get rid of 'nuisances', a category into which some of the dead were inserted. There were new requirements for civil registration and certification, which acknowledged some of the complexities of urban living arrangements by placing legal responsibilities on tenants, and not just family members, to report on any births and deaths in their domestic quarters.<sup>71</sup> The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 had already severely restricted the choices available for parish-funded funerals, and during the 1850s, several Acts were passed to stop urban areas like Southwark from allowing intramural burials.<sup>72</sup> The resultant gradual removal of dying and death from being a domestically-managed matter, to the increasing role of professional services like doctors, infirmaries and undertakers were transitions which were not always seamless or universal. The early to mid-nineteenth century exposes the highly uneven nature of these aspects of social and cultural change. Nonetheless, by the early 1860s, burial had virtually ceased in the Borough, and former graveyards been leased as timber yards and workshops or used for the drying of washing and the keeping of animals.<sup>73</sup> Urban growth could result in such rapid spatial transitions, including the practical use of any unclaimed land for the purposes of the living as well as the dead.

As the different sources on which this thesis rests demonstrates, the analysis draws on, and contributes to, histories of dying and death, as well as urban, local and social studies. For this reason, it is impossible to review all relevant literature or to demonstrate the full potential contribution of the research. The primary argument

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<sup>71</sup> *A Bill for Registering Births, Marriages and Deaths in England, 1836*, Parliament of the United Kingdom, 17 February 1836.

<sup>72</sup> Of significance to this study, there were further Burial Acts in 1850, 1852, 1853, 1854, 1855, 1857, 1859 and 1860, and later Acts in 1862, 1871, 1880, 1881 and 1885. These included the 1850 'Act to Make Better Provision for the Interment of the Dead in and Around the Metropolis', and in 1852 'An Act to amend the Laws concerning the Burial of the Dead in the Metropolis', in 1853 'An Act to amend the Laws concerning the Burial of the Dead in England beyond the Limits of the Metropolis and the amend the Act concerning the Burial of the Dead in the Metropolis', in 1855 'An Act further concerning the Burial of the Dead in England' and in 1857 'An Act to amend the Burial Acts.'

<sup>73</sup> Ron Woollacott, *Southwark's Burying Places Past and Present* (Ron Woollacott, 2001).

about the active ways in which individuals and groups managed the dying and dead in the rapidly urbanising context of Southwark, supports a growing acknowledgement of the role of local studies in deepening our knowledge of the many cultures of nineteenth century death, and how these cultures are materially, socially and geographically located.<sup>74</sup> In terms of more specific topics, the thesis touches upon histories of wide-ranging but related subjects, such the interactions of communities with public health, histories of labouring-class self-help movements, and the ever-fraught balance between local and central governance.

### Primary sources

The study draws upon a range of primary sources in order to examine how the rapidly urbanising community of Southwark managed high levels of mortality during the early to mid-nineteenth century. The most extensively used sources are census and mortality data, vestry and poor law guardian's minutes, jury verdicts from coroners' inquests, and social and campaigning literature. These will be considered in turn, in order to assess their use and limitations. The lack of labouring people's voices, the subjects of this study, is a significant silence. Primary accounts from Southwark residents about how they organised and managed high levels of dying and death in their families and communities are hitherto undiscovered. As noted in the previous section, contemporary analyses of social, economic and public health issues were generally authored by the wealthy, or politicians, bureaucrats, journalists and writers. These might take the form of Parliamentary investigations, social or campaigning literature, or newspaper articles in which working people were generally constructed as objects of study or entertainment, rather than as individuals to be represented in their own right. The thesis must therefore sometimes draw on other kinds of empirical material, the collation of which represents a contribution towards an understanding of dying and death in an urbanising environment. As the thesis focuses on what individuals and groups did to manage dying and death, so indications of their activities have been identified in order to explore their responses. This includes, for example, the fragmentary

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<sup>74</sup> Rugg, Julie, 'Constructing the Grave: Competing Burial Ideals in Nineteenth Century England', *Social History*, 38 (2013), 328-345.

surviving records of benefit and burial clubs, of which there were several in the Borough, the business data of funeral firms, which had a significant economic footprint in Southwark, and jury verdicts.

In order to assess the broad social and economic context of life and death in the Borough, the thesis analyses local census and employment data, although these sources also bring their limitations. Census data relied on honesty, literacy, legibility, and effective enumeration. The census only offers a snapshot of the moment in which it was completed, which also curtails its value when analysing highly mobile and transient communities like Southwark's. In addition, the questions that the census sought answers to reflect the social and cultural interests of central government officialdom in the mid-nineteenth century. The addition of categories about employment in 1841, and marital status, the interrelationship between household members and place of birth in 1851, underline a growing interest or concern about domestic arrangements, and particularly women's status, which the marital question made particularly visible.<sup>75</sup> Notwithstanding these important caveats, census and employment data reveal that Southwark communities were diverse, some undoubtedly coping with dreadful privation, but others thriving with the opportunities that improving mobility and a proximity to London offered. As with many urban areas during this period, rapid population growth during the first half of the nineteenth century brought infrastructural, practical and cultural challenges, but it also provided possibilities, with a varied job market, and a range of religious and social institutions with which communities could engage if they chose. The detail of this is explored in chapter one of the thesis.

The records of weekly meetings from 1830 to 1860 held by the Southwark vestries of St Saviour's and St George the Martyr, and St George the Martyr Poor Law Guardian minutes, shed further light on the practicalities and challenges facing a community that was growing rapidly in population, but which lacked the wherewithal to provide or develop appropriate infrastructure to cope with these

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<sup>75</sup> Judith Worsnop, 'A re-evaluation of "the problem of surplus women" in 19<sup>th</sup>-century England: The case of the 1851 census', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 13, (1990), 21-31.

new realities. Guardians and vestrymen (and they were always men) were largely self-selecting groups, made up of middle-class local tradesmen, clergy, and medical and legal professionals. As well as their views being shaped by their gender, social and economic standing, their meetings usually lasted several hours but were often summarised in a few notes. This inevitably loses the nuance of their discussion, which was further edited by the interpretations of the vestry clerk. However, vestrymen generally had several roles, they were part of their communities as well as representatives of local authority, and their views were far from homogeneous. Meeting minutes outline debate about the multiple pressures of managing the needs of the local community, what to do about rebellious ratepayers, the need for economic and infrastructure development, and orders from government to, for example, enact the requirements of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, or make various changes in public health legislation. Many vestrymen clearly resented this central interference in local affairs. In St George the Martyr, the United Parishioner's Society led by prominent local radicals John Day and Charles Anderson, gained control of the vestry, and used this position to defy the Poor Law Commissioners on many issues, including workhouse rules and the use of outdoor relief.

The negotiations and disputes in Southwark about payment of rates, what constituted appropriate pauper support, the state of local housing, and whether burials should continue in the Borough, underlines the ways in which the churn of social and economic change during 1830 to 1860 impacted on aspects of dying and death as well as the needs of the living. In this context, the thesis also assesses a limited number of interviews conducted by poor law guardians with those requesting assistance. These records give details of at least some individuals and their experiences of privation or destitution, adding an important human dimension to this research. These short statements are again inevitably refracted through the interpretative skills and values of the guardians or their clerks. Nonetheless, they offer a different perspective into the conditions of life and death in Southwark and some of the few instances in which the economically disadvantaged speak in their own words.

A further source in which the voices of some Southwark residents are recorded are through jury verdicts from Southwark's coroner's court. The thesis analyses 5110 such verdicts, which both elucidate some of the everyday accidents and causes of death in the Borough but also underline the increasing role of bureaucracy in managing death in urban areas, particularly after the 1836 Registration of Births, Marriages and Deaths Act required medical certification of cause of death. The perspective of juries was limited insofar as they were only ever constituted by male, rate-paying householders, but nonetheless their verdicts offer first-hand accounts of death, a source that is otherwise scarce in the surviving archive records of Southwark from this period. Verdicts were short narratives or descriptions about the causes of death composed in a jury's own words, and thus often expressed in rather vernacular language. Witness statements, where relevant, were taken from women and children as well as men, which lends further context and texture to the commentaries about dying and death in this predominantly labouring community. Therefore, whilst only around 6 per cent of deaths in Southwark were subject to inquest, the records that do survive offer a rich variety of voices and views. Inquests could also offer a rare public platform from which witnesses could criticise various forms of authority or economic power, by speaking about disgusting or dangerous housing, poorly run work environments, cruel poor laws and negligent doctors, or the dangers of disease in the community. Albeit the influence of such critique was limited, and circumscribed, these narratives offer an occasional glimpse of how some individuals perceived a rapidly urbanising and changing environment that was struggling to adequately house, employ, feed, and even bury some of its members. Work accidents, domestic incidents of burnings and scalding, especially of infants, disease and infections, and occasional horrific violence, all serve as a reminder, if one were needed, that early to mid-nineteenth century lives were contingent, often short, and fraught with danger from even the smallest of cuts or scratches.

An analysis of 365 business records relating to the funeral trade in Southwark from 1830 to 1860 support the thesis's contention that the sector was becoming a significant part of the Southwark economy, as well as more professionally focused during the early to mid-nineteenth century. The transition from funeral services

being provided as part of an artisanal or workshop-based business such as a builders or carpenters, to a fully-fledged trade and specialism was rapid, and it also offered employment opportunities, many of them to women. The increasing range of services and differently costed burial packages on offer underlines the important role of the funeral across all social classes.

The thesis's chapters open with quotations from Charles Dickens. This is for two reasons. Dickens is particularly associated with Southwark, having lived in Lant Street as a teenager, whilst his father was imprisoned in the Marshalsea prison for debt. He frequently used descriptions of Southwark locations in his novels and journalism, to make broader social points about the miseries and privation of urban labouring communities. Furthermore, Dickens caricatured many of the, in his view, dubious and exploitative 'professions' associated with the dying and dead, including nurses, clerics, doctors, coroners and undertakers.<sup>76</sup> Dickens was a campaigner as well as a journalist and writer, and clearly these depictions were often deployed not only to entertain, but also make critical or social commentaries. However, the thesis takes issue with these sometimes comic or grotesque portrayals of working people. The focus here is not to explore the relationship between literature and historiography, or indeed the deployment of fictional sources to make historical points. It is rather to note that Dickensian tropes have, perhaps inadvertently, contributed to the idea that labouring communities were little more than victims of the unscrupulous, rather than taking active roles in shaping their own responses to managing dying and death.

Public health reports, particularly Edwin Chadwick's best-selling *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain*, published in 1842 and his 1843 *Supplementary Report into the Practice of Interment in Towns* are also important referents for this thesis. Chadwick's work was an early example of the use of statistics and mortality data to underline the changing conditions of urban life and death, and to argue for various policy changes, such as improved sewerage systems

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<sup>76</sup> Undertakers appear in *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), in which Twist is apprenticed to Mr Sowerberry, Mr Trabb combines the role of tailor and undertaker in *Great Expectations* (1860-1861) and Mr Mould is in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1842-1844). Nurse Mrs Gamp appears in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, and a nameless coroner appears in *Bleak House* (1852-53).



and the abolition of intramural burial. Although there had been a census since 1801, and the decennial analysis grew in reach and detail during the nineteenth century, Chadwick also used information available from the 1836 Registration of Births, Marriages and Deaths Act. This enabled him to move beyond individual observation, although he did still draw heavily on interviews for his reports, to map life expectancies, geographical, employment and other social factors against numerical data. The emergence of this statistical mind-set in the 1830s, whilst not necessarily embedding a stable consensus about the meanings of data, nonetheless represents a shift in the representation of social and environmental conditions.<sup>77</sup> What distinguishes Chadwick's work in the 1840s from earlier public health reports is an intertwining of the highly anecdotal circumstances of labouring life and death, with his reliance on statistics to extrapolate the risks of death according to age, social class and exposure to epidemics. Whilst Chadwick's works are framed, and limited by their male, class-bound, bureaucratic viewpoints, as well as his fixed notions of what constituted public health, it is paradoxically also a valuable source for what it fails to say about the conditions of life and death, as the numbers alone cannot develop his thesis into a structural critique of the relationship between poverty and mortality.

The thesis also makes extensive use of journalism, contemporary commentators and other campaign reports, and sundry correspondence from residents, hospitals, medical officers, and bills, pamphlets and public notices. These add colour, stories and context to Southwark's social and cultural contexts and are also reflective of the multifarious aspects of individual, group and community roles and responses. The primary sources used for this thesis are thus varied. As noted, first-hand accounts from Southwark residents about dying and death are very limited. As the thesis rests on what individuals and groups did to manage their situations, the records of

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<sup>77</sup> Mary Poovey describes the emergence of a statistical mindset from the 1830s onwards, arguing that the growing sophistication and reach of statistical data enabled the development of abstract concepts of social participation, or 'a new social body'. The aggregation of data created a different form of analysis away from first-hand observation and towards numerically dense analyses. See Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation 1830-1864* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). See also Tom Crook and Glen O'Hara (eds.), *Statistics and the Public Sphere: Numbers and the People in Modern Britain c.1800-2000* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), who take the view that the avalanche of statistical information offers mixed information about decision-making both at policy and personal level, and was thus more nuanced than Poovey suggests.

meetings, jury verdicts, burial clubs and local funeral trades, provide valuable insights into these activities. As Southwark was a heterogeneous, economically and socially varied place, the use of several different angles from which to approach an analysis of the actions and activities of its residents, helps to demonstrate this very diversity.

## Structure

The thesis is divided into five chapters, each focused on different ways in which a heterogeneous, but predominantly labouring community coped with high levels of mortality. It demonstrates that active and managed choices were made to approach the different stages of dying and death through planning, saving and spending habits, domestic arrangements to care for the dying, dead and corpse, and the selection of burial choices. The impact of rapid urbanisation as well as public health and other legislative changes also played a significant role in how actions to manage dying and death changed over this thirty-year period, and these influences are also examined.

The first chapter, 'Southwark, c.1830 to 1860' assesses the social, economic and cultural contexts of the Borough, with an overview of its demographic characteristics, occupational and social structures, housing, health and poor relief systems. It argues that the conditions of rapid urbanisation both enabled and challenged the ways in which individuals and groups coped with high levels of mortality, offering possibilities ranging from cooperation, to indifference and dispute. This provides the context for chapter two, 'Buying and Selling Death in Southwark', which analyses the variety of actions taken by individuals, groups and communities to plan for and manage the financial aspects of dying and death. These included sometimes quite complex schemes of saving and spending, offering limited financial resilience for the inevitable periods of sickness and death that families had to cope with. Burial clubs, benefits clubs and other, looser and more informal savings groups mushroomed during the 1830s to 1860s and ranged widely in levels of formality, actuarial soundness and longevity. The growth of the funeral industry in Southwark, often directly related to specific benefits and burial clubs, is also

assessed in chapter two. Funerals and undertaking offered new routes of business and employment in Southwark, and became a significant local industry, offering paid work outside the home to many women as well as men, as research reveals that several funeral establishments were owned and run by women. The development of this sector reflects complex local economic arrangements of exchange, through the active engagement of residents as workers in the sector, as well as purchasers of its services.

Chapter three, 'Caring for the Southwark Dying and Dead', examines how circumstances enabled or constrained the care of the dying and dead. Most deaths occurred in the home during the early to mid-nineteenth century, with the majority of the sick and dying looked after by women. Home care centred on special diets and limited pain-relief, although there was some professional support from doctors and dispensaries available in Southwark. The chapter demonstrates that Southwark residents utilised these resources when available, sometimes leading to considerable workloads for parish doctors. The chapter also analyses two reports by Edwin Chadwick, who dedicated much of his 1842 *Report into the Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* and 1843 *Supplementary Report into the Practice of Burial in Towns* to the ways in which labouring communities looked after their dying and dead. It argues that Chadwick's views, which were influential in shaping nineteenth-century legislation, and continue to be much-referenced in histories about dying and death, need to be carefully assessed against evidence of what individuals and groups actually did to manage high mortality levels, rather than straightforward acceptance of his interpretation of their behaviours.

To qualify for funeral payments from burial clubs and savings associations, it was sometimes necessary for coroners to determine causes of death. This was particularly the case if a death was sudden, unexpected or appeared to require an explanation. In chapter four, 'Inquest and Verdict in Southwark', an analysis of 5110 Southwark coroner's court jury verdicts from 1830 to 1860 underlines the active engagement of juries with the changing ways in which death was investigated and described during this period. Verdicts began to incorporate a greater use of medical and public health terminologies, indicating a shift in the ways that death was

understood and represented. Furthermore, over the course of thirty years the coroner's inquests reveal an increasing focus on investigating disease, rather than accidents, as a cause of death, underlining an actively changing set of priorities about what constituted sudden or unexplained death in Southwark.

Chapter five, 'Burial and Dispute at Cross Bones Cemetery', draws several themes of this thesis together in a study of a long-running dispute over the Cross Bones cemetery in Southwark. Individuals and groups acted alone and in concert to campaign both for and against the future of the burial site. For nearly thirty years arguments intertwining public health, the different impacts of intensive urbanisation on long-term and transitory residents, and the growing fear of miasma and the spread of disease continued between vestries, church wardens and some residents. The case also underlined tensions between central government and local authorities, over who should have control over burial policy. The chapter demonstrates that actions regarding the dead could also convey ambivalent undertones and reflect complex local relationships that could fracture along lines of social and economic class, length of residency and even the geographical site of residences and their proximity to burial grounds.

The conclusion suggests possible areas of future research, to include broadening and deepening analyses of different locales and their responses to dying and death. The differences between rural and urban communities, or those urban areas that were shaped by single-industries, for example, could bring new insights into the relationships between geography, work-patterns, living conditions and the relationship between the dead and dying. Whilst the detailed analysis of one community like Southwark cannot claim universal insights into dying and death in the early to mid-nineteenth century, it anchors its findings in death as a daily presence in the often precarious lives of nineteenth-century urban dwellers. How the residents of Southwark prepared themselves, or not, for the practicalities and realities of sickness, death and burial offers insights into how they understood their world and how it was changing around them, amidst the intensities of urbanisation, and its attendant social and economic upheavals.

## Chapter one: Southwark, c.1830 to 1860

There is a repose about Lant Street, in the Borough, which sheds a gentle melancholy on the soul. There are always a good many houses to let in the street: it is a bye-street too, and its dullness is soothing. A house in Lant Street would not come within the denomination of a first-rate residence; but it is a most desirable spot nonetheless. If a man wished to abstract himself from the world; to remove himself from the reach of temptation; to place himself beyond the possibility of any inducement to look out of the window, we should recommend him by all means to go to Lant Street.

Charles Dickens, *Pickwick Papers*<sup>1</sup>

Through a study of Southwark, Surrey, this thesis examines how the mixed, but predominantly labouring population of a rapidly changing urban area coped with high levels of mortality during the early to mid-nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> This chapter assesses the economy, society, and environment of the Borough in order to illustrate and support analyses in subsequent chapters which focus on different aspects of dying and death in Southwark. Using census and other statistical data, it describes Southwark's demographic characteristics, how this related to work and social structures and patterns of housing, poor relief, culture and community.

By the 1830s the streets and courts of Southwark were already thickly populated. Warehouses and workshops clustered around the Thames banks, as did many of the poorer residences on the Bankside. Bankside homes were prone to flooding, and notorious as the site of the first outbreak of cholera in Southwark in February 1832, when Mrs Sarah Roberts of Bear Gardens succumbed to the disease in a few hours, confirming local prejudices about the unwholesomeness of residing close by the stinking river.<sup>3</sup> Many of these kinds of popular perceptions of Southwark during the early to mid-nineteenth century are based on the writings of Charles Dickens. Dickens was familiar with the Borough's Lant Street, his description of which opens

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens, *Pickwick Papers* [1836-37] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003), p. 417.

<sup>2</sup> Southwark was incorporated as a metropolitan borough as part of local government reorganisation in 1900. See 'The new London boroughs', *The Times*, 30 November 1899, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Cholera Gazette*, 14 February 1832.

this chapter. During 1824, whilst his father was imprisoned in Southwark's debtor's prison, the Marshalsea, he took lodgings at number 24, in a house belonging to Archibald Russell, a vestry clerk and employee of the Insolvent Court.<sup>4</sup> Dickens's mother and his younger siblings joined his father in prison, and the twelve-year-old Charles was sent to work in a boot blacking factory to earn his keep. The melancholy description of the street as a drab, down-at-heel place suggests the memory of living there was not a particularly happy one.

Dickens described the precarious and transitory lives of Lant Street residents.<sup>5</sup> He noted a community of the casually employed, including dressmakers, tailors, and journeymen bookbinders, observing that many of the street's occupants were also involved in a complex web of letting and subletting furnished rooms.<sup>6</sup> As with many other labouring districts, household budgets could rise and fall dramatically in an insecure job market, and night-time rent flight was common, 'the population was migratory, usually disappearing on the verge of quarter-day'.<sup>7</sup> However, available data for Southwark during 1830 to 1860, contrary to Dickens's portrayal of bleak, hopeless and pensive urban drabness, reveals a rather more diverse picture than this. Assessed in greater detail in the following sections, statistics present a young, largely migrant population, drawn to the Borough for its many different, if sometimes casual job opportunities. Many of these were for skilled, relatively well-paid work, open to women as well as men.<sup>8</sup> Southwark was undergoing profound topographical change during this period, which improved its connections to the City and West End, but also put greater pressure on housing, although the numbers residing in different properties, and the kinds of living arrangements available, were variable. This makes generalisations about individual lives and experiences in Southwark during this period hard to make.<sup>9</sup> The following study adds to existing

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<sup>4</sup> Graham Prettejohns, *Charles Dickens and Southwark* (London: London Borough of Southwark, 1994), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Dickens, *Pickwick Papers*, p. 417.

<sup>6</sup> Dickens, *Pickwick Papers*, p. 417.

<sup>7</sup> Dickens, *Pickwick Papers*, p. 417.

<sup>8</sup> These opportunities are reflected in a variety of contemporary data, particularly in the more detailed census information about employment from 1851 onwards.

<sup>9</sup> There is an extensive and rich literature on nineteenth-century urban life, of relevance for this study, particularly those which analyse aspects of London life. See for example, Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), especially Chapter 8, 'London, the World City', pp. 311-361, Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A study in the relationship between classes in Victorian London*

analyses of urban and social history by expanding our understanding of how the dying and dead were managed in these contexts of rapid demographic, social and economic change.

With its Dickensian connections, Lant Street is a useful beginning for an examination of early to mid-nineteenth century Southwark. Geographically, Lant Street crosses the Borough, running east to west from Southwark Bridge Road to Borough High Street. During the early to mid-nineteenth century it traversed an area of great economic diversity, ranging from tradesmen's residences, shops and public houses, through to an area known as the Mint. One of Southwark's largest workhouses was in the Mint, and this part of the Borough had a reputation as a poor, dirty, and crime-ridden area.<sup>10</sup> An examination of Lant Street census data reveals these many social and economic differences, a microcosm of the Borough overall. It shows that Southwark was socially and economically mixed, some residents undoubtedly facing privation, but others thriving with the opportunities that their mobility and a proximity to London offered. As with many urban areas, rapid population growth during the first half of the nineteenth century brought infrastructural, practical and cultural challenges, but it also provided possibilities, with a varied job market, and a range of religious and social institutions with which communities could engage if they chose. Southwark's location along the south of the Thames meant docks, breweries and tanneries were important, if casual, local employers. There was also a thriving small business and workshop environment, including cobblers, printers, engineering works, victuallers, hat makers, glassworks, tanneries, cabinet makers, builder's yards, masons, and, as the century progressed, funeral businesses, for which Southwark, along with Whitechapel, became a London hub.<sup>11</sup> Many women

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(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), Roy Porter, *A Social History of London* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), Jerry White *London in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Vintage, 2008), Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Night: Narratives of sexual danger in late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), Anthony Wohl, *The Eternal Slum: Housing and social policy in Victorian London* (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> John Hollingshead described the Mint as 'the citadel of thieves', *Ragged London in 1861*[1861] (London: Everyman, 1986), p. 89. The Mint's terrible reputation was cited in later investigations into the lives of the London poor, such as in Rev. Andrew Mearns' 1883 *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London: An inquiry into the condition of the abject poor* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1970).

<sup>11</sup> Evidence of this was found through an analysis of Post Office Directories between 1830 and 1860, and Pigot's London & Provincial New Commercial Directory (London: J.Pigot & Son), years 1823, 1832 and 1848.

found independent employment, or even ran, these enterprises. These stories too, all form important elements of our understanding of Southwark urban life and death during the period.

As this chapter offers a contextual overview of the early to mid-nineteenth century Borough, it is divided into several sections. These examine population and work, housing and poor relief, and communities and culture. Whilst the chapter overall raises questions about what might be meant by 'community' during this period, it explores some of the social possibilities that were, if not unique to urban areas, certainly expedited by density of population. The changing social structures of rapid urbanisation both enabled and challenged the development of different activities and networks that were in turn supported and undermined in the interplay between a large transitory population and longer-term Borough residents. This is a thread pursued through subsequent chapters of the thesis in relation to the actions that could be taken to manage dying, death and the dead, demonstrating how responses were shaped by the material, social and economic circumstances of the Borough.

### Lant Street

As the 1821 and 1831 censuses only counted heads of household, and did not give occupational details, it is hard to verify Dickens's account of the residents of Lant Street, based on his experiences of living there in the 1820s. In the 1831 census, Lant Street 'and courts' were described as having 237 houses, housing 422 families, but little further information about the occupants was provided.<sup>12</sup> By the 1851 census, many more questions were included, such as place of birth and marital status, occupational descriptions having already been added in 1841. The Lant Street of 1851 recorded as sixty-eight occupied houses, with 181 households, a sharp decline in number from 1831, which may be accounted by the fact that the new census did not include the surrounding courts. In addition, during the 1830s and 1840s Southwark vestries had ordered the demolition of several older buildings to make way for new street layouts, thinning out the volume if not density of multiple-

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<sup>12</sup> Reverend George Weight F.R.A.S, F.S.S., *Statistics of the Parish of St George the Martyr, Southwark*, Statistical Society of London, 1840, p. 51.



occupied houses. Average occupation of Lant Street property was roughly 2.6 households per building, but these were not evenly distributed, households varied in size, and some buildings had five or six families living in them, others only one or two.<sup>13</sup>

As might be expected during a period of intense migration, nearly three quarters of Lant Street residents in 1851 were born outside Surrey, coming from twenty-seven counties and five countries, including Germany and the East Indies. Southwark and Surrey-born heads of household accounted for 21 per cent of the total, and neighbouring Middlesex for 22 per cent. The others came from across England, from Yorkshire in the north, Norfolk, Cornwall and the southern counties of Sussex and Kent. The diversity of origins illustrates the pull of urbanising areas during the nineteenth century, Southwark being particularly popular for both its proximity to London, and its variety of work possibilities, and Lant Street broadly reflects the diversity of the Borough overall.

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<sup>13</sup> The density of housing, as can be seen from the case of Southwark, varied considerably. Andrew August estimates around seven per household, but this could mean anything from single rooms upwards. Andrew August, *The British Working Class 1832-1940* (Harlow: Longman, 2007).



Illustration 1: A drawing of Lant Street, mid-nineteenth century, artist and date unknown. © Board of the British Library, Dex.316 – Vol.1.

Table 1: Birthplace of heads of household, Lant Street, Southwark, 1851<sup>14</sup>

<b>Place of Birth</b>	<b>Number</b>
Southwark	39
Surrey (unspecified)	9
Middlesex	41
Kent	15
Devonshire, Suffolk	6 each (12 total)
Hampshire, Gloucestershire, Yorkshire	5 each (15 total)
Somerset	4
Berkshire, Nottinghamshire	3 each (6 total)
Derbyshire, Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Warwickshire, Wiltshire, Worcestershire	2 each (12 total)
Other English counties	9
Ireland	7
Isle of Man	2
Germany	2
Other countries	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>181</b>

Thirty-four of Lant Street's household heads were women, the majority of whom were employed in some form of garment-making as needlewomen, tailoress, dressmakers and even a shroud maker. The four listed paupers were all widowed women, and described as receiving relief, which may have been from the parish or local charities. The men were occupied in a wide variety of trades, many of them labourers, but there were also eight policemen, twelve shopkeepers and seven accountants and clerks respectively. Eighteen children were employed, ten as errand boys, four as servants, two in trades and two young teenaged girls described rather touchingly as 'assistant mothers'.

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<sup>14</sup> Census of Great Britain, 1851, Surrey, Southwark St George, Registration District 04, pp. 11-21.

<b>Occupations</b>	<b>Number</b>
Labourers – Bricklayers, Painters and Decorators, Glaziers	16
Cabinet makers, Upholsterers, Carpenters	14
Porters and Dock workers	14
Hat makers, Leather workers, Textile workers	13
Shopkeepers, Salesmen, Grocers, Bakers, Hairdresser, Cheesemonger, Pharmacy-owner	12
Tailors, Needlewomen, Dressmakers and Shirt makers	12
Shoe and boot makers	12
Makers of various kinds, including clocks, bags, combs, brushes, umbrellas, mattresses, picture frames and coaches	11
Metal workers and Smiths	9
Policemen	8
Cabmen, Carmen and Draymen	8
Accountants and clerks	7
Laundresses, Servants, Charwomen	7
'Others' described as machinist, Gilder, Map Mounter, Mould Cutter, Householder, Cooper, Cork Cutter	7
No specified occupation	6
Engineers	5
Rag and Bone, Dealers	4
Paupers	4
Beer sellers	3
Warehousemen	3
Teachers, Nurses	3
Book Binders	3

Table 1: Occupations of all heads of household, Lant Street, 1851 census<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Census of Great Britain, 1851, Surrey, Southwark St George, Registration District 04, pp. 11-21.

There was a diversity of economic activity on Lant Street, although the social status of different kinds of employment must be contextualised. To be a teacher, shopkeeper or accountant covered a wide spectrum, depending on the kind of institution or business involved, and this level of detail is missing in the census. Employment was often casual and should a disaster such as an accident or ill-health befall an individual or family, circumstances could quickly decline, as Dickens's own experiences attest.<sup>16</sup> Without family means, or wider support from kin, old age often resulted in poverty. The Lant Street paupers were all elderly women, all of whom had been previously employed. Rachael Pitts, of 21 Lant Street, and aged seventy-four in 1851, had been a charwoman, and at number 25, Mary Best, aged seventy-eight, had worked as a shirt maker. Mary Golden, seventy-six, at 34 Lant Street was a former laundress and Mary Yew, sixty-two, at number 54 had been a nurse.

The Meding family at number 43 offer an example of how tenuous life could be. They were, at the time of the 1851 census, thirty-three-year-old labourer William and his thirty-six-year-old wife Catherine, both from Barnet, living with their four children. By 1861 they were thriving and had moved to nearby Wellington Street, had two more babies, and William had become a bricklayer, eventually becoming an engineer. But by their sixties they had moved back to Barnet, William scratching a living as a general labourer again, and their widowed daughter-in-law and grandchild were residents in the workhouse. Other Lant Street residents had better economic luck, such as George Wilkins, who had sole occupancy of number 41, was a successful baker and employed at least two men. His neighbour, Mr Chasen owned his own victuallers and Charles Noad at number 45 was a master shoemaker. Joseph Lyons, born at number 50 in 1847, founded the Lyons Cornerhouse teashop chain, gaining a knighthood in recognition of his business successes. Radical vestryman John Day shared a home and office with a bookbinder Edward Hammond at number 2 Lant Street. Day was an active Poor Law Guardian and constant critic of punitive government policies towards paupers during the 1830s to 1850s. He helped to

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<sup>16</sup> Dickens's father, John Dickens, was imprisoned in the debtor's prison, Marshalsea, in Southwark, in 1824.

establish the 'United Parishioners of St. George the Martyr', Southwark in 1831, to counter what he perceived as the abuses and extravagances of the local vestry.<sup>17</sup>

Lant Street, like much of the Borough, was thus a rather heterogeneous street. Some individuals had deep roots and business interests in Southwark, and others, according to the 1861 census, were transitory, and moved when work, luck and money ran out, or family and personal circumstances changed. The latter part of the nineteenth century did result in many of the Borough's wealthier residents migrating as well, to the by now better-connected suburbs, or to wealthier London districts.<sup>18</sup> The relocation of St Thomas's Hospital to Westminster in 1862 took with it a tranche of professional medical residents. These departures of local taxpayers would place increasing pressures on the rates over time, which is discussed in later chapters of this thesis. However, the earlier part of the nineteenth century shows a quite diverse set of social structures, undermining the suggestion that Lant Street and the Mint were, during the 1830s and 1840s, amongst the 'worst' areas of the Borough, 'exceedingly filthy and wretched, and inhabited by an indigent and profligate population.'<sup>19</sup>

## Population and work

This section explores features of Southwark's population and employment. As underlined later in the thesis, the demographic particularities of the Borough and its work environments impacted on the kinds of deaths experienced by some residents. These particularly relate to child mortalities, disease patterns and work-related accidents, issues which are analysed in greater detail in chapters three and four. As with other urban areas, Southwark's population expanded rapidly, if patchily, during the first half of the nineteenth century. Until they came under the responsibility of the Metropolitan Board of Works in 1855, there were five parishes:

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<sup>17</sup> See *Rules and Regulations of the Society called the United Parishioners of St. George the Martyr Southwark*, 1831, Southwark Archives, MH12/123000.

<sup>18</sup> See Jerry White, *London in the Nineteenth Century* (London: London, 2008), pp. 77-98, on the development of London's suburbs and transport infrastructure.

<sup>19</sup> Weight, *Statistics of the Parish of St George the Martyr, Southwark* p. 56.

St Saviour's, Christ Church, St George the Martyr, St Olave and St Thomas.<sup>20</sup> After 1855 three districts were created, St George the Martyr, St Saviour's which was merged with its marginally wealthier neighbour, Christchurch, and St Olave District, which joined up with St Thomas. Prior to 1855, the boundaries were somewhat mutable, a matter particularly exposed when retrospectively trying to assess statistical trends. Overall, this means obtaining exact population figures for Southwark before the 1850s is difficult, because depending on source the definitions of each parish and its returns are frequently inconsistent and/or contradictory.

Demonstrating that urbanisation was a far from monocultural experience in the early to mid-nineteenth century, population increase occurred unevenly across the Borough, with estimates ranging between a 50 and 79 per cent rise between 1801 and 1851.<sup>21</sup> The population declined in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, due to out-migration by middle-class residents and housing clearance for infrastructure and business developments. St Olave district experienced the most intensive population growth, with numbers rising to roughly 79 per cent, from 28,700 in 1801, to 51,400 in 1851.<sup>22</sup>

The parish of St George the Martyr was helpfully, if paternalistically, detailed by the Reverend George Weight on behalf of the Statistical Society of London in 1840. Of Weight there is relatively little biographical information available, but he was a keen data-gatherer, and an associate of Rawson W. Rawson, a senior civil servant and President of the Royal Statistical Society, who assisted him in his researches.<sup>23</sup> Although Weight's observations about Southwark are tempered by his class, gender, religious and social assumptions, he did offer a detailed picture of many of the aspects of life in the Borough during this period not recorded elsewhere. He is quoted extensively in the following sections of this chapter. Weight's accounts of the parish offer an insight into the new kinds of density that were being coped with. In

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<sup>20</sup> Throughout the thesis, the focus is on the parishes of St George the Martyr, St Olave and St Saviour, and these are taken to cover the extended boundaries of 1855.

<sup>21</sup> For example, Leonard Reilly in *The Story of the Borough* (London Borough of Southwark, 2009) estimates a 79 per cent increase, but Parliamentary Papers 1852 – 53 Ixxxv (1631) estimate 50 per cent increase.

<sup>22</sup> Reilly, *The Story of the Borough*.

<sup>23</sup> Sidney Rosenbaum, 'Precursors of the *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*', 50, (2001) 457-466.

1811, the population was listed as 27,967, but by the 1840s this had risen to around 50,000. However, thereafter growth slowed considerably, increasing to just 55,510 in the 1861 census.<sup>24</sup> These statistics therefore support the rises of between 50 and 79 per cent in Southwark overall, at least during the first half of the century, the density of which was variably experienced according to street, court or even house-level, as suggested by the case of Lant Street.

In contrast, St Saviour's Parish grew at a much slower rate, only increasing from 15,596 in 1811 to 19,709 in 1851, a relatively modest 19.6 per cent.<sup>25</sup> This may have been because St Saviour's was becoming overall a less residential area, as its boundaries covered dock areas, warehouses, Borough Market, part of Guy's Hospital and other sites of expanding business and employment rather than domiciles. In addition, many houses were demolished to accommodate the building of the new London Bridge in 1831, the railway in 1836, and remodelling and widening of several thoroughfares during the 1840s. This development of transportation links in turn consolidated the area as a business and working district and enabled the out-migration of the parish's middle-class residents to the suburbs.

The unreliable and uneven nature of Southwark's population statistics offers a subtle perspective on urban development during the early to mid-nineteenth century. Not all urban areas mushroomed into the teeming slum districts of popular imagination. Whilst, as noted in the introduction to this thesis, the census returns were not always completely reliable, contingent on issues such as literacy, legibility and accuracy in returns, they demonstrate that even neighbouring parishes could experience the processes of urbanisation in quite different ways. As Southwark was for many a transition point between the southern counties of England and London, the parishes where population growth did occur was mostly due to migration, rather than an increase in birth rates or decline in death rates. Statistics for who was resident in the Borough cannot account for those most mobile communities. During a Board of Guardians meeting in December 1839, the minutes noted that Southwark was in 'the unfortunate position being the transit [...] and rendezvous for all the

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<sup>24</sup> John Marius Wilson, *Imperial Gazetteer for England and Wales, 1870-1872*.

<sup>25</sup> Census of Great Britain, 1851.



tramps and beggars from Kent, Surrey and Sussex', and must avoid the reputation for being overly generous with parish relief for fear of attracting more such indigent migratory communities.<sup>26</sup> This comment encapsulates many of the ambivalences and realities of nineteenth-century mobility. Many of the new residents to the Borough were passing through, part of the great movement of people of all classes during this period, as demonstrated by middle-class urban flight by mid-century. This population churn was in turn creating a society of what James Vernon has described as 'distant strangers', raising concerns about who could be considered a legitimate member of the local community, and indeed what 'community' consisted of if it was in constant flux.<sup>27</sup> This question is addressed in more detail later in this chapter.

The population of Southwark, in line with the nation's broader demographic during the early to mid-nineteenth century, was young, as most migrants to cities in the early to mid-nineteenth century moved as teenagers or young adults. For example, of the 51,824 residents of St George the Martyr in 1851, 43.4 per cent of the males and 41 per cent of the females were aged under twenty.<sup>28</sup> In comparison to the rest of London the proportion of women to men was slightly lower than the national average, St George's having a 51 per cent female to male population. St Olave and St Saviour had a similar proportion, with roughly fifty-fifty male to female split.<sup>29</sup> In this sense, Southwark bucked national trends, as during the mid-nineteenth century there were around half a million more women than men, and many urban areas had higher female to male ratios. According to the 1851 census more than a quarter of women aged 40 and under were unmarried.<sup>30</sup>

As the case of Lant Street demonstrates, a wide variety of work and trades were carried out in Southwark, which was part of its attraction for migrants. Reverend

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<sup>26</sup> St Saviour's Parish Vestry Minutes, 2 December 1839, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

<sup>27</sup> James Vernon, *Distant Strangers: How Britain Became Modern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> Weight, *Statistics of the Parish of St George the Martyr, Southwark*, p. 52.

<sup>29</sup> In the census of 1851, St. Saviour recorded 9779 men to 9930 women, and St Olave 9660 men to 9715 women.

<sup>30</sup> 1851 Census of Great Britain. See also Judith Worsnop, 'A re-evaluation of "the problem of surplus women" in 19<sup>th</sup>-century England: The case of the 1851 census', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 13 (1990), 21-31.

Weight notes that of the 9183 families in St George's in the 1840s, 5019 were employed in 'trade, manufactures and handicrafts, 42 in agriculture, and 4122 in other occupations.'<sup>31</sup> Weight also noted that of the 'other' occupations, this 'class includes the gentry and other independent ranks of society, and is in proportion tolerably large.'<sup>32</sup> However, the term 'other occupations' actually covered a very broad social spectrum, and in terms of census categorisation could sometimes lead to gentry coming under the same definitional heading as a bargeman or labourer, where they were not counted under other head definitions. So, whereas a wealthier parish, such as St George's, Hanover Square, Mayfair, were certain to have a high level of gentry residency, Southwark's statistics probably allude to labouring work. The next category of 'heads', of 'capitalists, bankers, professional and other educated men' amounted to 849, or roughly one in ten of the adult male population. Again, in the other, wealthier St George's, Hanover Square, the total was one in six, and in Southwark's wealthier parish of Christchurch it was one in seven.<sup>33</sup> These differences in social and economic circumstances are relevant in the present context because they impacted on life expectancy and the varied ways in which people died. For example, in St Olave's parish, those classified as 'gentry' lived more than twenty years longer than the artisan classes, aged on average sixty-four years at death, compared to forty-three for working people.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, gentry were recorded as highly unlikely to die of what were described as 'epidemic' diseases such as typhus, cholera or influenza.<sup>35</sup> As explored in greater detail in chapter four of this thesis, the relationship between living conditions and mortality levels became increasingly visible during the period 1830 to 1860, both enabling and circumscribing a range of actions from Southwark residents in response to managing their dying and dead.

Detailed occupational data was not gathered before the 1841 census, but a comparison between the existing records from 1841 and 1861 reveals remarkable levels of consistency in the percentages employed in different trades in the Borough.

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<sup>31</sup> Weight, *Statistics of the Parish of St George the Martyr, Southwark*, p. 52.

<sup>32</sup> Weight, *Statistics of the Parish of St George the Martyr, Southwark*, pp. 52-53.

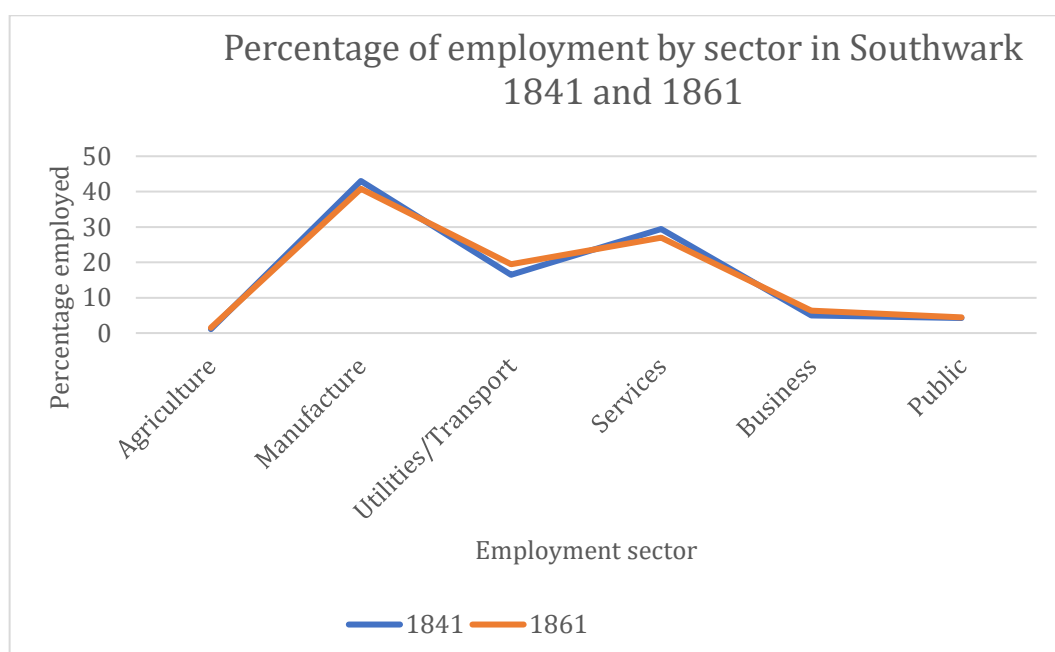
<sup>33</sup> Weight, *Statistics of the Parish of St George the Martyr, Southwark*, p. 53.

<sup>34</sup> Chadwick, *A Supplementary Report into the Practice of Interment in Towns*, (London: Clowes & Sons, 1843), p. 257.

<sup>35</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 257.

The caveat here is that the categories defined by the census data are broad, and not comprehensive for 1841. Manufacturing in this context covered everything from glass works to breweries and hat making, employment that covered a range of skills and wages. Consumer services referred to grocers, druggists, public houses and everything in between, and business employment could range from being a clerk in a small firm to running a large enterprise, so it is difficult to assess whether the status of the kinds of roles involved declined or improved. Nonetheless the statistics show a remarkable stability of distribution across sectors.

Figure 1: Percentage of employment by sector in Southwark 1841 and 1861<sup>36</sup>



Whilst these statistics suggest some stabilities in the job market, many jobs, such as docks and warehouse labouring, were often casual. Furthermore, accounts from medical officers and appeals to Poor Law Guardians imply that even those in work were often living lives that teetered on near destitution. The St George the Martyr Guardians petitioned the House of Commons in February 1837 to allow for extended provision of outdoor relief, making a distinction 'between the idle, worthless, disorderly poor who would attempt to live upon the industrious Rate Payers', and

<sup>36</sup> Census of Great Britain 1841, Registration Districts St George the Martyr, St Olave and St Saviour, Census of Great Britain 1861, Registration Districts St George the Martyr, St Olave, and St Saviour.

those who even though working, applied for 'parochial relief only in consequence of real misfortune.'<sup>37</sup>

Nonetheless, the statistics suggest a diverse, working scene rather than the nest of idle thieves and ne'er do wells described by John Hollingshead, in his 1861 publication, *Ragged London*, in which he noted:

In many respects [Southwark's] standard of civilization is lower than that of Whitechapel or St. George's in the East...It has scores of streets that are rank and steaming with vice; streets where unwashed, drunken, fishy-eyed women hang by dozens out of windows, beckoning to the passers-by. It has scores of streets filled with nothing but thieves, brown, unwholesome tramps' lodging houses and smoky receptacles for stolen goods.<sup>38</sup>

Hollingshead was a journalist and a dramatist, and his remarks must be contextualised by the fact that he had been commissioned in January 1861 by the *Morning Post* to write a series entitled 'Horrible London.' His articles were therefore framed to scandalise and titillate the readership, by rendering predominantly labouring districts of the city a threat to the civilization of the whole. It is all here, drunkenness, filth, lewd women, tramps and thievery. This was ingrained poverty, the Mint described as 'the dear old collection of dens it was in our grandfather's day'.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, these people were breeding with 'alarming fruitfulness', suggesting to Hollingshead that 'some of the places [ought to be] christened Malthus Yard.'<sup>40</sup>

Hollingshead's writings fit into a popular genre of publications from the mid-nineteenth century that broadly blended social reportage, entertainment and horror stories of urban poverty.<sup>41</sup> Doubtless there were some dire parts of the Borough, as

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<sup>37</sup> Southwark St George the Martyr Board of Guardian Minutes, 22 February 1837, LMA/SOBG-11.

<sup>38</sup> John Hollingshead, *Ragged London in 1861* [1861] (London: Everyman, 1986), p. 85.

<sup>39</sup> Hollingshead, *Ragged London*, p. 86.

<sup>40</sup> Hollingshead, *Ragged London*, p. 86.

<sup>41</sup> Texts such as John Duncombe's *A Peep into the Holy Land* (1835), or James Grant's *Sketches in London* (1838) use death to draw attention to social disparities, Grant in particular was a campaigner against the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Racy accounts of poverty living suffused Watts Phillips's *The Wild Tribes of London* or G. A. Sala's *Gaslight and Daylight* (1859). George Godwin, who was also editor of *The Builder*, made links between physical and moral urban topographies in *Town Swamps and Social Bridges* (1861), and Thomas Archer and Thomas Beames described concerns

with all urban districts, but, as the diversity of workshops, shops, builders and mason's yards show, it was also a thriving, and mixed working district. Like Dickens, Hollingshead encapsulates the contradictions and tensions inherent in representing poorer and labouring-class districts to his predominantly middle-class readership. On the one hand, he wanted to expose the dark side of in-work poverty, disgraceful slum housing and high mortality rates on which nineteenth-century prosperity was based, at the same time, he created a threatening, reactionary image of a dissolute, over-breeding 'other' that would swamp the city with their offspring and vice.

### Housing and poor relief

There were many challenges facing Southwark's parishes during the early to mid-nineteenth century. While infrastructure developments were expedited, such as the building of new London Bridge in 1831 and the railway in 1836, and major new thoroughfares created, deficiencies in housing, drainage and water supplies remained a constant problem for residents. Michael Durey has documented the devastating effects that this sclerotic failure to tackle water and drainage problems in the Borough had on residents during the 1832 cholera outbreak, leaving the poorest streets 'without any effective system of underground drainage whatsoever'.<sup>42</sup> As with many working, urban districts, these conditions under which disease might thrive undoubtedly contributed to the high mortality levels, particularly of the Borough's infants and children.<sup>43</sup> As discussed in greater detail in chapters three, four and five of the thesis, the causes of disease outbreaks, and their impact on local communities became an increasing issue of interest and contention during the period c.1830 to 1860.

Southwark still had a quantity of seventeenth-century buildings during this period, and some were possibly even older. An anonymous note from 1852 describes, in a way which could have come from Dickens himself, the conditions in such older

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about social disorder in their respective *The Pauper, the Thief and the Convict* (1865) and *The Rookeries of London* (1850).

<sup>42</sup> Michael Durey, *The Return of the Plague: British Society and the Cholera 1831-32* (Dublin: Gill and McMillan, 1979), p. 55.

<sup>43</sup> All the Southwark parishes recorded child mortalities of over fifty per cent. See Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, pp. 256-266.

properties in Ewer Street, which ran parallel with the South-Eastern Railway's Charing Cross line. Ewer Street's ancient wooden houses, were all 'crammed full of the poorest and most wretched of our residents'.<sup>44</sup> The houses were described as 'literally alive with vermin' so that the said occupants were regularly driven out of doors, and at night, sometimes for months at a time in the warmer seasons, 'the unfortunate poor creatures of both sexes, of all ages, sleeping huddled together on doorsteps, and on the footway, so as to render the street almost impassable.'<sup>45</sup>

There are no definitive statistics to assess just how many properties were in the same condition as Ewer Street. Southwark's three districts had a total of 12,473 houses by 1861, to accommodate its recorded population of 99,303. This makes an average of just under eight residents per dwelling, although of course properties differed in size, and, as the case of Lant Street illustrates, were highly variable in their density of habitation. One of the most complex aspects of nineteenth-century households was the intricate web of property ownership underpinning these residencies. Until the early twentieth century most people of all social classes rented rather than owned their property.<sup>46</sup> However, supply and demand were unevenly matched, builders often preferring to develop a glut of middle-class residences and too few homes for working people, who were increasingly crammed into old, inadequate and vermin-infested lodgings. Southwark's lack of land meant it did not follow the model of textile and industrial towns and cities in building back-to-back terraces, but mostly re-deployed older, large lodging houses, often built around courts and with shared pumps and privy facilities, which have been described as 'promiscuous housing' arrangements.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Unattributed extract, dated 1852, LMA/SC/PD/SW/1/7/G4516.

<sup>45</sup> Unattributed extract, dated 1852, LMA/SC/PD/SW/1/7/G4516.

<sup>46</sup> Around ninety per cent of the houses in England were rented from private landlords during the nineteenth century, home ownership not increasing until the twentieth century. See Stefan Muthesius, *The English Terraced House* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1982), p.17. See also John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing 1815-1970* (London: Methuen, 1978), Martin Daunton, *House and Home in the Victorian City: Working-Class Housing 1850-1914* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983).

<sup>47</sup> Daunton, *House and Home*, p. 12.

Historian John Rule links such housing and planning inadequacies directly to changing modes of production, intertwining the forces of industrialisation, urbanisation with the underpinning ideology of *laissez-faire*:

[If] the unregulated operation of market forces, is held to be the dynamic philosophy which underlay the surge in Britain's output, then, in housing – the provision of which is amongst the most speculative of trades – the market economy seems most evidently to have failed to meet the basic needs of the labouring people [...] House building, because of its speculative nature, moved in response not to the demographic cycles which determined need, but under the influence of economic considerations determined by the business cycle, levels of interest, and the price of available land [...] slums were part of [...] the economy of low wages, and one of their practical functions was therefore to underpin Victorian prosperity.<sup>48</sup>

In the context of Southwark, this analysis is incomplete, however. Whilst the housing stock does appear to have deteriorated over the nineteenth century, with an estimate that 43 per cent had declined into slum conditions by 1845, Southwark's housing economy was tied not just to nineteenth-century *laissez-faire*, but also odd specificities of local land ownership that sometimes linked back to ancient, manorial liberties.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, there was great pressure on such available land as there was for developing the railway and widening roads to improve access to London. Not only did this limit the amount of land for new housing development for any social class, as Rule notes, but it also seems to have prevented the growth of purpose-built housing for labourers, as happened in other parts of London such as Whitechapel or Bethnal Green's terraced accommodation.<sup>50</sup> The 'promiscuous housing' pattern of multiple occupancy in larger buildings, and transitory lifestyle of some of the residents, expedited the decline of local housing stock, and vestries remained toothless in their ability, authority or resource to enact improvements. It is also highly likely, although not verifiable, that many vestrymen were themselves beneficiaries of the renting system. Sarah Wise uncovered an extraordinary web of

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<sup>48</sup> John Rule, *The Labouring Classes in Early Industrial England 1750-1850* (London: Longman, 1986), pp. 75-76.

<sup>49</sup> David R. Green, *London and the Poor Law 1790-1870* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

<sup>50</sup> Although this was also often far from ideal and such houses could also devolve to slum-like conditions - see Sarah Wise, *The Blackest Streets: The Life and Death of a Victorian Slum* (London: Bodley Head, 2008).

vestryman self-interest and landlordism in her study of The Nichol slum in Bethnal Green, and it is probable that at least some of local businesspeople who served on the vestries of Southwark had investments in rented property.<sup>51</sup>

St George the Martyr had 6854 residences all of which had rates paid on them. However, 3092 of these properties were 'farmed' out, a complex web of letting and subletting that was a common feature of nineteenth century housing management. In effect this meant that there could be any number of 'landlords' for each property, and the weekly-rent paying tenant might have no idea who the actual owner was. This was also a recipe for neglect and decline, as the property owners, even if they cared about the state of their buildings, were often so far removed, both geographically and socially, from their holdings, that little if anything was done to improve conditions for inhabitants. For example, in St George's some 2903 properties were farmed out by 265 people, who possessed varying numbers of properties. Kent Street's ninety-one residences were all the property of one landlord.<sup>52</sup> The level of rates also indicate the economic state of the parish. Only 8 per cent of St George's housing was rated at over fifty pounds per year, compared to 35 per cent in the more affluent parish of Marylebone, or 43 per cent in St George's Hanover.<sup>53</sup>

The accommodation with the worst reputation were the cheap lodging houses, and there were eleven of these in St George's alone. It was estimated that each building accommodated up to seventy people in the winter months who could bunk down for fourpence a night in a single bed, or threepence for two in a bed, with an average of seven beds per room.<sup>54</sup> Rudimentary cooking facilities, a fire, candles and bedding were provided, and married and single people kept in separate rooms. Notwithstanding this, Reverend Weight noted that, 'the arrangements are altogether more comfortable than might be expected' and observed with approval regular Bible readings and Temperance members amongst residents, many of whom lived for many years in the same lodgings, challenging the assumption that lodgers

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<sup>51</sup> Wise, *The Blackest Streets*, pp. 44-53.

<sup>52</sup> Weight, *Statistics of the Parish of St George the Martyr, Southwark*, p. 51.

<sup>53</sup> Weight, *Statistics of the Parish of St George the Martyr, Southwark*, p. 51.

<sup>54</sup> Weight, *Statistics of the Parish of St George the Martyr, Southwark*, p. 56.



were always transitory in their behaviours.<sup>55</sup> The numbers of people who fled in the night to avoid paying rent, so-called 'rent flight', are unrecorded for Southwark. For those who did not run away but could not meet their payments or were otherwise destitute, there was parish relief. Prior to the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 Southwark had several workhouses, one of which, St Saviour's Parish Union, in the Mint, inspired Dickens's workhouse scenes in *Oliver Twist*.

The population of Southwark's main workhouses fluctuated during the early to mid-nineteenth century. During the 'hungry' 1840s it has been estimated that 6.5 per cent of the British population inhabited workhouses at any given time.<sup>56</sup> The workhouse was the place of last resort, however, and Southwark guardians often preferred to pay outdoor relief, as with the four women described living on Lant Street. It was certainly cheaper, and probably more humane to support people in their own homes rather than institutionalise them. The indefatigable Reverend Weight informs us that St George the Martyr spent £9726 on parish relief in 1839.<sup>57</sup> By the early 1860s, however, this had increased to £28,531, reflecting both the higher costs of indoor rather than outdoor relief, and growing levels of destitution in the parish. From the 1830s to late 1840s, numbers of residents in the Mint Street workhouse increased by roughly a quarter, and as much as a third during the summer cholera outbreak of 1849.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless with a peak population of 593, this only amounted to 1.1 per cent of the overall population of the parish, although 1856 individuals, roughly 6 per cent, were registered as paupers overall. These figures do not account for those who were moved on from Southwark for not meeting the required residency requirements for relief.

Statistics for outdoor relief are patchy, varying from small amounts of money, to items like shoes and other items of clothing, to bread, medicinal brandy, blankets or coals.<sup>59</sup> Minutes of the weekly Guardians' meetings summarised all admittances,

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<sup>55</sup> Weight, *Statistics of the Parish of St George the Martyr, Southwark*, p. 56.

<sup>56</sup> Derek Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edn. (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).

<sup>57</sup> Weight, *Statistics of the Parish of St George the Martyr, Southwark*, p. 54.

<sup>58</sup> In February 1837 residents numbered around 400, but by August 1849, at the height of the cholera outbreak, this number had increased to 593. St George the Martyr Board of Guardian Minutes LMA/SOBG-11.

<sup>59</sup> St George the Martyr Board of Guardian Minutes, various, LMA/SOBG-11.

deaths and expenditures, and for example, a typical session held on 15 February 1837 agreed to,

[...] a loan of 5 shillings to Thomas Rider, Charles Stephenson and Charles Mendez and a pair of shoes for Francis Turner and a dress and some shoes for Susannah Worlock from the workhouse store<sup>60</sup>

Being a Guardian was a time-consuming commitment, as meetings often ran from early evening until midnight. As well as detailing the accounts and events in the workhouse community and hearing the needs and complaints of residents requesting assistance, Guardians often took an interest in individual cases themselves.<sup>61</sup> A notable feature of London workhouses was their central location amid the residential and commercial activities of their communities. Douglas Brown underlines the ways in which this developed relationships between workhouse communities, residents as well as staff, and neighbourhood businesses, in ways which were perceived as positive for trade, employment and the local economy overall.<sup>62</sup> Douglas argues that the geographical and economic positioning of London workhouses like Southwark's Mint, with their flow of people entering, leaving, supplying and working for the institutions, may have helped to foster a less socially removed, and thus less punitive atmosphere towards paupers than in areas where the workhouses were located on the fringes of communities. Southwark Guardians like Day argued for a liberal regime for workhouse residents too, for example, that they might receive visits from friends, or be able to leave to attend religious services or classes on Sundays, even if they were on occasion caught drinking beer in a public house instead, as were Mary Robinson and Mary Dewey in November 1838.<sup>63</sup>

The workhouse and outdoor relief in operation in Southwark suggests a community that was if anything marginally less deprived than many other labouring districts in London during the early to mid-nineteenth century. This begs the question of why Southwark was consistently represented as an area of such desperate poverty.

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<sup>60</sup> St George the Martyr Board of Guardian Minutes, 15 February 1837, LMA/SOBG-11.

<sup>61</sup> St George the Martyr Board of Guardian Minutes, LMA/SOBG-11.

<sup>62</sup> Douglas Brown, 'Supplying London's Workhouses in the Mid-Nineteenth Century', *The London Journal*, 41 (2016), 36-59.

<sup>63</sup> St George the Martyr Board of Guardian Minutes, 7 November 1838, LMA/SOBG-11.

Dickens, Hollingshead and others had books and papers to sell, and indeed points to make that critiqued the social and economic realities of urban life for many. However, their analyses sometimes ignored several important factors about other, more nuanced trajectories both within, and external to, urban communities. George Dodd, in *Days at the Factories*, published in 1843, wrote admiringly about the skills and crafts of several Southwark workplaces, and visited a brewery, hat maker, leather factory, soap and candle workshop and flint glass works.<sup>64</sup> Whilst Dodd's writing is largely a celebration of the work ethic, replete with its ingenuity and cooperation, and he offers no individual portraits of the workers themselves, he does not dehumanise his subjects as an abject, filthy or threatening populous horde. They are Southwark working men and women, earning a highly respectable keep.

### Culture and communities

Earlier sections of this chapter argue that representations of early to mid-nineteenth century Southwark often focused on the Borough's poverty and deprivation, but that the reality was rather more socially and economically complex. This section explores how those data sets can be assessed in relation to how Southwark residents responded to a period of rapid social change, as part of the context for understanding how these changes may or may not have impacted on actions taken in order to care for the dying and dead. Defining and decoding what the idea of community meant, if it meant anything at all, in the context of early to mid-nineteenth century Southwark is a complex question. This is not least because the very idea is loaded with anthropological, sociological and other meanings, as well as contemporary concerns about identity, gender, ethnicity and other social categorisations that may or may not have informed nineteenth-century attitudes.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> George Dodd, *Days at the Factory: The Manufacturing Industry of Great Britain Described* (London: Charles Knight & Co., 1843).

<sup>65</sup> There is a rich and detailed literature on notions of community, both from historical and contemporary viewpoints, and from several disciplinary perspectives too numerous to cite in this context. Benedict Anderson's influential *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983) conceptualised the notion through the developing linkages between religion and territory, print and capitalism as informing a process of constructed nationalism and 'imagined' community within that paradigm. At the local level of a community like Southwark, however, this becomes much more problematic, as it appears that some individuals cleaved to quite localised notions of identity, establishing for example, charities, schools, churches and fairs rooted in the practices or possibly nostalgia associated with their birthplace, issues touched upon in chapter two of this thesis. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, the local history movement is perhaps more relevant,

This is not to say that distinct groups were not identified, for example medical officers would describe a visit to the 'Irish' part of the Borough, and part of the pauper burial ground in Cross Bones, St Saviour's, was colloquially called the 'Irish Corner'. But the Irish were a separate nationality, and central to broader national political and social questions in the early to mid-nineteenth century.<sup>66</sup> There were discussions at vestry meetings about the levels of destitution amongst these groups that did not exist in relation to, for example, Welsh or Cornish migrants to the Borough. In this context, it is striking that vestry minutes and other primary sources never mention the word 'community', preferring instead to define themselves or their activities through the grouping of 'parish' or 'population', or through social and economic identities, such as ratepayers, gentlemen, labourers or paupers. This does not mean that claims were never made on behalf of, or by, different groups at various times, such as when residents collaborated to complain to the vestry about an issue, ratepayers protested at rate rises, or workhouse residents expressed concern about the Anatomy Act, for example.

Imposing notions of community from a historiographical perspective also risks essentialising complex differences within groups. As noted in the case of Lant Street, the residents came from twenty-seven counties in England, and regional identification may, or may not, have continued to be strong even after their relocation to Southwark. Historiographical debate about the constructions of a notion of 'British' identity are hard to interpret at local level, and in Southwark it is notable that sense of origin could still be influential for some. For example, the

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emerging from the 'people's histories' of the 1960s and 1970s, and the History Workshop Movement's development of detailed local studies, such as Jerry White's *Rothschild Buildings: Life in an East-End Tenement Block 1887-1920* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980). White's histories of London in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries also detail the strength of Irish, Welsh and Scottish identities and communities in London, in *London in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Vintage, 2008) and *London in the Twentieth Century* (London: Vintage, 2001). Raymond Williams notes that the word 'community' has been in use in the English language since the fourteenth century, to describe 'the commons or the common people', evolving through the eighteenth century to encapsulate notions of 'something in common, as in common interests'. This was further identified in the nineteenth century as a denotation of community as something more immediate and local than the idea of 'society'. Williams' definition is perhaps the most pithy and relevant to this study of Southwark. See Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London: Fontana, 1976) pp. 65-66.

<sup>66</sup> A detailed discussion of the relationship between England and Ireland during the nineteenth century is beyond the present scope, but the impact of ongoing political and economic crises touched on areas like Southwark through migration, particularly during the 'hungry 40s' and Potato Famine of 1845 to 1852. See also *The State of Ireland*, Hansard, 16 February 1844.

Welsh Calvinist migrants maintained their own chapel, and by the later nineteenth century organised an annual Eisteddfod in Southwark, and 'taffy's fair' in neighbouring Lambeth.<sup>67</sup> The Yorkshire Society established its own schools network, to 'educate, board and clothe children, one of both whose parents had been born in Yorkshire.'<sup>68</sup> The Borough Irish population, who made up approximately 5 per cent of Southwark's residents, tended to live in close proximity to each other, in the poorer streets near Bankside.

The push-pull features of migration are further illustrated by the Meding family of Lant Street, who returned to their birthplace of Barnet in their old age, a pattern that is not uncommon for migrant communities. In the nineteenth century such relocation was sometimes enforced by Poor Law requirements. There are several examples in Southwark Board of Guardian notes detailing the cases of individuals who were pushed around from parish to parish when seeking relief, as for example the case of elderly widow Mrs Charlotte Shorthouse who, although technically a resident of Lambeth had lived in St George's for over thirty years with her late husband. Both Lambeth and St George's refused to support her, leading St George's Guardians to write to the Poor Law Commissioners in May 1839 to point out that cases like hers were far from uncommon.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, even though mobility was an important feature of nineteenth century urban evolution, not all urban communities were transient. Recurrent tensions in Southwark, explored in later chapters of this thesis, were often between settled residents of the Borough and newcomers, or those passing through. Even the Medings, although they eventually left Southwark, appear to have remained in the area for roughly twenty years, raising their growing family, begging the question at what point people 'belong' to a locale, and how they fashion different identities accordingly.

Other than the collective housing arrangements in which most Borough inhabitants lived and died, there were various spaces in which Southwark's residents could gather and build their social and support networks. One of these was through church

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<sup>67</sup> Emrys Jones, *The Welsh in London 1500-2000* (Cardiff: Cardiff University Press, 2001), p. 116.

<sup>68</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

<sup>69</sup> St George the Martyr Board of Guardian Minutes, 22 May 1839, LMA/SOBG-3.

or chapel. David Bebbington has argued that urban expansion during the nineteenth century offered individuals much more freedom of worship than smaller, rural parishes might.<sup>70</sup> Southwark had numerous religious institutions, ranging from Church of England and Roman Catholic, to Synagogues and Primitive Methodists. These offered a variety of spiritual and social possibilities for residents, only sustainable with the levels of density found in urban areas, although there are no statistics available for how many attended a place of worship on a regular basis.<sup>71</sup> Local churches and chapels were also very involved in the administration of Southwark, through vestries, workhouses and other authorities, as well as central to managing and recording marriages, births and deaths. They provided meeting places, philanthropy, and sometimes a rudimentary educational structure for children. Attendance at Sunday school grew over the early to mid-nineteenth century, with 33 per cent of St Olave children being enrolled, and 23 per cent of St Saviour's children, statistics are not available for the other parishes.<sup>72</sup>

Another social space available to Southwark residents was the public house. Reverend Weight disapprovingly remarked that the parish of St George the Martyr had 91 public houses, 44 beer houses and thirteen inns. This only covers official establishments, and there were likely many more informal places which sold various kinds of bootlegged alcohol.<sup>73</sup> Weight's total only amounts to one drinking establishment for every 338 residents, lower than the national average of around one pub per 200 residents during this period.<sup>74</sup> Other than offering a refuge from unpleasant and inadequate accommodation, public houses also played important

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<sup>70</sup> David Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982), pp. 4-5.

<sup>71</sup> These included Baptist Chapels at Bandyleg Walk, Colliers Rents, Denmark Row, Dipping Alley, Duke Street, Goat's Yard, Maze Pond, Neckinger Road, Pepper Street and Sheer's Alley; Quaker Meeting Houses at Ewer Street, Long Lane, Redcross Street and Worcester Street; Methodists occupied Chapel Place and Great Surrey Street; Anglicans were served by numerous churches including Christ Church, Holy Trinity, St Thomas', St Olave, St George the Martyr, St James, St John's, St Margaret on the Hill, St Mary Magdalen; Catholics could worship at The Roman Catholic Church of the Most Holy Trinity and St George's Roman Catholic Cathedral. There were many other sites, some as informal as private homes, where local nonconformists could meet to worship. See for reference Edward E. Cleal, *The Story of Congregationalism in Surrey* (London: James Clark & Co., 1908); Arthur H. Stockwell, *The Baptist Churches of Surrey* (London: Stockwell, 1910).

<sup>72</sup> Thomas Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability: Sunday schools and working-class culture 1780-1850* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 55.

<sup>73</sup> The Beerhouse Act of 1830 liberalised the laws around brewing and selling beer, allowing anyone to produce and sell upon purchase of a two-guinea license.

<sup>74</sup> Peter Haydon, *Beer and Britannia: An inebriated history of Britain* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2001).

roles as labour exchanges, coroner's courts, local meeting venues, and as hosts for burial clubs, friendly societies and other savings groups.

During the 1840s, there was no bank in St George the Martyr parish, thus, in common with many labouring districts, local communities often established their own such savings groups, which are analysed in greater detail in chapter two of this thesis. The precise origins and terms of these organisations are not always documented, but it is probable that many such societies emerged through groups of drinking friends or work colleagues. P.H.J.H. Gosden's 1961 *The Friendly Societies in England 1815-1875* addressed the variety of such organisations that emerged during the nineteenth century, exploring their geographical specificities, as well as their foundational narratives.<sup>75</sup> One of the larger, and more established groups, the Oddfellows, situated their origins in Ancient Rome, and the Foresters went as far back as the Old Testament, citing Adam as their original 'forester'.<sup>76</sup> Gosden argues that the development of such societies illuminates the development and importance of social spaces for working-class communities, and that the deployment of history and locational specificities formed an important basis for the development of ritual, convivial and other identarian activities.<sup>77</sup>

Geoffrey Crossick and R.Q. Gray have assessed the impact of friendly societies in urban communities, in London's Kentish Town and Edinburgh respectively, although their interpretations rest on studying Forester's and Oddfellows courts, which only formed a partial piece of the saving society landscape.<sup>78</sup> The historiographical tendency to focus on big, established societies such as Oddfellows or the Ancient Foresters also enabled E. J. Hobsbawm to situate their evolution as part of the growth of an 'aristocracy of labour', by which social differentiations could emerge within distinct working-class groups and trades by dint of those who could afford membership fees. Nonetheless, this elides the many differences in scale,

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<sup>75</sup> P.H.J.H. Gosden, *The Friendly Societies in England 1815-1875* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1961).

<sup>76</sup> Gosden, *The Friendly Societies in England*, p. 1.

<sup>77</sup> Gosden, *The Friendly Societies in England*.

<sup>78</sup> Geoffrey Crossick, *Artisan Elite in Victorian Society: Kentish London 1840-1880* (London: Croon Helm, 1978), R.Q. Gray *Class Structure and the Formation of Skilled Workers in Edinburgh c.1850-1900* [unpublished thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1973]

reach, and operation of the many smaller, informal, and even women-only societies that existed.<sup>79</sup> Lant Street had its own society, the 'Honest Hearts', based at the Blue-coat Inn.<sup>80</sup> Many of the Southwark savings clubs and societies had patriotic or confident names, such as the 'Hercules' or the 'St George's Royal Union'. There were probably many more informally constituted groups, often arranged around rudimentary insurance and burial funds, and it has been estimated that by 1874 two and a quarter million people in England belonged to some kind of friendly society or savings group.<sup>81</sup> Such clubs were not just a feature or product of urban life, but the concentration of population in places like Southwark, many of whose residents were living and dying far from their place of birth, probably encouraged their formation.<sup>82</sup>

Of cultural and sporting activities there is very little available data for Southwark during the early to mid-nineteenth century. It is likely that many activities, such as dog breeding and fighting, and boxing, carried on out of sight of the authorities. Although these kinds of groups may appear to bear little relationship to the actions undertaken by individuals and groups to support the dying and dead, many mutual savings and burial clubs had their roots in such associational activities, as discussed in greater detail in chapter two of this thesis. A literary society was established in Bridge House in 1832, and its members numbered around three hundred by the 1840s. The subscription was 1/ 1d a year, which would have excluded the poorest, but members received access to around forty lectures a year and a library of some four thousand volumes. There were also three shorter evening talks per week on a variety of topics.<sup>83</sup> Another educational society was established in 1840, which had around six hundred members, and remained in use until around 1900. The society's organisers noted that,

[T]he benefits derivable from it are very great, and its promoters have good reason to be satisfied with the improvement in knowledge, and,

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<sup>79</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, 'The Labour Aristocracy in Nineteenth Century Britain and Trends in the British Labour Movement', *Labouring Men* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973).

<sup>80</sup> There was also the 'New Olive Branch' at the Windsor Castle, Great Suffolk St., the 'Benefit Societies' at the Grapes, also Great Suffolk St., and the Dun Horse on Borough High St., the 'Hercules Union' at The George, the 'William IV' at the Red Lion on Pearl Row and the St. George's Royal Union at the Dover Castle on Surrey St. Reverend Weight, *Statistics of the Parish of St George the Martyr*, p. 67.

<sup>81</sup> Thomas Laqueur, 'Bodies, Death and Pauper Funerals', *Representations*, 1 (1983), 109-131.

<sup>82</sup> David Neave, *Mutual Aid in the Victorian Countryside 1830-1914* (Hull: Hull Academic Press, 1991).

<sup>83</sup> Weight, *Statistics of the Parish of St George the Martyr, Southwark*, p. 63.



consequently, in morals, of a considerable portion of the community of this borough; but yet is felt the want of assistance of the better educated inhabitants, who being independent of little feeling, would check any ebullition in others; and, unfortunately, the withholding their assistance has led to the suspicion that they are unwilling to raise others in intellectual and moral acquirements.<sup>84</sup>

This is an interesting comment for many reasons. It is one of the few uses of the word 'community', in the primary sources about Southwark during this period, but the use of the word precisely emphasises its very lack, underlining a view that there was in fact little engagement between different strata of local society.<sup>85</sup> Reverend Weight judged the society's analysis 'too severe', but then proceeded,

...there can be no doubt that the indifference of the upper classes to the moral destitution of their fellow parishioners, and their too frequent want of co-operation in attempts to lessen it, is a great discouragement to those who are anxious to endeavour to promote improvement, and inflicts **a positive evil** [my emphasis] on the parish.<sup>86</sup>

These comments reveal that, far from being integrated and cohesive, Southwark experienced some divisions and tensions, or perhaps sheer indifference between different social groups. Whilst there were numerous philanthropic institutions in the parish, including three almshouses for elderly women, these invariably carried a set of social and economic assumptions about the separation between donors and beneficiaries. Recipients of charitable places were selected by vestrymen and later guardians, who would decide based on their own moral judgements who was most worthy of their financial support.<sup>87</sup>

Separate from the literary societies, a Southwark Mechanics' Institution had been established by local artisans in the mid-1820s, with the support of Dr George Birkbeck, and an associate of Robert Owen, James Horne, was its president for a while.<sup>88</sup> In 1832, the National Union of the Working Classes (NUWC) lost their

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<sup>84</sup> Weight, *Statistics of the Parish of St George the Martyr, Southwark*, p. 64.

<sup>85</sup> Williams, *Keywords*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>86</sup> Weight, *Statistics of the Parish of St George the Martyr, Southwark*, p. 64.

<sup>87</sup> St George the Martyr Board of Guardian Minutes, various, LMA/SOBG-11.

<sup>88</sup> Iowerth Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth Century London* (Folkestone: Dawson, 1979), p. 253.

meeting place in Finsbury Circus, and moved their classes to Borough Chapel, which until 1831, was the favoured preaching place of Irish mystic John 'Zion' Ward.<sup>89</sup> Since the eighteenth century Borough Chapel had been a favourite site for radical preachers, and by 1832 James Smith, a Scottish preacher inspired by Joanna Southcott, was also a regular, preaching Universalism, 'the identity of the female God with Nature.'<sup>90</sup> The NUWC, and radical Richard Carlile, were also using the Southwark Rotunda, for meetings and lectures on various political and social themes.<sup>91</sup> This included, intriguingly, an attempt by an ex-actress called Eliza Macauley to establish an equitable exchange bank along cooperative lines.<sup>92</sup> How many local residents involved themselves with these activities is not recorded, but there was enough local interest to establish a branch of the Working Men's Association, another small group with radical roots, in Southwark in 1835.<sup>93</sup> There was also a Surrey Tract Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge that ran briefly in the 1830s, but these activities were probably fairly niche.<sup>94</sup>

Places of work were also sites of potential community and solidarity, although the casual nature of much Southwark employment, and the migratory nature of its workforce, such those employed in docks and warehouses, hindered local organising amongst workers.<sup>95</sup> Even in the more structured environments of the manufactories described by George Dodd, work was delineated along specific gender lines, skills sets, and physical parts of the workplace, which must have limited the potential for any notion of collective bargaining.<sup>96</sup> Many jobs were atomised to the extent of piecework in the home, such as sewing or matchbox making, which curtailed the social potential of working life, and probably merged its drudgery into the additional demands of domestic labour.

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<sup>89</sup> Sue Zemka, *Victorian Testaments: The Bible, Christology and Literary Authority in Early Nineteenth-Century British Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

<sup>90</sup> Prothero, *Artisans and Politics*, p. 262.

<sup>91</sup> Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London 1795-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>92</sup> McCalman, *Radical Underworld*.

<sup>93</sup> Prothero, *Artisans and Politics*, pp. 313-314.

<sup>94</sup> *Poor Man's Guardian*, 16 January 1834, p. 443.

<sup>95</sup> Prothero, *Artisans and Politics*.

<sup>96</sup> Dodd, *Days in the Factories*. Also see Alastair Reid, *United We Stand: A History of Britain's Trade Unions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2004).

The conclusions of these data sets are thus variable. Social solidarity could, but did not necessarily, emerge because of close living conditions, and social and economic circumstances did not always create mutual support systems. Dispute could arise between inhabitants of the same house. For example, in February 1848, Charlotte Mallows of 43 Lant Street went on trial accused of stealing two sheets and a shift from a washing line and pawning them. If she did do it, this was both very high risk and desperate. Two women in the adjoining rooms to Charlotte, Mary Ann Porter and Mary Ann Mead, accused her of stealing, for which she was found guilty and imprisoned for six months.<sup>97</sup> On the other hand, individuals could put themselves and their families at great risk to help each other. During the cholera outbreak of 1832, parish surgeon Mr Millard noted how the residents of Silver Street took turns to look after each other.<sup>98</sup> Margaret Donahoo, Hannah Daly, Margaret Tumey and Johanna Connell all assisted one another, and all got sick within a few hours of each other.<sup>99</sup> Such routine care of neighbour's children, the sick or dying, or helping to raise funds to pay for a funeral, were commonplace enough to be remarked upon by Henry Mayhew and Edwin Chadwick amongst others. In this regard the social solidarities of the Irish were particularly admired.<sup>100</sup> The role of neighbours in caring for the sick and dying is examined in greater detail in chapter three of this thesis.

Relationships between Southwark residents, both settled and transitory, during the early to mid-nineteenth century thus remains something of a conundrum. If, how much, when and why they identified with, or supported each other, or those in their neighbourhood, street or shared house, were clearly highly variable. Much data, about local levels of participation in religion, educational establishments or other social groups is unavailable. On the one hand, Reverend Weight reported that wealthier residents appeared to show little interest in the struggles of their less well-economically endowed neighbours, on the other hand, there were high levels of philanthropy in all Southwark parishes. Some residents, like John Day, whose

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<sup>97</sup> Proceedings of the Old Bailey, 28 February 1848, [www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org), version 8.0, [retrieved 24 May 2019].

<sup>98</sup> *Cholera Gazette*, 3 March 1832, p. 150.

<sup>99</sup> *Cholera Gazette*, 3 March 1832, p. 150.

<sup>100</sup> Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* [1851-56] (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1985).

voice recurs in this thesis, committed their lives to local improvement and attempting to lessen the punitive nature of social and economic divides in his parish. Whilst pressure on the rates meant that much-needed work on sewers and drains did not take place, ratepayers voted to raise funds for the poorest during epidemic outbreaks.<sup>101</sup> It appears that times of stress, such as sickness, or tension about housing, rates, or social nuisances, often provided the impetus for Southwark groups to act in concert. The structure of Southwark's social and economic landscape, of casual labour and shifting, multi-occupancy housing, paradoxically both enabled and deterred the opportunities for cooperative and neighbourly behaviours, including actions organised around the dying and dead, the central theme of this thesis.

## Conclusion

To understand the context for some of the practical and cultural changes that framed responses to high levels of mortality in Southwark, this chapter has purposed itself with outlining the economic, social and cultural landscape in which Southwark residents lived and died in the early to mid-nineteenth century. As illustration 2, an image of Borough High Street c.1830 shows, it was also an area under rapid development. Counter to the characterisations of Dickens and other commentators, this chapter argues that Southwark was not just a site of poverty and deprivation, but a socially and economically heterogeneous place. Lant Street, where Dickens lived while his father was in Marshalsea prison, was a diverse collection of residences, ranging from well-to-do tradesmen to paupers, and drawing people from many different counties across Britain.

Reverend Weight's commentary supports this assessment of the Borough as a diverse, albeit predominantly labouring area, which offered residents a variety of social and cultural sites in which to socialise, learn, or worship. Although, in common with other urban areas during this period, Southwark's urban growth added great pressure on resources, such as housing, water and sewerage, it did at the same time

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<sup>101</sup> St Saviour's Vestry Minutes, 15 February 1832, LMA/P92/2221.

support the development of a wide range of institutions, from churches to dispensaries and literary societies. Indeed, counter to the idea that the Borough was predominantly poverty-stricken, its two literary societies consistently had more members than the St Saviour's workhouse had residents. Furthermore, urban sites like Southwark offered social freedoms like public houses, and the chance to encounter people from varied cultural contexts, as well as limited access to education, a thriving scene of friendly societies and doubtless, even though undocumented, many other kinds of associational and leisure activities.

As will be explored in greater detail in subsequent chapters, population growth also had the potential to create tension between different groups. For example, ratepayers regularly complained about the rising costs of supporting paupers, and some of the longer-established Borough residents engaged in a series of long-running disputes with local vestries about the decline of local infrastructure. This included the state of local burial grounds, which it was perceived were becoming overcrowded and thus potentially dangerous to health, an issue which is analysed in chapter five of this thesis. Growing concerns about disease were reflected in the increasing numbers of inquests held to investigate deaths from these causes, assessed in chapter four through an examination of jury verdicts. The new discourses of public health gave some individuals ways of articulating their feelings about these negative elements of urban growth, a recurring theme pursued throughout the thesis. Managing the dying and dead in early to mid-nineteenth century Southwark therefore reflected in part the shifting states of urban life, reflective of the wider social, cultural and economic specificities, possibilities and disruptions occurring in the Borough. The local contexts of the individuals and groups that coped with and managed high levels of mortality as part of these broader historical trajectories has been the focus of this first chapter. Their active and practical responses to the pressures of urban living and dying were varied, matters to which the thesis turns next.



A VIEW OF HIGH STREET SOUTHWARK being THE ANCIENT ROADWAY leading from

Illustration 2: A View of the High Street, Southwark (also known as Borough High Street) c.1830, by George Johannes Scharf. © Museum of London.

## Chapter Two: Buying and selling death in Southwark

At length the day of the funeral, pious and truthful ceremony that it was, arrived. Mr Mould, with a glass of generous port between his eye and the light, leaned against the desk in the little glass office with his gold watch in his unoccupied hand, and conversed with Mrs Gamp; two mutes were at the house door, looking as mournful as could be reasonably expected of men with such a thriving job in hand; the whole of Mr Mould's establishment were on duty within the house or without; feathers waved, horses snorted, silk and velvets fluttered; in a word, as Mr Mould emphatically said, 'Everything that money could do was done.'

Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*<sup>1</sup>

As argued in the introduction to this thesis, Charles Dickens was much preoccupied with the financially transactional nature of life and death in the urban environment, and therefore deeply critical of trades like undertaking. He portrayed undertakers as exploiting the grief and vulnerability of the bereaved, making money from the sale of showy, expensive and gaudy funerals under the pretence that this might 'buy' decency and respectability for the deceased and their families. City life, with its transitory populations, and the sometimes ambiguous social and economic status of the individuals operating in its economic landscape, were the perfect breeding-ground for parasites such as Mr Mould, the undertaker mentioned in the quotation above, to thrive. Mould's funerals purveyed appearance and illusion, reflected by the description of his little glass office, his fake-emotional mutes, and his own rotten name.

Ambivalence about the amounts of money that some individuals and families put by for funerals, and the elaborate ceremonies that might be purchased with these savings, is a feature of analyses of nineteenth century dying and death. Although written in the 1970s, John Stevens Curl's still much-cited thesis about the 'Victorian celebration of death' examined the nineteenth-century culture of extravagant expenditure on funerals and mausolea, often by those who could least afford to pay for it.<sup>2</sup> Private funerals carried an important distinction from the perceived

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* [1844] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 385.

<sup>2</sup> James Stevens Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death* (Newton Abbott: David and Charles, 1972).

ignominy of a basic pauper or parish burial. Referring to Curl, Julian Litten and Pat Jalland note that whilst middle-class Victorians often opted for relatively modest interments, labouring people regularly saved and, in their interpretation, overspent, on lavish burials that their limited budgets could ill-afford.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, those who did save and spend for burial ran the risk of being exploited on several fronts: through disorganised and sometimes corrupt burial and savings clubs, and thereafter the rapacious greed of the undertaking trade.

This chapter argues that assumptions about the decisions that individuals and groups made about saving for and spending on death deserve reassessment. Fitting with the thesis' overall argument that urban life created new possibilities for both the making and unmaking of different kinds of group solidarities organised for the dying and dead it demonstrates that savings clubs and the growing undertaking trade played an important role. Through an analysis of records of savings clubs and societies, and of undertakers and associated businesses, it argues that death historiography has failed to grasp the significance of different aspects of managing death during this period. Savings societies and funeral industries entwined themselves with the growing material, employment and consumer possibilities represented by the dying and dead, but these relationships were not just commercial. The 'buying and selling' of death could take on a wide range of complex purposes, as the interrelationships between clubs and local businesses and employers could develop subtle interdependencies, not just monetary but also social. Furthermore, these relationships could be based on multiple forms of exclusion and inclusion, based on different kinds of affiliation that were not always simply financial.

The history of savings clubs, particularly those that developed into respectable 'friendly societies', has been well documented in a broad range of scholarship from the 1960s to the present. They have been predominantly interpreted as an important evolution of labouring-class mutualism and self-help in the period before trades unions were able to take on some aspects of security and welfare for their

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<sup>3</sup> Julian Litten, *The English Way of Death: The Common Funeral Since 1450* (London: Robert Hale, 1991), Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).



members.<sup>4</sup> As spaces where labouring, artisan and trade communities could create their own models of social support, mutual reliance and conviviality, their significance was noted by E.P. Thompson amongst others as representing important models of working-class cooperative activity, in contradistinction to middle-class values based on individualism and private property.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter argues for a more nuanced interpretation of their activities, demonstrating that, at least in Southwark, some groups were established to assert quite separate identities, based on patriotism, religion, trade or other affiliations. Thus, in the fragmented social landscape of urban Southwark, such groups can also be seen to challenge as well as construct ideas of community and social identity. Mutualism was present, but paradoxically often on highly individuated terms. Savings clubs covered a wide range of size, membership type, durability and financial reliability, which resulted in mixed assessments of their value by middle-class contemporaries. They covered a range of benefits, some offering rudimentary insurance for unemployment or sickness, but with the universal feature of cover for the costs of burial for members, which could be extended to spouses and children. Thus, whilst the terminologies of savings or benefit clubs is used somewhat interchangeably in this chapter, and such groups varied greatly in size and reach, the assumption here is that all such groups were in some form or other burial clubs.

The chapter is divided into two parts. First, it will examine the role, function and spatial density of savings clubs in Southwark during 1830 to 1860. It argues that these groups could offer a variety of benefits for the dying, dead and their families and associates. Many clubs developed quite distinctive identities which helped to create practical and social loci for their members. In addition, savings schemes sometimes enabled labouring people to gain control over their familial burial choices, a matter that carried social and cultural importance for some groups.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See for example, P.H.J.H. Gosden, *The Friendly Societies in England 1815-1875* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961), David Neave, *Mutual Aid in the Victorian Countryside 1830-1914* (Hull: University of Hull Press, 1991), Simon Cordery, *British Friendly Societies 1750-1914* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980). See particularly 'The rituals of Mutuality', pp. 456-469.

<sup>6</sup> Julie Rugg, 'Constructing the grave: Competing burial ideals in nineteenth-century England', *Social History*, 38, (2013), 328-345.

Nonetheless participation in savings clubs could be quite restrictive in practice, with enrolment controlled by issues such as cost, trade and gender. Therefore, the issue of who was permitted to participate in these groups, and how different deaths were accounted for and assigned monetary value, is revealing of complex social and economic formations and tensions, all of which had the capacity to both form and challenge different models of group cooperation and support.

Second, the chapter will analyse the growth of the undertaking trade in Southwark. Nineteenth-century undertakers have been subject to a rather ambivalent, if rather limited, historiography.<sup>7</sup> As noted above, assessments of the sector are sometimes based on Charles Dickens's unflattering literary portrayals of drunken, parasitic and greedy funeral directors like Mr Sowerberry, Mr Trabb and Mr Mould.<sup>8</sup> These unpleasant individuals plied a trade based on fake emotion and the selling of over-priced tat to the recently bereaved. Scrutiny of Southwark's funeral trade supports a more balanced conclusion. Southwark, along with Whitechapel, became a centre for the funeral industry during the early to mid-nineteenth century, and business directories show a sharp growth in the number of undertakers and funeral furnishers during this period. Managing a funeral business involved engagement and work with many different trades, demonstrating the wide variety of activities that constituted labouring populations. Southwark's local economic structure, outlined in the previous chapter, consisted of numerous yards, manufactories and workshops employing carpenters, metal workers, masons, builders, seamstresses and upholsterers, and was therefore well-positioned for equipping nineteenth century funerals, and the skilled undertaker had to be adept at coordinating and cooperating with these various trades.

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<sup>7</sup> Undertakers are much referenced but there remains relatively little detail about their work. See Julian Litten's chapter 'The Trade', in *The English Way of Death: The common funeral since 1450* (London: Robert Hale, 1991), pp. 5-31, Trevor May, *The Victorian Undertaker* (Oxford: Shire, 1996), pp. 9-10. Thomas Laqueur conceives of the trade as basic commercial opportunism, the growth of the funeral industry in tandem with consumer cultures of the mid-nineteenth century, although he ties this analysis mainly to the rise of private cemeteries. See Thomas Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 288-305, also Glennys Howarth, 'Professionalising the Funeral Industry in England, 1700-1960', in *The Changing Faces of Death: Historical Accounts of Death and Disposal*, Peter C. Jupp and Glenys Howarth (eds) (New York: St Martins, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> They appear respectively in Charles Dickens's novels, *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), in which Twist is apprenticed to Mr Sowerberry, Mr Trabb combines the role of tailor and undertaker in *Great Expectations* (1860-1861) and Mr Mould in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1842-1844).

The growth of Southwark's undertaking trade created important employment opportunities for women as well. Not only did they make shrouds, coffin pillows, mattresses, and other associated grave goods, research in Southwark shows that some undertakers and funeral businesses were owned and run by women. For this fact alone, aspects of the undertaking trade deserve reassessment, as this important feature of both the historiographies of death and women's work has hitherto been largely unexplored. Whilst women were expected to work as carers of the dying and layers out of the dead, death historiographies have tended to draw a sharp distinction between these female, private, domestic aspects of managing death, and the male, public role of organising funerals.<sup>9</sup> Southwark's funeral businesses are therefore suggestive of a much more permeable, and possibly changing, relationship between these private and public aspects of managing death.<sup>10</sup>

In this context the development of both savings schemes and the undertaking trade might also be interpreted, as Thomas Laqueur suggests, as part of the evolution of capitalism, whereby death represented yet another commercial and consumer opportunity.<sup>11</sup> Services such as savings clubs and professional funeral management made money by filling the gap that would once have been provided by extended kinship networks that had been fragmented by the experience of migration. Laqueur is correct in this assessment, but the ecology of an urban environment like Southwark has additional complexities to explore. For example, the development of activities such as savings clubs also gave individuals and families some control over their burial choices, which reflects other important issues that are both a function of, but also separate from purely economic ones. Savings clubs could create spaces where individuals and groups could plan and share the risk of their financially precarious situations, but also develop potentially convivial and supportive social networks, demonstrating their allegiances to a trade, a geographical origin, or religious beliefs. Configuring these as assertions of a kind of commercialised 'identity' is to impose a twentieth and twenty-first century set of suppositions on the

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<sup>9</sup> Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, Litten, *The English Way of Death*.

<sup>10</sup> Howarth, 'Professionalising the funeral industry'.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Laqueur, 'Bodies, Death and Pauper Funerals', *Representations*, 1, (1983), 109-131.

behaviours of the past that may inadvertently erase other important aspects of group and individual decisions and behaviours. Laqueur's argument that the growth of the ever-more elaborate funeral in the first half of the nineteenth century is both a reaction against the perceived shame of pauper burial and due to the availability of commercial items such as carriages, mourning jewellery and cheap coffin fittings seems inadequate here. Whilst affordability, and the framework offered by savings societies and professional undertakers to put money by for funerals undoubtedly expedited the ability to buy more goods to mark death, there are surely other dimensions to be considered. It suggests that these might include a need to emphasise death differently amidst the unknown landscape of 'distant strangers'. It might also, as this chapter contends, reflect an assertion and development of alternative kinds of group identity and kinship, through associational activities, cooperation, and resilience and sometimes, dispute.

The chapter is based on several sources. There is limited data about Southwark savings clubs, because of the loose nature of how many of them were constituted, so the focus here is on their geographical density, and an analysis of local recruitment advertisements. Unfortunately, this excludes the ability to analyse the many hundreds of completely informal burial clubs and other forms of saving group, the numbers of which must be speculated upon. The undertaking trade, and its growth, are explored through an analysis of the business directories in the Borough, demonstrating how it evolved from the 1830s to 1860s, to incorporate a wide variety of local and artisan trades. The study of a local undertaker, F.A. Albin and Sons, which was established in the late eighteenth century and is still a working business today, offers an interesting example of how the trade evolved during this period. The testimony of Mr Wild, a Southwark undertaker extensively interviewed by Edwin Chadwick for his 1843 report on intramural interment is also drawn upon, for contextual detail about his work in and around the Borough. In addition, and where relevant, sundry parliamentary and vestry reports are deployed to reflect the increasing reliance that local authorities placed on professional undertakers to manage parish and pauper burials. Sources are limited by a lack of primary accounts of those who, for example, joined savings clubs or prioritised saving for burial as part of their family planning. Their actions and choices have been mediated by their

predominantly middle-class contemporaries, who were often caught between their admiration of the thrift and self-reliance of the labouring classes, and their horror at the contingent and seemingly naïve ways in which these communities organised themselves and their financial affairs. As explored in greater depth below, the cultural gulf between groups and their mutual understanding of motivations and behaviours was, and remains, profoundly important, a function in part of an economic order that left so many vulnerable to lives of appalling material and financial insecurity.

### Saving for death in Southwark

The motives which induce the poor to become members of burial clubs are very mixed. In some cases, it may be to secure a decent burial free of the parish, and in some to leave a little money to those that survive; but it is to be suspected that in many cases the notions are most vague as to what end is sought.

*Fraser's Magazine*, November 1874<sup>12</sup>

As the above quotation from *Fraser's Magazine* suggests, savings clubs, especially burial clubs, which were often associated with labouring and poorer communities, were regarded with scepticism or puzzlement by some nineteenth-century commentators. Middle-class reformers had a somewhat contradictory attitude towards their formation, on the one hand supportive of their potential to encourage sober and thrifty habits in the labouring classes, on the other, expressing concern about possible corruption and poor accounting. *Fraser's*, a current affairs and literary Liberal publication, does dignify the motivations of members with some complexity, acknowledging that the rationale for membership was 'mixed', and might not be reduced to a single factor.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, *Fraser's* was firmly convinced that national schemes, such as a post office bank, would be a safer and more controlled environment for burial and other savings.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Fraser's Magazine*, November 1874, p. 541.

<sup>13</sup> *Fraser's Magazine* was founded in 1830 by Hugh Fraser and William Maginn. It regularly employed writers such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Makepeace Thackeray and Robert Southey. A Tory publication in its early years, it became progressively Liberal.

<sup>14</sup> *Fraser's Magazine* November 1874, pp. 541-555.

The following analysis of Southwark saving clubs in the early to mid-nineteenth century argues that, as *Fraser's* suggests, membership was indeed motivated by complex issues. These ranged from the need for flexible arrangements for planning for death and burial in a highly mobile, mostly young, population, to the assertion of different aspects of group and individual support in a rapidly developing urban environment. Furthermore, the transitory nature of Southwark's communities reinforced the sometimes loose structural arrangements of burial and other clubs. These frameworks could offer at once some rudimentary security for individuals and families, but without necessarily binding them too tightly to financial risk or loss through long-term membership schemes. In this way, planning for the certainty of dying and death became part of building different kinds of alliance, cooperation, and sometimes dispute, under circumstances of great social and economic contingency. The dead became incorporated into different kinds of domestic and local economy, which was both inclusive and exclusive, but which formed its own rationale within the rapid changes wrought by urban life and death.

During the early to mid-nineteenth century, burial clubs in particular gained a reputation for loose accounting arrangements and the potential for fraudulent activities. These were based on occasional lurid press reports about individuals who claimed money for a death that had not occurred, or worse, committed felonies to access funds.<sup>15</sup> These concerns sometimes also appear to have masked a more general anxiety about urban expansion, poverty and population growth. In August 1848 a Dr Jonas Malden wrote to the *Lancet*, expressing the fear that burial clubs gave 'the poor man struggling with difficulties and encumbered with a numerous family, an interest, not in the life, but in the death of his wife and children.'<sup>16</sup> For Dr Malden, worse yet, the burial clubs were the product of a Malthusian nightmare of the 'over-crowded state of our population, the difficulty oftentimes of the poor man in feeding the hungry mouths of his offspring, and the progressive increase of these evils by the unchecked improvidence of early marriages.'<sup>17</sup> In Malden's imaginings,

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<sup>15</sup> For example, Edwin Chadwick described several cases of fraud in burial societies, as well as disapproval of their tendency to spend savings on alcohol. Edwin Chadwick, *Supplementary Report into the Practice of Interment in Towns* (London: Clowes & Son, 1843) pp. 62-68.

<sup>16</sup> *Lancet*, August 1848, p.194.

<sup>17</sup> *Lancet*, August 1848, p.194.

these relatively crude savings schemes exemplified all that is worrisome about the uncontrollable masses, embroiled in a cycle of improvident sex and death, even going as far as to encourage murder. Dr Malden's fears were not universally shared, because burial clubs, whilst often informal in structure, were one of a myriad of savings schemes that mushroomed during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, helping to form a rudimentary insurance system for their members. As a result, there were several legislative attempts to regulate their activities. From 1794 it became a requirement to register as a friendly society, and such groups were subject to further legislation throughout the nineteenth century. Although the figures are unavailable for Surrey, the society registrations for neighbouring Middlesex show a flurry of 384 logged in 1794. Thereafter an average of 48 a year registered until 1831, although there are no statistics for how many of these groups folded over the same period.<sup>18</sup>

By the 1870s there were concerted government attempts to manage the operation of burial clubs and friendly societies much more stringently, in order to regulate the 'singular conjunction of bad laws, shrewd speculators, and ignorant populace' that underpinned their operation.<sup>19</sup> The gulf between official or government views of such schemes and local participation is revealing. By 1874 around two and quarter million men in England and Wales were members of a friendly society, and many also extended cover to their wives and children, and a further 650,000 men, women and children belonged to registered burial clubs.<sup>20</sup> Thousands more were affiliated to informal groups not recorded by official statistics. John Benson's research into English coal miners suggests that by around 1870 nearly every single one was a member of a burial club.<sup>21</sup> Although coal mining was a high-risk job, which may have

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<sup>18</sup> In 1793/4 when it was first required to register the societies 384 were registered, thereafter 1795 – 47; 1796 – 90; 1797 – 20; 1798 – 25; 1799 – 52; 1800 – 36; 1801 – 35; 1802 – 44; 1803 – 40; 1804 – 60; 1805 – 55; 1806 – 54; 1807 – 47; 1808 – 66; 1809 – 68; 1810 – 55; 1811 – 72; 1812 – 52; 1813 – 76; 1814 – 80; 1815 – 58; 1816 – 67; 1817 – 59; 1818 – 62; 1819 – 69; 1820 – 30; 1821 – 43; 1822 – 30; 1823 – 36; 1824 – 20; 1825 – 34; 1826 – 19; 1827 – 27; 1828 – ?; 1829 – 29; 1830 – 56; 1831 – 59. Total: 1,725 LMA – Returns for Middlesex Registration of Friendly Societies - MJ/SP/1831/10/106/02.

<sup>19</sup> Trading Benefit and Burial Societies, and Post-Office Insurance', *Fraser's Magazine*, November 1874, p. 541.

<sup>20</sup> Laqueur, 'Bodies, Death and Pauper Funerals', p. 110.

<sup>21</sup> John Benson, 'The thrift of English coal-miners 1860-1895', *Economic History Review*, 2 (1978) 416-417.

created an incentive for these workers to insure for their deaths that cannot be universally applied elsewhere, this still demonstrates extraordinary levels of participation.<sup>22</sup> Many of the more informal or unregistered clubs were as casual as a street or pub raffle, held when somebody died without the means to otherwise pay for a burial, and to spare the deceased the shame of a parish interment. Anecdotes reported by Edwin Chadwick in his inquiry into interment in towns revealed the tenuousness of such arrangements, as he described tenement residents rallying with collections on the death of a neighbour, in order to avoid a pauper's funeral.<sup>23</sup> Thus many hundreds or even thousands of burial clubs probably fell into the category of associations that Eric Hobsbawm denoted 'primarily, as *societies*, with convivial meetings, ceremonies, rituals and festivities; to the detriment of their actuarial soundness.'<sup>24</sup>

Retrieving the number and membership levels of Southwark's savings clubs for the period 1830 to 1860, before the increase in formal registration of such groups is impossible, given the paucity of primary data available. Nonetheless, what evidence there is there suggests that clubs that saved for sickness and burial were an extensive part of the local landscape, forming potentially convivial spaces for groups to meet, collect, plan and save. In the early 1840s Edwin Chadwick counted around 200 savings clubs in Westminster, Marylebone, Finsbury and Tower Hamlets respectively, ranging in membership numbers from 100 to 800.<sup>25</sup> These were largely supported by 'the labouring classes', and whilst different areas had local social structures around which they organised, it is reasonable to assume that Southwark had similar numbers of groups.<sup>26</sup> In his detailed study for the London Statistical Society of the parish of St George the Martyr, Southwark, undertaken in 1839- 1840, Reverend George Weight noted that there was no savings bank in the parish.<sup>27</sup> There were, however, seven registered savings groups, discussed in greater detail below, which were locally organised and controlled, and filled the gap

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<sup>22</sup> Raphael Samuel (ed.) *Miners, quarrymen and saltworkers* (London: Routledge, 1977).

<sup>23</sup> Chadwick in his *Supplementary Report* notes Mr Leonard, surgeon of St. Martin in the Fields' descriptions of families in the same tenement raising the funds for a burial, p. 32.

<sup>24</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution 1789 – 1848*, [1962] (London: Abacus, 2002) pp. 246-47.

<sup>25</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 57.

<sup>26</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 57.

<sup>27</sup> Reverend George Weight F.R.A.S., F.S.S., *Statistics of the Parish of St George the Martyr, Southwark*, Statistical Society of London, 1840.



that local infrastructure had not supplied. Weight only listed registered clubs, and there were likely many more that met and organised informally or without the knowledge of statistical society surveys. Informal and short-term burial clubs appear to have been very common but were frequently treated with suspicion by the registering authorities. One government official remarked the burial club 'which survives a generation is exceptional', but paradoxically, if a club existed to pay for the deaths of its members, this meant that the structure had served its purpose.<sup>28</sup> In addition, this comment is arguably indicative of the gulf between class-bound attitudes towards mortality and risk. Short-termism was perfectly viable and rational in the context of a highly mobile, transitory and youthful population which also experienced high mortality rates.

Most deaths in the Borough, well over fifty per cent, were those of young children aged under ten years.<sup>29</sup> Their funerals were comparatively cheap, as Chadwick noted 'the actual *cost* of the funeral of a child varies from £1 to 30s' although allowances from savings clubs could go up to three or four pounds to bury a child.<sup>30</sup> Whilst the club could comfortably cover the cost of a child's burial, the overall outlay for the family's membership was modest, if they subscribed for burial only. This covered them for the eventuality of a child's death, but was a relatively small outlay if, for example, they relocated for work and joined a different club elsewhere. Membership of a basic burial club cost between 1*d* and 3*d* a week in the 1830s and 1840s, manageable for most labouring households if the breadwinner was in employment.<sup>31</sup> Some of the larger societies charged double or treble this amount, a much greater financial hit if a member left for any reason, and indicative of why the larger groups, such as Oddfellows, mainly recruited wealthier and more geographically settled artisans and tradesmen.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, whilst the temporary savings club's arrangements may have appeared to be frighteningly contingent to the financially secure and domestically stable middle classes, the organisation and

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<sup>28</sup> Reports of the Assistant Commissioners: Southern and Eastern Counties, Northcote Commission, 1874, pp. xxii, pt.ii (C97), p. 27.

<sup>29</sup> Chadwick, 'Returns of the numbers and ages at which deaths, funerals and births occur in different districts', *Supplementary Report*, pp. 256-266.

<sup>30</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 64.

<sup>31</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 57.

<sup>32</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, pp. 59-63.

constitution of the transitory club or association made sense in the economic planning of a labouring family, whose ability to save fluctuated almost daily in a casual labour market like Southwark's.

Whilst it is impossible to assess accurately the extent and type of saving society membership in Southwark during the early to mid-nineteenth century, the spatial density of different groups and clubs is significant. To calculate the rough density of savings clubs the following analysis rests on two suppositions. First, that the number of parish burials in Southwark demonstrates that most residents paid for their own, or their family's interments, and therefore must have had savings or borrowed to do so. Second, that such records as do exist suggest that most public houses hosted at least one kind of savings club. An estimate of the number of public houses in the Borough, detailed below, suggests that even if only half of them hosted savings clubs, there was still a significant number of such groups. Additionally, although savings clubs were diverse in what they did and did not cover, such as unemployment insurance, or certain kinds of sickness, for example, they all paid for the costs of burial, so the assumption in this section is that all groups were, regardless of formality, size and reach, by default 'burial' clubs of some sort.

The stigma of a pauper or parish burial is the most frequently cited reason for the popularity of savings clubs in the nineteenth century.<sup>33</sup> Essayist and poet Charles Lamb noted as early as 1811 that nothing 'could keep up in the imaginations of the poorer sort of people, a generous horror of the workhouse more than the manner in which pauper funerals are conducted.'<sup>34</sup> Whether Lamb based this assessment on any kind of evidence or interaction with 'the poorer sort of people', or on his own feelings of anguish when he witnessed a parish burial, is not known.<sup>35</sup> Whilst there is primary evidence for the late nineteenth century that people did save for funerals

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<sup>33</sup> Laqueur, 'Bodies, Death and Pauper Funerals', also Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (London: Routledge, 1987), Elizabeth Hurren and Steve King, 'Begging for a Burial: Form, Function and Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Burial', *Social History*, 30 (2005), 321-341.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Lamb, 'On burial societies; and the Character of an Undertaker', *The Reflector*, No.III, Art. xi, 1811. Lamb was part of an influential literary circle, including William Wordsworth and William Hazlitt.

<sup>35</sup> Lamb, 'On burial societies'.

to avoid this fate, there are no accounts for residents of early to mid-nineteenth century Southwark that this motivated them to participate or not in burial clubs.<sup>36</sup>

The vestry and poor law guardian's records for Southwark during 1830 to 1860 contain some minutes of discussions about parish burial, but these notes are usually about practicalities, such as organising tenders for local undertakers, and do not venture into the social perceptions or interpretations of such interments.<sup>37</sup> Although there were specific cemeteries for pauper burials in the Borough, such as Cross Bones and the Lock, parish burials also took place in all of the burial sites still in use in Southwark during the 1830s to 1850s. An analysis of burials in Christ Church, for example, shows that between 1830 and 1845 when the graveyard was closed, a limited number of workhouse burials also took place there.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore there is no evidence from the church register that the burials were conducted with any less ceremony, or at less fashionable times of day, than privately paid-for interments. Mr Wild, a Southwark undertaker interviewed extensively in the *Supplementary Report* noted that three o'clock in the afternoon was the most popular time for burial, and it appears that workhouse burials were also conducted within this popular time-slot.<sup>39</sup> Whilst the clergyman, Mr Mapleton, noted whether the burial was 'pauper' or otherwise in his occasional notes, no other observations were made about the kind of interment offered.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Mr Mapleton served as a vestryman at various times during the 1830s, and was generally supportive of a generous treatment of the poorer members of his parish.

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<sup>36</sup> For the later nineteenth century perspective, see for example Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum* [1971] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), or Maud Pember Reeves, *Round about a pound a week* [1913] (London: Persephone, 2008).

<sup>37</sup> For example, St Saviour's vestry minutes during the later 1830s reveal discussions about extending contracts for handling burial in the workhouse to an undertaker as well as a coffin maker. Bids for these contracts were discussed and issued periodically. St Saviours Parish Vestry Minutes, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

<sup>38</sup> Christ Church Burial Registers, LMA/P92/CTC/60 and LMA/P92/CTC/61. Note the spike caused by cholera burials in 1832-33.

<sup>39</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>40</sup> Christ Church Southwark Burial Register, 1830-1846, LMA/P92/CTC/61.

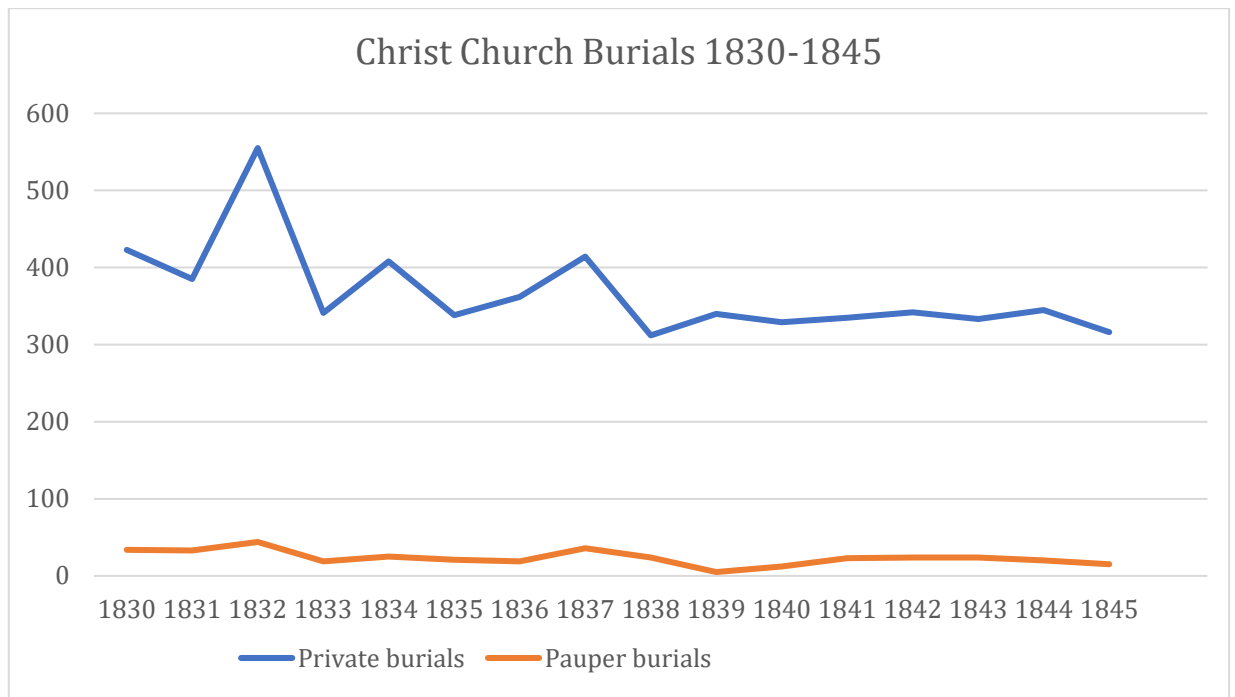


Figure 2: Christ Church burials 1830-1845<sup>41</sup>

Overall, the pauper burials in Christ Church account for roughly 3 per cent of annual burials, which fits with an overall statistic for Southwark parish-funded interments of between 3 and 7 per cent.<sup>42</sup> For example, in the 1830s to 1840s, 3.4 per cent of St Saviour's, 2.3 per cent of St George the Martyr and 5.1 per cent of St Olave's burials were conducted on the parish.<sup>43</sup> Given the social and economic situation of the predominantly labouring communities of Southwark, with mortalities from these communities accounting for well over half of the death rate, it seems reasonable to assume that most of those individuals who did not depend on the parish for their interment, had made some kind of provision for their burial. Funds were not necessarily formally saved up though a burial or other kind of club, of course, but clearly some resource had been found to pay for a private funeral.

Julie Rugg has argued that a motivation behind saving for burial was the important social and cultural distinction for some communities between private and parish interment. Privately-funded burial allowed families of the deceased more control

<sup>41</sup> Christ Church Southwark Burial Register, 1830-1846, LMA/P92/CTC/61.

<sup>42</sup> Christ Church Southwark Burial Register, 1830-1846, LMA/P92/CTC/61.

<sup>43</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, pp. 256-266.

over grave space, an issue which became particularly pressing during the early to mid-nineteenth century due to over-crowding in urban burial sites, and for some, concerns about body-snatching.<sup>44</sup> Rugg bases her assessment on analyses of the social and emotional expectations of families being buried in close proximity to each other, and that the security of the body should not be 'disturbed' by offering multiple interments on the same site. Additionally, the increasing influence of public health discourses argued against multiple-use graves for reasons of hygiene.<sup>45</sup>

These issues may have been important for some groups, but in areas of high population mobility, like Southwark, this case is less compelling. There was every possibility that labouring families would have to relocate regularly for work or other reasons, regardless of where family members were buried. This fact circumscribed the kinds of actions and preparations individuals and groups could make for managing the dying and dead. If the site of burial itself was by necessity invested with less significance, then it is possible that the act of saving to pay for it took on some transference of this meaning, perhaps allowing for a modicum of control over the disposal of the dead and where they were buried. Given the number of burials that clearly were paid for privately it is possible to assume that the ritual of the interment, and how that was funded, held significance. An unknown remains here that is how many individuals returned to visit the burial sites of family and loved ones, or who opted to be buried near family members even if they had relocated away from the relevant parish.

Another aspect to assessing the possible numbers of clubs in Southwark is the spatial density of those groups that have left records. The data is incomplete, but by the late 1830s St George the Martyr parish had seven registered clubs, all based in local public houses. This may seem like a very small number, given that there were 148 pubs and inns in the parish during this time.<sup>46</sup> However, it is important to note that these were the 'registered' clubs only, which even after the 1875 Friendly Society Act, continued to be in the minority, and many continued to be informally

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<sup>44</sup> Rugg, 'Constructing the grave'.

<sup>45</sup> Rugg, 'Constructing the grave'.

<sup>46</sup> Weight, *Statistics for the Parish of St George the Martyr, Southwark*.

organised. The ratio of public houses to residents in St George was roughly one establishment to 350 residents.<sup>47</sup> If this statistic for population to public house is scaled across the Borough then there were around 270 to 300 public houses during the early to mid-nineteenth century. If most of these establishments hosted a club then that constitutes an extensive network, even though numbers joining are unknown. The number of such groups would roughly agree with Chadwick's assessment of 200 clubs for similarly socially-constituted and domestically dense areas of London.<sup>48</sup> St George the Martyr's registered clubs were the New Olive Branch, based in the Windsor Castle and the Benefit Society of the Grapes, both on Great Suffolk Street, the Honest Hearts, at the Blue-Coat Boy on Lant Street, the Benefit Society of the Dun Horse, High Street, Hercules at the George on Waterloo Road, the William IV at the Red Lion, Pearl Row and the St George Royal Union at the Dover Castle on Little Surrey Street. All the clubs were within a few streets of each other.

This density of groups is significant for this thesis, because it demonstrates the kinds of action and energy that individuals and groups were willing to invest in order to prepare for periods of sickness or a death in their family. Furthermore, it shows that there was enough demand for these rudimentary insurance services to support such numbers. Whilst membership records do not survive, making it impossible to assess the exact social configuration or size of the groups, given Southwark's overall social constitution, as discussed in chapter one, it is likely to have been labouring and artisan members that subscribed. Other than those that described themselves simply as a 'benefit' club, the names of the groups give an interesting insight into the use of language to draw on different kinds of kinds of heroic, historic or royalist and patriotic roots for their legitimacy.<sup>49</sup> The olive branch is a sign of peace or victory, and is rooted in Greek mythology, and Hercules has a similarly Greek/Roman heritage. King William IV died in 1837, which may explain the use of his name for a club, or it may be due to his passing of the Beer Act – the 'King William' is England's most popular 'royal' public house name, and there is evidence that it was deployed

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<sup>47</sup> Weight, *Statistics for the Parish of St George the Martyr, Southwark*.

<sup>48</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 57.

<sup>49</sup> Gosden, *The Friendly Societies in England 1815-1875*.

as a moniker for drinking clubs as well.<sup>50</sup> The St George Royal Union needs no explanation for its patriotic nature, and the Honest Hearts presumably hoped to convey their upright respectability through their name. The use of language is important, and for some groups, unless the names were being used in humour, this presumably helped to establish a sense of allegiance or other kind of group affiliation *and* exclusion. It is unlikely an anti-Royalist would have sought to join the William IV, for example. With potentially 200 or more clubs to subscribe to, naming must have conveyed some purpose, unless the group was simply called after the public house in which they met. The references to long historical memory, amidst the churn of rapidly evolving urban life and transitory communities, may have been a conscious or unconscious signifier of longevity and established credentials. Nineteenth-century radicals often saw themselves as the genuine patriots and friends of the constitution. These kinds of names, and imagery, are very common in friendly society banners.

There were other ways beyond heroic names that individuals could express various affiliations through membership of benefit societies. As well as public house-based benefit clubs, some Southwark associations had their roots in other kinds of organisation, such as local chapels and religious groups, political allegiances, or the geographical origins of members. One of the few groups to leave records from this period was that of the Southwark Christian Brotherly Society.<sup>51</sup> Although their exact dates of operation are not available, they were active during the early to mid-nineteenth century. The Society, unlike their public house counterparts, made it a point of virtue that they did not serve alcohol at their quarterly meetings. They met at Carter Lane, just off Tooley Street, which was the centre of Southwark's workshop and manufacturing district. Around 80 per cent of the annual death rate in this parish, St Olave, were described as artisan and labouring classes.<sup>52</sup> The 1878 edition of *Old and New London* described it as an area teeming with 'wharfingers, merchants, salesmen, factors and agents; outfitters, biscuit bakers, store-shippers, ship-chandlers, slop-sellers, block-makers and rope-makers; engineers and others,

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<sup>50</sup> Peter Haydon, *Beer and Britannia: An inebriated history of Britain* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2001).

<sup>51</sup> Minute Book of the Christian Brotherly Society LMA/ACC1809/1.

<sup>52</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 257.

together with the usual varieties of retail tradesmen', so membership was probably derived from groups of these working men.<sup>53</sup> The quarterly meetings discussed payments for burial and sickness, and elected new members to the group. As with all savings societies they operated with rules such as refusing cover for babies under eight weeks, or accepting new members aged over 50.<sup>54</sup>

For the more radically-minded the 'Associated Brothers Benefit Society' advertised in the unstamped *Poor Man's Guardian* in 1832 for 'HEALTHY MEN' under fifty years of age to join their savings club at the Five Bells in Southwark.<sup>55</sup> Describing themselves as 'established upon the most improved and economical principles' the club was purely for sickness, lying-in and burial costs, and did not cover unemployment. For the price of 2s 4d a month, members would receive 15s a week for sickness, £15 for a member's death (assuming they had fulfilled the minimum period of membership criteria) and £7 10s for the death of a wife.<sup>56</sup> A universal feature of all benefit clubs was the offer of around half or less of the payment on the death of a wife than the main club member, presumably reflecting the fact that male subscribers were more likely to be the household's main breadwinner, and their death had more significant economic consequences for the family. The payments for sickness and death did not change very much during 1830 to 1860, because the 'Southwark Birmingham Benefit Society', founded by migrants from the West Midlands, and who met weekly on Thursday evenings at the Duke's Head in St Saviour's, offered identical fees and payments to members in July 1840, offering £15 on the death of a member and £7 10s on the death of a wife.<sup>57</sup> This club was open to 'HEALTHY MEN of all ages and trades' and carried the rules of 'no spending money, no fines for stewards, stock shared every year.' Somewhat casually, names of new members could be 'entered any time at the Bar.'<sup>58</sup>

The Ancient Foresters, which originated in Yorkshire, were initially established by migrants from that county in the Borough, in a public house of the same name that

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<sup>53</sup> *Old and New London, Volume VI* (London: Casser, Petter & Galpin, 1878).

<sup>54</sup> Minute Book of the Christian Brotherly Society LMA/ACC1809/1.

<sup>55</sup> *Poor Man's Guardian* No.53, June 16, 1832, p. 8.

<sup>56</sup> *Poor Man's Guardian* No.53, June 16, 1832, p. 8.

<sup>57</sup> *Morning Advertiser* 18 July 1840, p. 1.

<sup>58</sup> *Morning Advertiser* 18 July 1840, p. 1.



still stands today on Southwark Park Road. Registered as a friendly society by 1850, the Foresters had their origins in the late eighteenth century, in Kirkdale, Leeds. Philanthropy was important to this group, and their objects stated that they wished 'to unite the virtuous and good in all sects and denominations of man in the sacred bonds of brotherhood, so that while wandering through the Forest of this World they may render mutual aid and assistance to each other.'<sup>59</sup> Migrants from Yorkshire carved a strong identity in Southwark, also establishing their own parochial school and charitable works for children with at least one parent from Yorkshire.<sup>60</sup> This suggests that, at least for some communities, origin continued to be a powerful emotional and practical motivator, even after relocation, and savings and benefits societies could be a way to reinforce this.

A 'very superior society', the 'Hand-in-Hand' met every other Thursday at the Queen's Arms near Southwark Bridge Road, offering an enhanced £20 on the death of a member and £10 on the death of his wife.<sup>61</sup> Nonetheless, their terms were rather more stringent and detailed than many other clubs, stating,

These benefits do not depend on contingencies, as is the case with too many in the present day, but are secured by a large capital in the public funds; nor is the society indiscriminately open to persons of all ages and trades; no-one can be admitted whose trade is injurious to health; and each person must pay according to age at time of admission [...] rules may be seen or had at the bar where members may be entered at any hour of the day.<sup>62</sup>

Given the dangerous nature of much of Southwark's employment, in docks, manufactories and building sites, the exclusion of anyone in an unspecified 'trade injurious to health' must have been very wide indeed. The comparatively generous payment on the death of a member also suggests that this club was aimed at tradesmen and small business owners, rather than labourers. Nonetheless, Chadwick estimates the costs in London of a 'Tradesman First Class' funeral as £50, and a 'Tradesman Second Class' as £27,

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<sup>59</sup> Victoria Solt-Dennis, *Discovering Friendly and Fraternal Societies* (Oxford: Shire, 2005).

<sup>60</sup> Weight, *Statistics of the Parish of St George the Martyr, Southwark*.

<sup>61</sup> *Morning Advertiser* 15 February 1841, p. 1.

<sup>62</sup> *Morning Advertiser* 15 February 1841, p. 1.

compared to an artisan or labourer's funeral costing £5.<sup>63</sup> Thus the 'Hand-in-Hand' would not have covered the costs of a second-class trade burial, whereas the less exclusive clubs more than covered the costs of interment for their members. This may reflect the less tenuous financial arrangements of 'Hand-in-Hand' members, however, who had other means of topping up funeral costs.

It was not just the benefit clubs that competed and advertised for members. Publicans regularly offered to host benefit clubs, for the obvious reason it gave them a steady stream of customers, and it was commonplace for them to offer 'an excellent large room' or 'a spacious commodious room' for such groups and societies to meet.<sup>64</sup> In addition, many publicans collaborated with undertakers, who might offer deals for membership burial costs. Chadwick rather disapproved of these arrangements, observing that other trades might also be involved, noting,

The state of feeling addressed in the formation of these societies is denoted by the placards issued at the joint expense of the publican or of the undertaker, or rather of some mechanic or some person of another trade, who gets the business done by an undertaker. These placards are frequently headed 'In the midst of life we are in death.'<sup>65</sup>

This underlines another important element often missing in the historiographical analysis of savings clubs. They also formed useful local economic links, not just with those trades that might obviously benefit from their formation, such as publicans and undertakers, but with printers or other mechanics and businesses. Again, it is impossible to assign an exact figure to how much trade or employment such additional activities provided in the Borough, but with potentially 200 or more clubs to service it was probably not insignificant. This underlines strongly local nature of the Southwark economy during the early to mid-nineteenth century, reliant on the many small and

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<sup>63</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 70.

<sup>64</sup> *Morning Advertiser*, 17 July 1846, p.1 and 31 December 1834, p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 58.

medium workshops and yards for both employment and other activities, such as saving for sickness and death.<sup>66</sup>

For their members, Southwark's savings clubs were primarily a way of developing a basic safety-net for surviving disaster such as sickness or unexpected death in the family. Nonetheless, in some instances membership conferred additional layers of social or other means of local participation on members. This is suggested by the different names that clubs gave themselves, the locations they met in, and the periodicals in which they advertised for members. Savings clubs also exercised control about who could join, creating a nuanced dynamic around the ways in which belonging might be defined, in the shifting context of rapidly changing urban landscape. Whilst the geographical spread of such groups appears to have been extensive, with clubs occupying a presence in most public houses where records are still extant, many groups were far from open to all comers. This raises a series of intriguing issues, about how those individuals who subscribed related to their group, whether membership bestowed any kind of collective identity or purpose on members, and how groups decided amongst themselves the terms and conditions of participation.

Beyond the practicalities of saving for family disasters, such as sickness or death, these associations also suggest the desire to create solidarities and group support to help mitigate the risks of highly contingent work, domestic and health circumstances. Whilst, as noted above, there were also rural mutual savings societies, so such activity cannot simply be attributed to the conditions of urban life, the range and probable number of groups in an area like Southwark implies that other dynamics were also important. Paradoxically, even in a context where groups came together to share risk, criteria for membership could be about exclusion as well as inclusion, based on affiliations such as origin or religion. The faceless mass of sprawling urban population so dreaded in Dr Malden's Malthusian nightmare

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<sup>66</sup> A point reinforced by Martin Dauntton in his analysis of the British economy is how local much of it remained during the eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century. See Martin Dauntton, *Progress and Poverty: An Economic and Social History of Britain 1700-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

quoted at the beginning of this section, could apparently be rather segmented, differentiated and selective in their savings activities.

### Selling death in Southwark: The rise of the undertaking trade

Undertakers: the gentlemen who provide humanity with its last lodging require no cards to designate their calling. It is written on their faces, in their deportment, on their habiliments – all over them. They are their own cards. If one was to meet an undertaker under the shadow of the pyramids, or at Spitzbergen, there could be no difficulty in recognising him as a member of the funeral profession.

*Reynolds's Miscellany*, April 14, 1866<sup>67</sup>

As the above quotation suggests, the undertaking trade in the nineteenth century was treated with ambivalence by some contemporary commentators, a theme which has been pursued by much subsequent death historiography.<sup>68</sup> Discussed in greater detail below, some assessments of undertakers of this period argue that the trade had the reputation of being greedy and somewhat parasitic, preying on the emotional vulnerabilities of the recently bereaved. This critique has lasted well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, demonstrated by Evelyn Waugh's satirical novel 'The Loved One' and Jessica Mitford's still much-referenced 'The American Way of Death'.<sup>69</sup> Indeed the very designation of funerals and undertaking as a 'trade' rather than a service or support, underlines the assumption that undertakers handled death as a manufactory process, rather than offering any practical or socially useful purpose.

The opening quotation underlines a further important point that has helped to shape perceptions of the undertaking trade. *Reynolds's* was launched in 1850 by George Reynolds, a dedicated Chartist, and firmly aimed at a working-class readership. An important thread throughout his publication was that readers should not be duped by the social and cultural practices of their so-called 'betters.' Funeral practitioners were often accused of being, in effect, performers, selling fake

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<sup>67</sup> *Reynolds's Miscellany*, April 4, 1866, p. 269.

<sup>68</sup> Jalland describes the unnecessary extravagance of much Victorian funeral planning, often based on the ignorance of the undertakers about the origins of practices such as feathermen, Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, pp.196-202.

<sup>69</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *The Loved One* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1948), Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death* (London: Quartet, 1980).

sentiment and emotion to make money. Their lugubrious appearance was an adopted identity, and in this context, they are further objectified as being 'calling cards', so ubiquitous is their appearance and demeanour. Furthermore, Charles Dickens remains on occasion a somewhat unquestioned source for historiographical accounts of undertakers.<sup>70</sup> His depictions of undertakers like Mr Sowerberry in *Oliver Twist*, Mr Trabb in *Great Expectations* and Mr Mould in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, offer unflattering portrayals as pedlars of fake emotion and overpriced tat. Oliver Twist's first funeral is a depressing affair presided over by Mr Sowerberry. The clergyman is late, and reads 'as much of the burial service as could be compressed into four minutes,' and under Sowerberry's orders the body is thoughtlessly tossed into a crammed grave and stamped down with a few inches of earth by the gravedigger.<sup>71</sup> The cemetery is swiftly locked up, the whole event having taken only a few moments, for which the undertaker is to be handsomely paid. "Well Oliver," said Sowerberry as they walked home, "How did you like it?"<sup>72</sup>

This section argues for a critical reassessment of the role of undertakers, the trade, and their relationship to local communities in the early to mid-nineteenth century. As with any business or selling of services, there were cases of exploitative or dishonest behaviours which received wide publicity. For example, in 1839, the Enon Chapel near the Strand was discovered to have thousands of bodies unceremoniously crammed under its floorboards, stuffed there by a corrupt Baptist minister in collusion with local undertakers.<sup>73</sup> Not only was the packed undercroft thought to be a public health danger, it was reported that once it got too full, bodies were flushed down a storm sewer into the Thames, to make room for more interments and money for the Minister and his collaborators.<sup>74</sup>

Finally, the undertaking trade was inevitably caught up in wider debates of the 1830s to 1850s about the miasmatic risks of intramural burial, which are discussed at greater length in chapter five of this thesis. The vested interests of undertakers in

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<sup>70</sup> Jalland, *Death and the Victorian Family*, Morley, *Death, heaven and the Victorians*, Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death*, Litten, *The English Way of Death*.

<sup>71</sup> Dickens *Oliver Twist* [1837-39] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), p. 48.

<sup>72</sup> Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, p. 48.

<sup>73</sup> Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*, (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 2015), pp. 219-220.

<sup>74</sup> Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*, pp. 219-220.

keeping burial locally controlled, some even owning their own burial sites, was heavily criticised by campaigners such as Edwin Chadwick and George Albert Walker as placing pecuniary interest before the health of the public.<sup>75</sup> As noted in the first section of this chapter, many undertakers were also secretaries of local burial clubs, a further vested interest that blurred the lines of propriety and self-interest in the perceptions of their critics.<sup>76</sup>

This chapter argues for a subtler account of the undertaking trade, one which also acknowledges their social purposes, and embeddedness into an extensive network of local trades, which created significant economic activities and employment possibilities. In Southwark, most undertakers ran small firms that were involved with a multitude of local businesses, such as tailors, seamstresses, upholsterers, metalworks, carpenters, masons, builders, feather dyers, printers, publicans, carriage makers, and mattress makers. These groups of workers made up the local communities of Southwark, and the need to bury their dead was both a practical reality and an opportunity for work. Many of these workers combined one or more trades with their undertaking duties. Due to the structure of its local economy, which supported hundreds of small and medium workshops, Southwark became something of a centre for the funeral industry in the nineteenth century, so whilst it is not possible to assess precise numbers involved, the sector was undoubtedly a significant employer.<sup>77</sup> In addition, Southwark sources reveal that several undertakers and funeral businesses were owned and run by women, an aspect of the industry which has been hitherto largely unexplored. Although women were mainly responsible for 'laying out' the dead prior to burial, their role as undertakers is less well documented. This is not to imply that women undertakers were any less capable of being performers, or as greedy and corrupt as their male counterparts, but it does challenge gender assumptions about the undertaker's role, begging the question of what other aspects of the trade may have been inadvertently overlooked by historiography.

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<sup>75</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, George Alfred Walker, *Gatherings from Grave Yards* (London: Longman, 1839).

<sup>76</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 60.

<sup>77</sup> Litten, *The English Way of Death*, p. 20.

As an area of high immigration during the early to mid-nineteenth century, the majority of Southwark's many migrant communities had to cope with the practicalities of death in the cramped and inadequate domestic circumstances of their new urban life. The deployment of professional support to help with caring for, removing, and burying bodies, tasks often undertaken by neighbours and friends in smaller, rural communities, provided a useful and necessary service. An often-overlooked feature of the growth of the undertaking trade during this period is its relationship to migration, and the requirement for assistance for those who did not necessarily have extended kinship networks on which they could depend for help in these matters. Thus, whilst the undertaking trade could cause controversy, with its publicised cases of greed or corruption, there were also important ways in which it also contributed to local community, cooperation and employment and offered an important support service to those coping with death.

The sources on which these arguments are based are from local business directories, records from individual Southwark funeral businesses, interviews by Edwin Chadwick with undertakers, newspaper and journal reports, and occasional reference to the meeting minutes of Southwark vestries and poor law guardians. These sources demonstrate the extensive reach of the undertaking business during this period, and the diversity of trades with which it worked. The material is limited by the lack of first-hand accounts of, for example, those who 'bought' the services of undertakers, so there is no way of assessing their feelings about the service they received, or how they made decisions about the expenditure they incurred to pay for interment. The exception to this are those cases of dispute between customers and undertakers that were reported in the press, and were, by default, unusual enough to be considered newsworthy. Overreliance on these press sources by historiography of the trade has been, arguably, one of the reasons that undertaking has been interpreted in such a negative light.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> The case of the Enon Chapel is much referenced as an egregious example of the undertaking trade. See Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*, pp. 219-220, Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians*, (London: Studio Vista, 1971), p. 38 and p. 61, Walker, *Gatherings from Grave Yards* makes ten references to Enon Chapel, on pp. 17, 18, 20, 137-38, 149, 154, 177, 236 and 248.

The significance of the undertaking trade in early to mid-nineteenth century Southwark, this section argues, is not just how quickly it evolved and embedded into the local economy, developing its own networks of local tradesmen and women and associated workers, but how behaviours and actions adapted in urban contexts to make use of the services it offered. The deployment of undertakers by all classes, rather than just the wealthy, as in previous centuries, is a shift which is suggestive of more than simply the increasing availability and affordability of funeral furnishings, or the sales skills of undertakers. It also offers insights into the material and social changes that were happening to individuals in urban communities, many of whom lived and died far away from their places of birth. In the nineteenth century undertaking was very much a feature of towns and cities, as rural communities continued to manage their own interments without professional intervention.<sup>79</sup> The undertaking trade can therefore be interpreted as, at least partially, a product and marker of the experience of displacement.

Perhaps surprisingly, historiography about the rise of the undertaking trade in the nineteenth century offers relatively little research exploring the social, economic or cultural significance of the sector. One of the few texts dedicated to the trade, Trevor May's *The Victorian Undertaker*, has little detail on what the job involved and the social context in which it evolved, and focuses instead on an account of Victorian burial practices.<sup>80</sup> Julien Litten provides a useful overview of the trade as it developed from the early modern period, but less about what undertakers actually offered the bereaved, or why their trade gained the significance it did. Litten concludes that,

The [undertaking] trade in the nineteenth century does not stand up to close examination. In the main they were a semi-educated band with neither trade nor union affiliation, and greedy – the occasional client was brought to financial ruin by undertakers charging over-inflated and extortionate prices for an unnecessary spectacle that few could either afford or understand.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Trevor May, *The Victorian Undertaker* (Oxford: Shire, 1996), p .5.

<sup>80</sup> May, *The Victorian Undertaker*.

<sup>81</sup> Litten, *The English Way of Death*, p. 31.



Despite the criticism of their greed, Litten goes on to speculate about why undertakers did not operate a yet more rapacious approach to business by, for example, taking over the sale of mourning dress, jewellery and stationary.<sup>82</sup> Perhaps for Litten this is further evidence of the 'semi-educated' nature of those involved in undertaking, underlining a recurrent theme in critiques of the trade. Both contemporary and historiographical accounts make frequent allusions to the social class of undertakers, underlining why it is always referred to as a 'trade'. As journalist and close friend of Dickens, Douglas Jerrold wrote in 1840, 'No man (that is, no *tradesman*) has a more exquisite notion of the outward proprieties of life – of all its external decencies, luxuries, and holiday show-making, than your Undertaker.'<sup>83</sup>

As Jerrold's remark suggests, undertaking firms frequently had their roots in artisan and labouring businesses. These trades were carpentry, building and masonry, the latter two because prior to the growth in the number of hireable carriages or hearses they often owned the only appropriate transport to move coffins over distances.<sup>84</sup> Many tradespeople continued to combine these jobs with organising funerals, a feature of the business which remained well in to the twentieth century. Although some undertakers were from better-off backgrounds, it was overall not considered a middle class or gentlemen's occupation.<sup>85</sup> Herein may lie a further ambivalence about the undertaker. Jerrold's 'tradesmen' might be invited through the front door into the bourgeois domestic spaces of their social superiors, contracted to handle the intimacies involved in removing bodies of their dead.

The socially transgressive nature of undertaking was further reinforced by the clothing and costume associated with formal funerals, which can also mask class differences, making the undertaker's status ambiguous and hard to define.<sup>86</sup> Jerrold's reference to 'holiday show-making' and 'luxuries' underlines this element

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<sup>82</sup> Litten, *The English Way of Death*, p.3 1.

<sup>83</sup> Jerrold, quoted in May, *The Victorian Undertaker*, p. 4. Dickens was Jerrold's pall-bearer at his funeral in West Norwood in June 1857, see Michael Diamond, *Victorian Sensation* (London: Athenaeum, 2003), p. 259.

<sup>84</sup> May, *The Victorian Undertaker*, p. 5.

<sup>85</sup> Litten, *The English Way of Death*.

<sup>86</sup> Glennys Howarth, *Last Rites: The Work of the Modern Funeral Director* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

of borrowed identity that some critics of the trade found objectionable. Dickens's Mr Mould, with his silks, velvets, feathers and gold watch, similarly masks his, by implication, humble social origins through the pretence of the funereal spectacle. A correspondent to the London *Daily News* in June 1853, objected to the advertising he received from undertakers, who, on hearing of a serious illness in his family, began petitioning their services to him,

I am forthwith inundated with undertakers' circulars, in which all the horrid paraphernalia of the tomb are set out, together with various merits, "readiness", "Dispatch" &c., of the applicant, expectant of his job, and all this is shamelessly, indecently, wantonly thrust before the very eyes of afflicted relatives [...] I say nothing against undertakers as a *class* [my emphasis] [...] but practices like those to which I refer it seems to be cannot be too widely held up to public disgust and abhorrence<sup>87</sup>

The correspondent implicitly objects to the social status of the profession, but also their deployment of modern techniques of advertising and self-promotion, in his view a crass commercialisation of death. Thomas Laqueur emphasises this point about social ambiguities by situating the development of the undertaking trade in the broader context of the growth of consumer culture in the nineteenth century.<sup>88</sup> The most basic pauper or private funeral, consisting of a plain pine coffin and four bearers could be made ever-more elaborate with a growing array of extras, such as coffin plates, shiny nails, or a fine cloth pall, and in this way, notes Laqueur, 'the nineteenth century funeral was built [...] and there was almost no limit as to what could not be added from the stores of funereal consumer goods provided by the new industrial economy.'<sup>89</sup>

Ruth Richardson posits a different theory about ambivalence towards undertakers, albeit also focusing her analysis on class.<sup>90</sup> She argues that the involvement of some undertakers in body snatching scandals, particularly in the early nineteenth century, had already undermined trust in the profession, and as with resurrectionists and

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<sup>87</sup> *Daily News*, June 20, 1853, Issue 2209.

<sup>88</sup> Thomas Laqueur, 'Bodies, Death and Pauper Funerals', pp. 109-131.

<sup>89</sup> Laqueur, 'Bodies, Death and Pauper Funerals', p. 114.

<sup>90</sup> Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*.

anatomists, they became identified as traders in and beneficiaries of death.<sup>91</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, and after the passing of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which amongst other measures prevented parish burials from providing anything but the most basic of interments, middle-class consumers became anxious to distinguish their funerals from simple pauper affairs. According to Richardson,

In the undertaker's hands, the funeral came to possess flexible potential in the assertion of financial status: various levels of expenditure could purchase equally various permutations of coffin strength and durability, grave or vault site, security and funerary display. Manifest in the increasingly commercialised trappings of death, the funeral came to be the rite of passage *par excellence* by which to assert financial and social position – a secular last judgement which had as its goal the exhibition of worldly respectability.<sup>92</sup>

Laqueur and Richardson both temper their assessments by positioning the success of the undertaking trade in the material conditions of the nineteenth century, but their analyses rest on the assumption that consumer cultures are both passive and pervasive. They also fail to address the geographical and demographic aspects of the growth of professional undertaking during the early to mid-nineteenth century, which is suggestive of other influences underpinning its growth.

As noted above, the deployment of undertakers was almost exclusively associated with urban areas during the early to mid-nineteenth century. The rapidly changing conditions of the city environment, with its expanding, and highly mobile populations, created markets for services and support systems that were far less important in smaller, settled communities. Writer William Howitt noted in 1844 that,

Nothing can, in fact, be more widely different in feeling and effect than town and country funerals. In town a strange corpse passes along, amid thousands of strangers, and human nature seems shorn of that interest which it ought, especially in its last stage, to possess. In the country, every man, woman, and child goes down to the dust amid those who have known them from their youth, and all miss them from their place.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, p. 272.

<sup>92</sup> Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, p. 272.

<sup>93</sup> Howitt, quoted in May, *The Victorian Undertaker*, p. 6.

Whilst it is important to caveat Howitt's remarks by noting his somewhat sentimental admiration of nature and rural life, he underlines the purpose of professional intermediaries in urban burial, which might be required for those living and dying 'amid thousands of strangers.'

As the overall argument of this thesis attests, in urban contexts other kinds of support, networks and actions became possible in developing forms of connection and resilience, and these often organised around the dying and dead. This thesis interprets the undertaking trade, and its involvement with multiple trades and savings clubs, as part of this evolution in urban relationships and organising. Indeed, by the mid to late nineteenth century, many trade groups and savings societies ran quite elaborate and very well-attended urban funerals, creating funeral corteges that were far from anonymously trundling through unknown crowds. By the end of the nineteenth century many working-class trades and union funerals had become vast spectacles, attended by hundreds of people, especially if the person being buried had died in a spectacular or brave way, or their fellow workers wished to assert a point about the dangers or inequities of their trade. These were ways in which working people could actively plant themselves on the city landscape, albeit briefly. For example, the funeral cortege of Metropolitan Fire Brigade Officer Thomas Ashford, killed when the Alhambra Theatre burnt down in 1882, was accompanied by nearly 1,000 firemen and police officers, and the procession was a mile and a half in length.<sup>94</sup>

In Southwark, as noted above, the undertaking trade developed rapidly during the Borough's peak periods of population growth. Although the increase was not evenly spread across Southwark's parishes of St Saviour, St George the Martyr and St Olave, during the first half of the nineteenth century numbers of residents rose between 50 and 79 per cent.<sup>95</sup> Whilst a direct correlation is impossible to establish, the number of undertakers in the community increased by 187 per cent during this

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<sup>94</sup> May, *The Victorian Undertaker*, p .5.

<sup>95</sup> For example, Leonard Reilly in *The Story of the Borough* (London Borough of Southwark: 2009) estimates a 79 per cent increase in Southwark's population but Parliamentary Papers 1852-1853 lxxxv (1631) estimate 50 per cent.

period.<sup>96</sup> Of course, these businesses were not just serving the Southwark populace, but nonetheless, this represents an impressive growth rate.

Although it falls slightly outside the timeframe for this thesis, an analysis of the funeral trade in Southwark in the 1820s, is useful to demonstrate the growth of the sector. There were sixteen listed undertakers in the Borough during this period, including one woman, Eleanor Powell, based on Joiner Street.<sup>97</sup> Demonstrating the beginnings of a transition from general to specific funeral 'trade', there were two businesses described as 'cabinet makers and undertakers', and seventy-six businesses listed undertaking as a side-line for customers to their other activities, which included cabinet-making, carpentry, coffin-making, appraising and upholstering. The majority of these, sixty-eight in total, described their primary business as carpentry.<sup>98</sup> But only twelve years later, in 1832, the number of undertakers in Southwark had risen to forty-five specialist businesses.<sup>99</sup> Seven companies listed under the same name as in the 1820s, including Eleanor Powell, who had by now moved her shop to larger premises in a busier thoroughfare in St Olave parish, on Tooley Street.

Eleanor was not the only female undertaker, having been joined in the trade by Sarah Innot on Weston Street and Mary Ann Williamson on King Street. In addition, there were sixteen businesses that offered cabinet-making and undertaking combined, eighty-one offering carpentry or upholstery and undertaking, including a woman carpenter, Sarah Marsland, on Union Street, and eight appraisers who could also be contracted for a funeral. Three companies had established themselves to provide funeral feathers, including Hannah Watts of Roebuck Place, and ten stone masons offered their services for funerals, including two owned by women, Elizabeth Stephens and Mary Hayward. In total this amounted to 163 businesses in the Borough either solely, or partially, involved in the undertaking trade.

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<sup>96</sup> *Pigot's Commercial Directory for London 1820* (Manchester: James Pigot, 1820).

<sup>97</sup> *Pigot's Commercial Directory for London 1820* (Manchester: James Pigot, 1820).

<sup>98</sup> *Pigot's Commercial Directory for London 1820* (Manchester: James Pigot, 1820).

<sup>99</sup> *Pigot's Commercial Directory for London 1832* (Manchester: James Pigot, 1832).

By the late 1840s, the number of undertakers had declined in the Borough to thirty-three, five of which were owned or run by women, and only one business combined cabinet-making and undertaking.<sup>100</sup> Eleven carpenters offered both services, including Frances Bisley and the appropriately-named Mrs Wood, as did two builders, one of them a Mrs Hernage.<sup>101</sup> By the 1850s, the number of undertakers had risen again, to forty-six, three of whom were women.<sup>102</sup> Only five carpenters offered funerals as well, now outstripped by upholsterers who were increasingly moved into this trade, with eight listed in the Borough. Edwin Chadwick estimates that around this time there were 275 undertakers in the metropolis, which means nearly 17 per cent of them were in the Borough.<sup>103</sup>

The changing nature of the trade, and the numbers of businesses involved in organising funerals reflects various trends. These include the diminishing number of carpenters and builders involved, underlining a rise in specialisation which might be expected given the growing number of funerals required because of population growth, and greater accessibility to goods such as carriages, which took much of the advantage away from builder-undertakers. Also striking is the number of women involved in undertaking, an issue which has received relatively limited analysis. Historiographies of dying and death have largely assumed that whilst women were involved in the domestic, private realm of death, men organised the public aspect of burial, women often being actively discouraged from even attending funerals during this period.<sup>104</sup> Whether or not Eleanor Powell, Sarah Innot and others conducted funerals is not known, but their listings as ‘undertaker’ suggest they were licensed to do so. There were three main branches of nineteenth-century undertaking, coffin making, undertaking and funeral furnishing.<sup>105</sup> Coffin makers could conduct funerals, although not all did. The undertaker was a coffin maker and a performer of funerals, whereas the furnisher bought coffins, but decorated and finished them him or herself, as well as performing funerals.

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<sup>100</sup> Post Office London Directory, 1848.

<sup>101</sup> Post Office London Directory, 1848.

<sup>102</sup> Watkins Commercial and General Directory of London, 1854.

<sup>103</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 53.

<sup>104</sup> Pat Jalland, *Death in War and Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 3.

<sup>105</sup> Litten, *The English Way of Death*, p. 26.

The furnisher was the peak of this hierarchy as he or she could afford to 'buy in' their coffins.<sup>106</sup> An anonymous letter to the London *Daily News* in May 1850 made a sharp distinction in the funeral trade, between 'two classes', one of whom were licensed to conduct funerals, and thus, in the view of the writer, provide a genuine service, and the other who were mere middlemen, making their living by extorting the public,

These middlemen canvass for employment, for servants and nurses to procure a job, pay commissions, it is said, even to the lawyer of the deceased, or to other confidential advisers, and sometimes demand, as is proved in evidence, more than a hundred percent profit on the real undertaker's charges.<sup>107</sup>

Nonetheless, those supposed 'middlemen' who coordinated funerals arguably organised a great deal and had several others in their employ, or external providers that they paid, depending on how elaborate the interment they were organising was. Reference has already been made to the number of trades potentially involved in a funeral. An analysis of the occupations in 1851 of the residents of Lant Street, Southwark, described at length in the first chapter of this thesis, shows how extensive these networks could be. Of the 181 listed 'heads of household', thirty-seven made some, if not all, of their living out of the funeral trade. These included seven cabinet makers and upholsterers, seven carpenters, and twelve garment makers of various kinds.<sup>108</sup> One resident, Evan Watkins at 36 Lant Street, was an undertaker and Louisa Mason at 29 Lant Street was a shroud maker. This means that just over 20 per cent of Lant Street were employed, either directly or indirectly, at least partially by the undertaking trade, and compares with, for example the 17 per cent employed in transport and utilities in Southwark during the same period.<sup>109</sup>

Whether the interdependence of these trades that derived all or some of their income from undertaking can create a sense of community or solidarity amongst the tradespeople involved is unknown. There may have been numerous tensions around providing the different services and goods required for funerals, records of which do not survive. Nonetheless, it does demonstrate evolving ways in which

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<sup>106</sup> Litten, *The English Way of Death*, p. 26.

<sup>107</sup> *Daily News*, May 16, 1850, Issue 1240.

<sup>108</sup> Census of Great Britain, 1851, Surrey, Southwark St George, Registration District 04, pp. 11-21.

<sup>109</sup> Census of Great Britain, 1851, Surrey, Southwark St George, Registration District 04, pp. 11-21.

different trades worked together, for mutual benefit, and formed ways of organising for the new requirements of the growing market of urban dead and their families. As noted above, the role of the undertaker was to coordinate the various trades and makers according to the wishes of those paying for the funeral. The most basic funeral consisted of a plain pine shell, an oblong box, and transport to the burial ground. More could be spent if, for example, a superior wood was used for the coffin, or metal plates, handles and other furnishings were added. Chadwick estimates the cost of funerals during the early to mid-nineteenth century as varying between £100 for gentry to £5 for an artisan, or £1 for a labourer's child. The costs included 'rent' of the burial ground, fees for the clergy, which seem to have varied greatly and were a point of great contention, especially for dissenters, and the undertaker's fee.<sup>110</sup>

Costs do not seem to have changed dramatically during the early to mid-century, as an unpleasant dispute in Southwark suggests. A report in *Reynolds's Newspaper* in January 1860, covered the case of a Mr Mitchell, whose child had died of smallpox, and who was unable to pay in full for the burial.<sup>111</sup> Believing he had the funds to afford the interment, Mr Mitchell had paid the undertaker, Mr Antill, 10 shillings, 7 shillings being for the burial ground and 3 shillings off the undertaker's overall bill of 18 shillings. The price of 7 shillings for a burial plot fits with Chadwick's assessment of the costs of a Southwark burial in the 1840s.<sup>112</sup> The undertaker provided a coffin, but upon realising he could not afford the rest of the funeral, Mr Mitchell applied to St George the Martyr Board of Guardians for a parish burial. The relieving officer refused Mr Mitchell claiming they would only pay for funerals in the parish's own coffins. The child remained unburied for two weeks, and lay, according to the report of the case, lodged in the single back-room that Mr Mitchell occupied 'with his family of young children, who were poorly clad, and appeared in great want.'<sup>113</sup> Interviewed by Southwark Police Court, Mr Antill said that he had refused to bury the child because 'the money is not forthcoming. As soon as he pays me 18s I will bury the child.' A compromise was reached that the parish would bury the

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<sup>110</sup> For example, Chadwick lists a huge variation in clergy fees across London, with the average cost of a burial in Bethnal Green costing around 1s 6d, and St Catherine Cree £1 12s. St George the Martyr Southwark charged 7s 3d. Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 271.

<sup>111</sup> *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 15 January 1860, Issue 492.

<sup>112</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 271.

<sup>113</sup> *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 15 January 1860, Issue 492.



child, if Mr Antill agreed not to charge for the coffin, to which he replied, he would not make any claim on the parish. He was 'willing for them to take the coffin as it was. His worship did not understand his business. He buried for the lower classes of the community exceedingly cheap, and, in many instances, if he did not get his money at the time he did not get it at all.'<sup>114</sup>

By the 1860s, the retention of a body, especially from an infectious disease like smallpox, was becoming more unusual, even in poorer households who had tended to retain corpses longer than their wealthier counterparts.<sup>115</sup> This significant change in practice was partly due to the success of public health campaigns, but it was also due to the development of alternative options for managing the dead, such as the growth of affordable undertakers. These issues are explored in greater depth in the following chapter on care of the dying and dead. By the later nineteenth century, some undertakers were developing 'parlours' (note the domestic language used) where bodies could be retained and displayed, so that families and friends might still go through the processes and rituals of waking or paying last respects but did not necessarily have to conduct these in their own home. For example, Albin & Sons, an undertaker that had been established in the Borough since the late eighteenth century, opened a parlour in the 1850s.<sup>116</sup> Again, this arguably created another aspect in the relationship between undertaker and customer. The intimacy of the domestic sphere was, whilst undoubtedly being commercialised, also being deployed as a site for family and friends to gather and pay respects, in funeral parlours that became ever-more designed over the century to look like bourgeois 'homes', complete with curtains and houseplants.

Whilst female relatives had been responsible for care of the body prior to burial, such as washing and dressing the corpse, this increasingly became the task of the undertaker. Later in the century their role would be further enhanced with the

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<sup>114</sup> *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 15 January 1860, Issue 492.

<sup>115</sup> This was generally because it took longer for poorer families to collect money to pay for a funeral, although for some communities, there were also important rituals such as wakes to perform. Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, pp. 44-46.

<sup>116</sup> Albin & Sons is a Southwark undertaker that has been registered in the Borough since the late eighteenth century. According to their timeline, they opened a parlour in c.1850. Unpublished source.

development of embalming.<sup>117</sup> For the funerals of the poorest or paupers, however, the body was more commonly stored in a 'dead house', a building on the site of a cemetery, or sometimes within an institution such as a hospital or workhouse. These procedures were promoted in the name of hygiene and public health. Such changes were significant, and an acknowledgement that many urban dwellings were unsuitable for retaining a body for long periods.<sup>118</sup> They are also suggestive that whilst most people still died at home, managing the dead was slowly becoming a matter for professionals and local or health authorities.

Undertaking was an evolving profession during the early to mid-nineteenth century, but one which was both a product of, and reactive to, profound changes in the demographic and economic organisation of areas like Southwark. As a response to the challenges and opportunities presented by urban life, and large communities of migrants who required services which would have been unnecessary in smaller, settled communities, its growth was sometimes met with ambivalence. Such reservations were reflective, arguably, of wider tensions, about social status, public health, and perhaps even the very fact of urban expansion, with its populous hordes of 'strangers'. This created the possibilities for new groups of working people to develop businesses, employment and other opportunities, demonstrating, as the thesis argues, another strand of ways in which individuals and groups responded to the possibilities as well as the challenges of high levels of urban mortality.

In Southwark undertaking was a significant employer, it brought together different trades and workers, labourers some of whom presumably appreciated the value of being able to buy support to manage deaths in their own families and communities. Although beyond the present scope, the increasingly elaborate labouring and artisan class funerals of the later nineteenth century suggest that funerals also played an important social function for individuals and some communities, a marker that challenges notions of the loneliness of urban death amidst strangers. Such events

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<sup>117</sup> Litten, *The English Way of Death*, pp. 32-56.

<sup>118</sup> Chadwick was a great admirer of the German system of housing the dead, writing about 'houses at Franckfourth [sic] and Munich for the reception and care of the dead until their interment', believing it was more hygienic and helped prevent spread of disease from dead bodies. Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, pp. 90-91.

instead might indicate the growth of different kinds of solidarities, built around work, unions, savings clubs and other markers of social and emotional lives that continued to have meaning even after death.

## Conclusion

The 'buying and selling' of death in the early to mid-nineteenth century presents some contradictions, but ones that can be better understood when contextualised by the issues that confronted an urban community like Southwark during this period. It is well-documented that the conditions of urban life, with its rapid expansion, growing migrant populations and sometimes precarious employment and domestic structures required locally responsive ways of planning and paying for the dying and dead. The number and variety of savings clubs available to local communities can be interpreted as reflective of the complex and many-layered kinds of individual and group cooperation, action, mutualism and exclusion that operated in this changeable local landscape. What is therefore perhaps less highlighted is that what may appear to be the irrational and insecure structures adopted to mitigate these contingent circumstances, such as short-term burial clubs, with their loose accounting systems, and their focus on conviviality as well as saving, often suited the mobility of young, transitory residents very well. These communities were mostly likely to have to pay for the funeral of a small child, and thus cheap and flexible schemes were financially low risk if they relocated at short notice. Such groups could also provide sociable and possible employment opportunities as well.

There were groups in Southwark that organised longer-term savings plans, perhaps around a trade, religious or political affiliation. Whilst primary accounts and membership lists in the period before 1875 are frustratingly few, those advertisements and records that do survive suggest that very particular kinds of membership were sought or encouraged, and these could be badged through the naming of clubs, their stated associations, such as the Christian Brothers, or the places that they chose to advertise their services. These descriptions carried multiple meanings for contemporaries, some of which are lost, but which suggest

that savings clubs were about more than just saving. They were also spaces in which other aspects of allegiance could be explored.

The one common feature of all savings clubs was that they paid to cover the costs of death. This factor is central because it highlights not only the preoccupation with, and costs of, mortality for working families, but also the structured gender lines which permeated even after death. All the clubs with extant records in Southwark show that the death of a female spouse paid between 50 and 75 per cent of the amount given for a male death. Nonetheless, the intertwining of savings clubs and the undertaking trade suggest a powerful desire for some individuals and groups to save for their own, or family, burials. This desire took on a greater emphasis in a context of a rapidly changing urban landscape, and mass migration, whereby death might occur far from an individual's place of origin, and without any forms of extended family networks or support to assist in the costs or practicalities involved. Thus, the connection between the rise of the undertaking trade and large-scale migration is important.

The buying and selling of death became integrated into the economic, working and social life of a predominantly labouring community like Southwark because of the material forces that shaped its resident's lives. Their contingent and circumscribed circumstances meant finding different kinds of ways to create allegiance and action, to protect themselves and their associates from the brutalities of ill-health, unemployment or the loss of a breadwinner. Whilst their attempts at self-help may have been misunderstood, mocked or subject to attempts at legislative control by their wealthier contemporaries, the continuance and resilience of such schemes, even until the present day, suggests that the desire to anticipate and affray the costs of death were and remain powerful. The involvement of the undertaking trade in this planning, for example through the sponsorship of burial clubs, was a cause of ambivalence for some, and on occasion created dispute, especially over the expenses of burials. Nonetheless, despite the occasional, and sometimes well-publicised examples of undertakers exploiting their clientele, there is also evidence from Southwark that the trade was well-integrated into the working lives of a significant number of residents. This created a working community around the needs of the

dead and their families and friends which also deserves acknowledgement, as part of the tapestry of living and dying in an early to mid-nineteenth century urban landscape.

### Chapter 3: Caring for the Southwark dying and dead

'Ah!' repeated Mrs Gamp, for it was always a safe sentiment in cases of mourning. 'Ah dear! When Gamp was summoned to his long home, and I see him a-lying in Guy's Hospital with a penny piece on each eye, and his wooden leg under his left arm, I thought I should have fainted away. But I bore up.'

Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*<sup>1</sup>

During the period c.1830 to 1860, most people, regardless of their social and economic circumstances, died at home, mostly cared for by women relatives or paid help.<sup>2</sup> The quotation with which this chapter opens, from Charles Dickens's 1844 novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*, is uttered by a drunken and sloppy nurse, Mrs Sarah (or 'Sairey') Gamp, described by Dickens as 'a fair representation of the hired attendant of the poor in sickness.'<sup>3</sup> Mrs Gamp's words underscore several important themes in this chapter. Given the home setting of most deaths that of her husband in Guy's Hospital was relatively unusual. Care of the dying was predominantly regarded as an extension of women's domestic duties, even though professional medical intervention for the sick and dying was increasingly available, particularly in urban communities, during this period. Gamp's death in a hospital could therefore be interpreted as a critical comment on his wife's supposedly 'professional' nursing skills and domestic abilities. Death is configured here as the summoning to a 'long home', providing an eschatological framing of the nineteenth-century domestic context of death and afterlife.<sup>4</sup> Historian Michael Wheeler suggests that Victorian ideas of heaven often organised around a celestial family gathering, or nostalgic, friendly reunion, a conceptualisation surely reinforced by the home-managed death.<sup>5</sup> The conflation of dying and death as part of the domestic sphere, was, this chapter argues, a powerful determinant for contemporaries in shaping ideas about what constituted proper care of the dying and dead. Such ideas were rooted in

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* [1843-44] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 378.

<sup>2</sup> Hospital space was limited for the terminally ill and dying. According to the 1851 census there were only 7619 resident patients in all the hospitals in England and Wales. Brian Abel-Smith, *A History of the Nursing Profession* (London: Heinemann, 1960), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* [1843-44] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Wheeler, *Death and the future life in Victorian literature and theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Wheeler, *Death and the future life*.

religious, cultural and social mores, which, the chapter demonstrates, permeated official and bureaucratic approaches as well.

Whilst high urban mortality rates during the early to mid-nineteenth century are well-researched and statistically undisputed, numbers alone reveal little of how these situations were managed at domestic level.<sup>6</sup> Periods of sickness and death were often planned for, through a variety of savings and benefit club schemes, as assessed in chapter two of this thesis. Whilst these clubs might pay a modest amount towards the hire of a doctor or nurse, or the cost of medicines, most care for the sick, dying and dead was undertaken by family members or neighbours, usually women.<sup>7</sup> Pat Jalland has analysed the nursing care, both within the family and through hired nurses in middle-class Victorian homes, and Julie-Marie Strange has assessed the ways in which care for the sick, dying and dead was organised in working-class domestic settings in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>8</sup> Both emphasise the importance of extended networks of family and friends in order to cope with these situations. Inevitably the material conditions of households impacted on the kind of care that could be provided, an issue that became a growing matter of concern to public health and sanitary reformers during the early to mid-nineteenth century. The overcrowded, 'promiscuous' living arrangements of some urban communities helped to create the conditions for disease, ill-health and epidemic outbreaks, establishing intertwined cycles of poverty, sickness and early death.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, such environments were often completely inadequate for care of the sick, or preparation for death and burial.

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<sup>6</sup> Mortality rates have been studied in detail by the Cambridge Group for Population and Structure. See E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1841-1871* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> The female aspects of middle-class domestic nursing care are noted in Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), and in working-class homes by Julie-Marie Strange, *Death, Grief and Mourning in Britain, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Although referring to later in the century, Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women 1890-1940* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984) also confirms the domestic, female nature of caring for the sick and dying.

<sup>8</sup> Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, Strange, *Death Grief and Mourning*.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Daunt, *House and Home in the Victorian City: Working-Class Housing 1850-1914* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983) describes the crowded conditions and shared facilities, which he describes as 'promiscuous', and which made up the majority of labouring class domestic experience in Southwark in the early to mid-nineteenth century.

Leading sanitary reformer and civil servant Edwin Chadwick was concerned that poverty was created by ill-health, rather than ill-health being a by-product of poverty. In 1842 and 1843 Chadwick produced the two best-selling government reports of the nineteenth century, the *Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* and the *Supplementary Report on the Practice of Interment in Towns*, both of which articulate this view.<sup>10</sup> He obtained much of his supporting evidence anecdotally, based on accounts from the home-visits of parish doctors, clergy and undertakers. He used these narratives to argue that much of the labouring class lived and died in a state of chaos and abjection, maintaining unwholesome habits which were instrumental in spreading disease and early death. The commentaries of his interviewees carried the implication that some diseases, especially those associated with poorer households, carried a moral stigma as well, and might be imputed to irreligious behaviours such as intemperance, undefined dirty personal habits or sexual licentiousness.<sup>11</sup> Chadwick underpinned his reports with extensive statistical evidence about epidemic and mortality rates in different London parishes. He was particularly exercised by the practice in labouring class and poorer households of retaining the dead in the home for several days, sometimes even weeks, prior to burial. He argued that this was unhygienic, irrational and had the potential to infect healthy residents through the miasmatic emanations of the corpse.<sup>12</sup> Not only were overcrowded homes completely inadequate for caring for the sick and dead, but attempts to organise what were in his view over-elaborate and expensive funerals that household budgets could ill-afford, was further evidence of gullible or naive labouring-class behaviours.

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<sup>10</sup> Edwin Chadwick, *Report on the Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (London: Clowes & Sons, 1842) and the *Supplementary Report into the Practice of Interment in Towns* (London: Clowes & Son, 1843).

<sup>11</sup> Analyses of the stigma of venereal diseases have been thoroughly researched, and religious and other moral interpretations of the behaviour of victims were often, but not always, brought to bear on patients. See, for example Roger Davidson and Lesley Hall (eds.), *Sex, Sin and Suffering. Venereal Disease and European Society Since 1870* (London: Routledge, 2001), Kevin Siena, *Venereal Disease, Hospitals and the Urban Poor* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2004). Women were often blamed for the spread of sexually transmitted diseases in particular, as explored by Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation and the City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995). Other diseases were also associated with degenerate behaviours, such as cholera's link to intemperance, discussed later in this chapter, or typhus, which was sometimes referred to as 'gaol fever' or 'Irish fever', suggesting association with criminality, dirt, and 'racialised' causes.

<sup>12</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*.



As he detailed contemporary accounts of dying, death and burial in the early to mid-nineteenth century, many of which refer to Southwark, Chadwick's two reports are a central source for this chapter. His reports were influential in shaping public health and burial legislation during the 1840s and 1850s, and they continue to be a much-cited resource for histories about the conditions endured by the labouring classes during the nineteenth century. Chadwick paid particular attention to urban conditions, mortality rates and funeral practices, all issues pertinent to this thesis. Nonetheless, whilst acknowledging the important impact of Chadwick's contribution to sanitary reform, this chapter takes a different view about some of his interpretations of labouring-class actions. The chapter argues that middle-class professionals, such as doctors and clergy, were not always able to relate to labouring-class domestic structures, and therefore translate behaviours as meaningful responses to the material conditions of living and dying in these contexts. Viewing the labouring-class home through the lens of bourgeois domestic ideals, certain actions appeared to be unhygienic, immoral and dangerous, but given the circumscribed circumstances labouring people had to cope with, their approaches to coping with the dying and dead can be meaningfully re-assessed. Even in the extreme cases where bodies were retained in the home for long periods prior to burial, the rationale was usually rooted in financial, cultural or other practical considerations.

In order to analyse these issues, the chapter is divided into two parts. First, there is a brief overview of the Southwark dying and dead, in order to provide the context for the most likely circumstances in which a home-managed sickness or death might take place. This is followed by an assessment of what could be provided for a patient's care, including recourse to professional assistance when available. In the second part, there is an examination of the care of the dead, both in the home and through the organisation of funeral arrangements. The section compares Chadwick's observations with Southwark primary sources, to assess his claims about the treatment of the dead and retention of corpses in the home.

Notions of sickness and dying are often used somewhat interchangeably in the chapter. It can be difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when an illness transitions

to dying, and much of the available contemporary advice about diseases that may or may not have been fatal, such as cholera or scarlet fever, did not make the distinction between sickness and terminal conditions. Given the rudimentary nature of much medical intervention in the early to mid-nineteenth century, an illness or infection could rapidly turn into something much more serious or even fatal. Finally, dying and death are culturally and socially located, and the many meanings of this for different individuals and groups is worthy of separate study beyond the present scope.<sup>13</sup>

The chapter draws on sources ranging from vestry and Poor Law Guardian minutes, census and statistical data, notes and sundry correspondence from the Borough's medical officers, and some residents, burial and death records from hospitals and churches. Published primary accounts include government and public health reports, but particularly Chadwick's *Report into the Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* and *Supplementary Report into the Practice of Interment in Towns*. Popular cookery and household management books are referenced, as, reinforcing the domestic nature of care for the sick, they often contained extensive detail about dietary and nursing advice. As with other chapters, the authorship of these sources, except for the domestic advice, is nearly always from a male, professional perspective. This is problematic given that the focus here is often on women's actions and roles as carers. Thus, the chapter must on occasion reconstruct an analysis of the experiences of women through the mediation of male commentary. Nonetheless, it argues, this does not detract from the active, resilient and cooperative ways in which Southwark residents cared for their dying and dead, and interacted with those mechanisms of support as were available to them.

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<sup>13</sup> See for example, S.C. Humphries, 'Death and Time' in S.C. Humphries and Helen King, *Mortality and Immortality: the anthropology and archaeology of death* (London: Academic Press, 1981). Humphries notes 'the problematic nature of the decision that someone is to be classified as dying [...] the decision may be markedly affected by the age, social status and perceived moral character of the patient.' P. 263.

## Care for the sick and dying

In early to mid-nineteenth century Southwark, the changes wrought by rapid urbanisation, such as population growth fuelled by migration, cramped and inadequate housing, and poor or non-existent infrastructure, created challenging enough living, let alone dying conditions. Regardless of circumstances and however seriously ill, the sick and dying, including laying out the body, were generally cared for at home, usually by women. The intention here is not, however, to examine the social, economic and cultural frameworks which constructed the assumption that women would be the primary providers of domestic labour and care, as that has been well covered elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> Rather it is to analyse the particular circumstances which enabled or disrupted women's abilities to actively fulfil these roles, and assess how these linked to social, economic and material situations. These are analysed through a short statistical overview of the Southwark dying and dead, followed by an assessment of common domestic remedies available during this period, as well as the kinds of professional assistance that might be drawn on. As there are no first-hand accounts from Southwark individuals about how they cared for the sick and dying, what could be done must be surmised from sources such as household guides, and published advice about nursing, as well as recipes for the sick or convalescent.<sup>15</sup> Whilst it is impossible to know precisely how and when such recommendations were followed, most ingredients for home remedies and recipes were cheap and widely available to urban communities, and dietary advice for the sick remained remarkably consistent over the period.

Urban migratory patterns in Southwark meant that it was unusual for extended families consisting of parents, grown-up children and grandparents to live together, so looking after a dying older relative was unusual, if census information about

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<sup>14</sup> See for example, Catherine Davidson, *A Woman's Work is Never Done: A History of Housework in the British Isles 1650-1950* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984), Deborah Simonton, *A History of European Women's Work, 1700 to the present* (New York: Routledge, 1998), Katrina Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation 1700-1870* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 2000), Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place*.

<sup>15</sup> There are some excellent accounts of domestic care of the dying and dead, but these tend to refer to the later nineteenth century. For example, Julie-Marie Strange, 'Life, Sickness and Death', in *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 27-65, various accounts in Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890-1940* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), Jane Lewis (ed.), *Labour and Love: Women's Experience of Home and Family, 1850-1940* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

domestic structures is accurate. For example, returns for Lant Street in 1851, discussed in detail in chapter one of this thesis, do not contain a single example of an extended family living together in any of its sixty-eight households.<sup>16</sup> There were four older women living alone on outdoor relief on Lant Street, with no record of supporting relatives, although neighbours may have helped them, as dense living conditions could often produce support networks.<sup>17</sup> For example, during the cholera outbreak of 1832, Southwark parish surgeon Mr Millard made notes of how neighbours helped each other, because it was useful for mapping the pattern of infection spread in his ward.<sup>18</sup> When 53-year old John Sullivan of Silver Street was diagnosed with cholera on 13 February 1832, he died the following day after 'five grain doses of calomel.'<sup>19</sup> He was looked after by neighbour Margaret Donahoo, who caught the disease the same day. In turn neighbours Hannah Daley, Margaret Tumey and Johanna Connell all assisted and all got ill, including Johanna's baby, two-year-old Jerry, who shared her bed.<sup>20</sup> In neighbouring Gleen Alley, Ann Gorman passed cholera to her neighbour Mary Bryan, who had also looked after her.<sup>21</sup> Poor Law Guardians often noted examples of neighbourliness as well. For example, meeting minutes note a nameless Irishman who applied for assistance in May 1837, who was reported 'quite destitute, a wife and three children, his wife had lain in a fortnight, and but for the kindness of the neighbours she would have perished.'<sup>22</sup> At the inquest of an adopted baby called George Brown, held in October 1852, the coroner and parish surgeon both remarked on the way in which women neighbours made a collective effort to save the baby's life.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Census of Great Britain, 1851, Surrey, Southwark St George, Registration District 04, pp. 11-21. In the example of the Meding family, discussed in chapter one of the thesis, they moved back to their birthplace of Barnet in old age. Many older people did the same if they needed to claim parish relief, as required by the Poor Law Amendment Act 1834.

<sup>17</sup> Although relating to a slightly later period, Ellen Ross, 'Survival Networks: Women's Neighbourhood Sharing in London Before World War I', *History Workshop Journal*, 15, (1983), 4-27, Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place*.

<sup>18</sup> It was not known how cholera was spread during the first UK outbreak of 1831-32, so one of the tasks of parish surgeons was to document cases to ascertain the patterns of infection. It was not until 1854 that John Snow made the link with contaminated water, rather than contagion or miasma as the cause.

<sup>19</sup> *Cholera Gazette*, 3 March 1832, p. 149.

<sup>20</sup> *Cholera Gazette*, 3 March 1832, p. 149.

<sup>21</sup> *Cholera Gazette*, 3 March 1832, p. 149.

<sup>22</sup> Southwark St George Board of Guardians Minutes, 17 May 1837, LMA/SOBG-2.

<sup>23</sup> *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 10 October 1852, p. 113.

In common with many urban areas with high migration levels and rapidly growing populations, Southwark's population was youthful, around 40 per cent of the community aged twenty or younger.<sup>24</sup> Mortality rates averaged a reasonably consistent level of 3 to 4 per cent per annum, with the occasional spike due to an outbreak of an epidemic like cholera or influenza.<sup>25</sup> Despite the young age of residents, death rates were high in Southwark if compared with wealthier districts. A parish such as Mayfair's St George, Hanover, had about half the Borough death rate, at 1.9 per cent.<sup>26</sup> Underlining the dangers of nineteenth-century childhood, especially when lives were passed in cramped, unhygienic and insanitary housing, the most likely Southwark death in the home was that of a baby or small child, because the disparity between wealthy and poorer districts was largely due to levels of child mortality.<sup>27</sup> Of the 3 to 4 per cent of annual deaths, the Southwark parishes of St Saviour and St George the Martyr recorded death rates amongst babies and children under ten at around 54.5 per cent and 56 per cent respectively.<sup>28</sup> The parish of St Olave recorded much lower child mortalities, at 28 per cent, but this probably reflects the fact that it was a predominantly working district and not so intensively residential. Most deaths in this parish were categorised as those of adult artisans, who constituted 60.7 per cent of mortalities.<sup>29</sup>

The women most likely to care for the dying and dead in Southwark during the early to mid-nineteenth century were of the labouring, artisan or 'undescribed' (unregistered poor) class.<sup>30</sup> As analysed in chapter one of this thesis, these categories could cover a wide range of social and economic circumstances in terms of household density and quality of lodgings, ranging from a comfortable two or three furnished rooms shared with family members only, to the virtually destitute, living in multiply-occupied single rooms with lodgers. Of the other 45.5 per cent of

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<sup>24</sup> Census of Great Britain, 1851, Surrey, Southwark St George, Registration District 04, pp.11-21

<sup>25</sup> Census of Great Britain, 1851. Also, John Marius Wilson, *Imperial Gazetteer for England and Wales 1870-1872*.

<sup>26</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 256.

<sup>27</sup> Anne Hardy, *The Epidemic Streets: Infectious Diseases and the Rise of Preventative Medicine 1856-1900* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> John Marius Wilson, *Imperial Gazetteer for England and Wales 1870-1872*.

<sup>29</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 257.

<sup>30</sup> The description 'undescribed' is taken from Chadwick's mortality statistics for London parishes, 1839. Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, pp. 256-266.

deaths in St Saviour's and 44 per cent in St George the Martyr, the most substantial category after children, averaging during this period at around 27 per cent per annum in St Saviour, 30 per cent in St George and 60.7 per cent in St Olave were described as adults from labouring and artisan classes, although this categorisation also covered a vast array of trades and types of employment. Furthermore, the statistics do not always record whether these deaths were predominantly those of men or women. The average age at death for this group was early to mid-forties. The Southwark group with the greatest longevity, outlasting the gentry's average age at death of 52, were those classed as paupers, who had an average age of 59 at death.<sup>31</sup> Pauper deaths were unevenly spread across the parishes, making up 5 per cent of St Olave's mortality statistics and 2 per cent and 3 per cent of St George and St Saviour's respectively.<sup>32</sup> Of other categories, as might be expected in a predominantly labouring district, gentry deaths made up 3.4 per cent of deaths in St George, but only 0.4 per cent in St Olave, and 1 per cent in St Saviour. Tradesmen constituted a consistent 5 per cent of mortalities across the parishes.<sup>33</sup>

Accurate details about the varied causes of death in Southwark during this period do not exist. Several deaths of adults and children, 25 per cent in St George, 13 per cent in St Olave and 18.6 per cent in St Saviour, were attributed to 'epidemic', but this could cover a range of diseases and conditions. Deaths from accidents or other sudden causes are addressed in chapter four of this thesis, through an analysis of coroner's reports and inquest verdicts, although even these deaths were sometimes vaguely described, with little or no detail.<sup>34</sup> The most common causes of death in urban dwellers, particularly children, during this period were scarlet fever, smallpox, influenza, diphtheria, typhoid, typhus, tuberculosis, various 'fevers' and diarrhoea or dysentery.<sup>35</sup> Problems arise when assessing how many people died of these diseases, given inconsistencies in identification and lack of medical technologies to determine precise causes of death. As epidemiologist and medical historian Thomas McKeown noted, 'in the Registrar General's classifications scarlet

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<sup>31</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, pp. 256-266.

<sup>32</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, pp. 257-266.

<sup>33</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, pp. 257-266.

<sup>34</sup> Index to Southwark Coroner's Inquests 1788-1837, LMA/CLA/041/IQ/02/055 and 056, and Index to Southwark Coroner's Inquests 1838-1860, LMA/CLA/042/IQ/01/097.

<sup>35</sup> Hardy, *The Epidemic Streets*.

fever was not separated from diphtheria until 1855, nor typhus from typhoid until 1869.<sup>36</sup> Even after the requirement to register deaths after the 1836 Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages Act, itself an attempt to gather better statistical information about causes of death, descriptions on death certificates remained inconsistent.<sup>37</sup>

The options for treatment in the home were limited. For the most economically deprived Southwark residents, a lack of washing, cooking and heating facilities greatly circumscribed care. If applied for, parish relief for the sick was as likely to consist of modest offerings of coals, bread, brandy and blankets as medicines.<sup>38</sup> A letter from the Privy Council Office sent to vestry clerks on 9 November 1831 suggested, for those who could not immediately procure medical assistance in suspected cases of cholera, keeping the body warm with 'repeated frictions with flannels and camphorated spirits; poultices of mustard and linseed.'<sup>39</sup> Oral treatments included 'white wine whey with spice, hot brandy and water, or sal volatile or drops of some of the essential oils, as peppermint, cloves, or cajeput.'<sup>40</sup> For conditions that required pain management or the suppression of coughing and chest infections, common treatments included laudanum or other opiate derivatives, which could be bought over the counter for a few pence at most general stores.<sup>41</sup> Laudanum is a tincture of opium, contains morphine and codeine, and is highly addictive. As well as its analgesic qualities its side-effects can include euphoria, dysphoria, itchy skin, sedation and constipation.<sup>42</sup> It was also extremely easy to overdose on laudanum, making it risky when treating children.<sup>43</sup> Indeed many of the available medicines probably did more harm than good. Calomel, another popular home dose, often given in cholera cases, is mercury chloride, and

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<sup>36</sup> Thomas McKeown, *The Modern Rise of Population* (London: Edward Arnold, 1976), p. 50.

<sup>37</sup> For example, 'apoplexy' could cover a host of causes from strokes to heart attack, as illustrated by jury verdicts from inquests. These issues are addressed in depth in chapter four of this thesis.

<sup>38</sup> St Saviour's Vestry Minutes, 5 April 1832, LMA/P92/SAV/2221.

<sup>39</sup> Letter and leaflet to the vestry clerk of the Parish of St Thomas', 9 November 1831, Wellcome Collection.

<sup>40</sup> Letter and leaflet to the vestry clerk of the Parish of St Thomas', 9 November 1831, Wellcome Collection.

<sup>41</sup> Virginia Berridge, *Opium and the People: Opiate Use and Drug Control Policy in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century England* (London & New York: Free Association Books, 1999).

<sup>42</sup> Barbara Hodgson, *In the arms of Morpheus: The tragic history of laudanum, morphine and patent medicines* (Buffalo: Firefly, 2001).

<sup>43</sup> Hodgson, *In the arms of Morpheus*.

was used in the nineteenth century as a purgative, a disinfectant and to treat syphilis.<sup>44</sup> It was also used as a laxative, as it was believed it could help patients rid themselves of their impurities through the bowels. Its long-term use can cause the loss of teeth and hair, and an unpleasant death by mercury poisoning.

As well as home-administered medicines, medical and nursing advice was available in household management guides and magazines. *Beeton's Book of Household Management*, an amalgamation of articles from *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* published in 1861, was firmly aimed at the middle classes, and contained a long section about approaches to home-nursing.<sup>45</sup> This included a chapter on 'invalid cookery', and extensive advice for nursemaids, who were expected to deal with minor childhood illnesses, for hired nurses, and several household remedies for the sick, especially children.<sup>46</sup> Whilst it is impossible to assess whether the home carers of labouring-class Southwark ever saw a copy of *Beeton's*, the remedies it suggested were cheap and accessible to nearly all social groups. Furthermore, as *Beeton's* plagiarised its contents from a variety of contributors, the medical advice was also available from other sources, including dispensaries and parish surgeons, all available to Southwark's labouring and poorer communities.<sup>47</sup> Thus it is likely that some of the suggested treatments may also have been used in labouring-class homes.

*Beeton's* suggested keeping a basic first-aid kit, and learning some rudimentary nursing skills, noting that,

If people knew how to act during the interval that must necessarily elapse from the moment that a medical man is sent for until he arrives, many lives might be saved, which now, unhappily, are lost. [...] the surgeon, on his

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<sup>44</sup> Minutes of the St Saviour's Board of Health, 14 February 1832 LMA/P92/SAV/2221.

<sup>45</sup> Isabella Beeton, *Beeton's Book of Household Management* (London: S.O. Beeton, 1861). Although beyond the present scope, Isabella Beeton, who died in 1865, lost two of her four children and suffered several miscarriages, so presumably knew something of nursing dying children. Although many of her recipes were plagiarised, the book remains an interesting commentary on mid-Victorian middle-class domestic life, including sections of advice for servants. See Kathryn Hughes, *The Short Life and Long Times of Mrs Beeton* (London: Harper Collins, 2006).

<sup>46</sup> Beeton, *The Book of Household Management*, pp. 1013-1096.

<sup>47</sup> Sheila Hardy, *The Real Mrs Beeton: The Story of Eliza Acton* (Stroud: History Press, 2011), p. 203.



arrival, finds that death has already seized its victim, who, had his friends but known a few rough rules for their guidance, might have been rescued.<sup>48</sup>

The quotation, if rather dramatically framed for a book of household advice, underlines how the home was routinely a site of sickness and death in the early to mid-nineteenth century, regardless of social and economic circumstances. *Beeton's* medical kit included a suggested list of drugs, such as Antimonial Powder, Calomel, Goulard's Extract, Opium and Laudanum, and a lancet, probe, forceps and curved needles.<sup>49</sup> With the investment of a few shillings, various prescriptions could be made up following *Beeton's* recipes, to help with conditions as varied as coughs, measles, scarlet fever, bites, stings, fractures, burns, and cholera.<sup>50</sup> There was even advice on how to bleed a patient 'in cases of great emergency'.<sup>51</sup> The suggested medicines were all easily available in urban areas like Southwark, either over-the-counter or from dispensaries.

*Beeton's* advice focussed primarily on childhood ailments. Convulsions, croup, whooping-cough [sic], worms, diarrhoea, measles and scarlatina are all listed with suggested remedies. The cure for croup, described as likely to ail fat, dull children, and the 'most formidable and fatal of all the diseases to which infancy and childhood are liable' included an alarming action plan of dangling the child in a hot bath up to the throat, giving an emetic of antimonial to induce vomiting, and if this failed, applying leeches to the throat.<sup>52</sup> For scarlatina, or scarlet fever, *Beeton's* advised sponging the child's hot body with cold water and vinegar, dosing with a mixture of aperient powders according to age, and applying a bran poultice for the throat.<sup>53</sup> If these instructions were followed, *Beeton's* opined, scarlet fever was only fatal in one-tenth of cases.<sup>54</sup> However, according to Anne Hardy's analysis of epidemic killers in the nineteenth century, scarlet fever was not only widespread across all

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<sup>48</sup> Beeton, *The Book of Household Management*, p. 1061.

<sup>49</sup> Antimonial powder was made up of two parts phosphate of calcium and one-part oxide antimony and used as an emetic and diaphoretic. Goulard's Extract was a solution of lead acetate and lead oxide, used as an astringent. Beeton, *The Book of Household Management*, p. 1061.

<sup>50</sup> Beeton, *The Book of Household Management*, pp. 1065-1073.

<sup>51</sup> Beeton, *The Book of Household Management*, p. 1065.

<sup>52</sup> Beeton, *The Book of Household Management*, p. 1059.

<sup>53</sup> Beeton, *The Book of Household Management*, pp. 1055-1057.

<sup>54</sup> Beeton, *The Book of Household Management*, p. 1057.

social classes, it was also responsible for 10,000 child-deaths per annum, and was considered to be more infectious and deadly than any other disease.<sup>55</sup> Whether deaths from scarlet fever were simply more prevalent in labouring-class homes, and thus not in the purview of the *Beeton's* authors and their readers, or the connection between fatalities from the disease and how those were perceived in terms of statistical risk by contemporaries, is difficult to assess.<sup>56</sup> Regarding fatalities in one-tenth of cases as of little statistical concern is also an insight into the nineteenth-century relationship to high childhood mortality, even in the context of middle-class homes. Scarlet fever certainly killed small children in Southwark, attested by an inquest held for the deaths of Charlotte and Frederick Huddart on 1 March 1841, but without robust data it is not possible to assert the precise number of deaths from this disease.<sup>57</sup> Without fail, all childhood diseases killed more labouring-class and poorer children than their middle class contemporaries. For example, on one Sunday, 31 December 1837, Reverend James Mapleton, Rector of Christ Church, Southwark, buried five children, all under the age of three. The burial records of Christ Church, and the neighbouring parish of St Saviours, show that this was a relatively unremarkable event. Sometimes there was more than one child from the same family to be interred, so on 14 February 1840 four-year-olds John and Edwin Freeman of Marlborough Street were buried, and on 17 October Anna and William Parker of Borough Mews, both small babies.<sup>58</sup>

Diet was also used as a means of caring for the sick. Advice on the correct foodstuffs was often expressed in somewhat moralising terms, suggesting that certain diseases were perceived to be the result of a behavioural failure on the part of the patient. For example, in an information sheet issued in December 1831, Southwark residents were advised that to avoid the risk of cholera, which would be induced by 'intemperate and irregular habits' to 'use nutritive but simple diet' in order to stay

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<sup>55</sup> Hardy, *The Epidemic Streets*.

<sup>56</sup> Tina Young Choi, 'Writing the Victorian City: Discourses of Risk, Perception and Inevitability', *Victorian Studies*, Vol.3, No.4, Summer 2001 pp. 561-589. Young Choi links the growing notion of risk to the development of statistical analyses, which enabled a culture of population comparison rather than individual relationships to risk.

<sup>57</sup> Index to Southwark Coroner's Inquests 1788-1837, LMA/CLA/041/IQ/02/055 and 056, and Index to Southwark Coroner's Inquests 1838-1860, LMA/CLA/042/IQ/01/097.

<sup>58</sup> Index to Southwark Coroner's Inquests 1788-1837, LMA/CLA/041/IQ/02/055 and 056, and Index to Southwark Coroner's Inquests 1838-1860, LMA/CLA/042/IQ/01/097.

healthy.<sup>59</sup> Thirty years and several outbreaks of the disease later, in 1861, *Beeton's* suggested in similar vein that 'to oppose cholera, there seems no surer or better means than cleanliness, sobriety [...] people who court an intemperate diet during the hot days of autumn are actually courting death.'<sup>60</sup> Cholera had a long, and entirely erroneous, association with low-living and alcohol abuse, reinforced by an Evangelical Christian response which framed the disease as a punishment for unwholesome lifestyles when it first arrived in England in 1831. On 7 November 1831, the *Times* published prayers to be read to counteract the cholera, and a day of fasting was proposed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, to ask God's forgiveness for the outbreak.<sup>61</sup> Religion was not universally embraced as a response to the epidemic, however, and the radical National Union of the Working Classes (NUWC) instead proposed a 'day of feasting' in response to the cholera, believing its threat to have been over-hyped as a distraction from political reform.<sup>62</sup>

Several cookbooks other than *Beeton's* had substantial sections on cookery for the sick or invalided. For example, Eliza Rundell's best-selling *A New System of Domestic Cookery* dedicated a chapter to 'Cooking for the Sick'.<sup>63</sup> Esther Copley, who wrote the popular *Cottage Cookery* of 1849, which ran through several editions, had advice for the sick, including prevention of cholera through simple diet and clean living.<sup>64</sup> Charles Elmé Francatelli's *A Plain Cookery Book for the Working Classes*, published in 1852, had sections on 'cookery and diet for the sick room' and 'medicinal, herbaceous and other drinks for invalids etc.', several sections of which *Beeton's* plagiarised.<sup>65</sup> Recipes such as beef tea, calves foot jelly and arrowroot pudding were suggested to be nourishing and restorative for the patient.<sup>66</sup> *Beeton's* also had plenty of advice about the cleanliness of utensils to be used and how to make little dishes

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<sup>59</sup> Minutes of the Vestry of St. Saviour's Southwark, 19 November 1831 (LMA/P92/SAV/2221).

<sup>60</sup> Beeton, *The Book of Household Management*, p. 1073.

<sup>61</sup> Philip Williamson, *State prayers, fasts and thanksgivings: Public worship in Britain 1830-1897*, Past and Present, 200 (2008) 121-170, p. 121.

<sup>62</sup> *Poor Man's Guardian* 21 March, 1831.

<sup>63</sup> Eliza Rundell, *A New System of Domestic Cookery* (London: John Murray, 1806). Rundell's book ran through sixty-five editions and was still being published in 1911.

<sup>64</sup> Esther Copley, *The Complete Cottage Cookery* (London: Groombridge & Sons, 1849).

<sup>65</sup> Sheila Hardy, *The Real Mrs Beeton*, p. 203.

<sup>66</sup> Charles Elmé Francatelli, *A Plain Cookery Book for the Working Classes* (London: Bosworth & Harrison, 1852), pp. 81-99.

of food look pretty and tempting for jaded appetites.<sup>67</sup> There is a remarkable consistency in recommended diets in the different cookbooks, suggesting that bland puddings and variations on meat broths were standard fare for the sick of all classes. Meat broths could be cheaply made using scrag ends and gizzards, according to Francatelli, and arrowroot was economical and widely available.<sup>68</sup>

For the sick surviving on outdoor relief, Poor Law Guardians and philanthropic dispensaries could prescribe food and drink such as bread, soup, brandy and meat as well as medicines. Southwark residents had access to this and other kinds of professional and parish support, and depending on circumstance could use a range of services including private doctors and nurses, parish surgeons, workhouse infirmaries, pharmacies, dispensaries, and two teaching hospitals, Guy's and St Thomas's.<sup>69</sup> Many savings and benefits clubs would pay for the services of a doctor or nurse and kept medical professionals on a retainer for members to call upon when required. For example, the Southwark-based 'Associated Brothers Benefit Society' offered cover for sickness, lying-in and burial costs, and for the price of 2s 4d a month, members would receive 15s a week for sickness which could be spent on the services of a nurse or doctor.<sup>70</sup> Southwark's two hospitals, Guy's and St Thomas's, could also be applied to for medical assistance, and there were various smaller institutions, including the Magdalen Hospital on Blackfriars Road, the Surrey Dispensary and the South London Dispensary. The Magdalen offered 'relief and reformation of penitent females who have deviated from the paths of virtue', and whilst it would not accept anyone pregnant or 'diseased' (meaning venereal infections), it did provide basic medical care, and support for finding work,

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<sup>67</sup> Beeton, *The Book of Household Management*, p.893.

<sup>68</sup> Anthony Wohl has analysed the limitations of the Victorian labouring class diet, which he argues was restricted in variety and nutrition, a situation that did not begin to improve until the final quarter of the nineteenth century, although it does appear that urban communities like Southwark did have access to a more varied diet than his analysis of poor law records suggests. Anthony S. Wohl, *Endangered Lives: Public health in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 48-51.

<sup>69</sup> Nurses were hired for several purposes not just care of the sick. Beeton lists sick-nurses, nursery nurses, wet nurses and monthly nurses. Helping with babies, postpartum women and small children was common practice, especially in middle-class homes. Beeton, *The Book of Household Management*, pp. 1013-1024.

<sup>70</sup> *Poor Man's Guardian* No.53, June 16, 1832, p. 8.

presumably once the path of virtue had been rediscovered.<sup>71</sup> The Surrey Dispensary in Union Street treated around 5000 patients a year, claiming on their sixtieth anniversary in 1838, to have 'Cured, 171,841; relieved, 15,174; discharged 5119; dead, 5687; under treatment, 504; total, 198, 325. Of this number, 31,796 were midwifery cases.'<sup>72</sup> The South London Dispensary treated around 1000 patients a year, and an Infirmary for the Diseases of Children was also available on Waterloo Road. Local boards of health and the workhouse also employed parish surgeons and medical officers for use by residents. Writing in 1878, one of Southwark's parish doctors, and keen amateur historian, William Rendle, described his former career as 'surgeon to the poor, and medical officer of health at St George the Martyr, Southwark'.<sup>73</sup>

Each Southwark parish employed three doctors, increasing their numbers in times of epidemic crisis, such as the cholera outbreaks of 1832 and 1849. During the first cholera outbreak in the 1830s, the doctors working in Southwark appear to have been largely reactive, mainly involved in assessing and confirming cholera cases for national returns to the government's *Cholera Gazette*, and carrying out post-mortems on suspected cases.<sup>74</sup> By the later 1840s and 1850s, there is evidence that doctors were taking a more proactive role in looking after patients, as well having greater involvement in coroner's courts and local sanitary investigations.<sup>75</sup> An inquest held in September 1853 for cholera victim John Hickie, revealed that local surgeons Mr Wakem and Mr Evans provided medical assistance at the request of Hickie's wife, Ann, giving her brandy, blankets, calomel and mustard poultice. After Hickie's death, they participated in the coroner's investigation into his domestic circumstances to assess whether this environment had caused the cholera.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Reverend George Weight F.R.A.S, F.S.S., *Statistics of the Parish of St George the Martyr, Southwark*, Statistical Society of London, 1840, p. 69.

<sup>72</sup> Weight, *Statistics of the Parish of St George the Martyr*, p. 71.

<sup>73</sup> William Rendle, *Old Southwark and its People*, (London: Drewett, 1878), p. 1.

<sup>74</sup> St Saviour's Board of Health Minutes, November – February 1831 to 1832, LMA/P92/SAV/2221.

<sup>75</sup> Their greater involvement was partly expedited by being paid for their services, after the passing of the Medical Witnesses Act, 1836.

<sup>76</sup> 'Asiatic Cholera in Southwark', *Daily News*, 14 September 1853.

From the later 1830s, the Board of Guardians also recruited doctors and parish surgeons for the workhouse infirmaries, a busy role as it has been estimated that generally only around ten per cent of workhouse inmates were healthy when admitted.<sup>77</sup> Joseph Rogers, who became medical officer of the Soho workhouse in 1855, detailed numerous chronic and serious cases of ill-health in his charge, including typhus and tuberculosis, as well as the complete inadequacy of the medicines at his disposal.<sup>78</sup> It is not possible to ascertain whether Southwark's workhouse inmates were as sickly as Soho's, but workload was certainly a regular complaint from the Borough's medical officers. Residents were proactive at requesting medical services, and the community had numerous health complaints which needed addressing. In October 1839, Dr William Rendle wrote to the Board of Guardians stating that in January 1839, he attended seventy-six new cases, and in August ninety-nine.<sup>79</sup> Although the workhouse population remained reasonably stable throughout the 1840s and 1850s, with an average of 500 inhabitants, the doctors saw well over 1000 additional outdoor relief patients a month.<sup>80</sup> Indeed if the statistic that only ten per cent of inmates were healthy to begin with is broadly accurate, Rendle's existing workhouse cases may have been on top of an already heavy caseload of 450 in-house patients. In August 1839, a year in which summer fevers were compounded by an outbreak of influenza in Southwark, 2200 residents received some kind of parochial medical help, concerning the local Board of Guardians about the 'frightful and alarming state of disease in the parish.'<sup>81</sup> Things were little better a year later, when the Guardian meeting minutes noted that the infirmary was so busy, the day rooms were having to double-up as sick rooms.<sup>82</sup>

Women shared this workload professionally as well as domestically, and could find employment as carers, nurses, 'assistant mothers', wet-nurses, monthly nurses, and nursemaids. Such roles, although some clearly age-constrained, often carried no

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<sup>77</sup> Joseph Rogers, *Reminiscences of a Workhouse Medical Officer* (London: Unwin, 1889). M.A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System 1834-1929* (London: Batsford, 1981) also confirms the high levels of sickness in workhouses, and abject state of the infirmaries, pp. 160-162.

<sup>78</sup> Rogers, *Reminiscences of a Workhouse Medical Officer*.

<sup>79</sup> St George the Martyr Board of Guardian Minutes, 23 October 1839, LMA/SOBG-3.

<sup>80</sup> St George the Martyr Board of Guardian Minutes, 21 August 1839, LMA/SOBG-3.

<sup>81</sup> St George the Martyr Board of Guardian Minutes, 21 August 1839, LMA/SOBG-3.

<sup>82</sup> St Saviours Parish Vestry Minutes, 21 April 1840, LMA/P92/SAV/458.

formal training requirements. By the mid to late-nineteenth century, nursing was evolving into a more respectable job than that portrayed by Dickens's Mrs Gamp, although there remained a broad spectrum of kinds of employment ranging from those hired by wealthy households and teaching hospitals, to those working in workhouse infirmaries. Sometimes female workhouse inmates would be tasked with helping on the wards.<sup>83</sup> Dickens wrote about an encounter with an inmate-nurse in his article 'A Walk in a Workhouse', 'a woman such as HOGARTH has often drawn [...] flabby, raw-boned, untidy – unpromising and coarse of aspect as need be.'<sup>84</sup> Workhouse ward conditions were often difficult and unpleasant. A letter from Edward Evans, surgeon to the St George the Martyr workhouse, in response to a request that he reduce the alcohol bill for the infirmary, argued that he would not be able to retain the goodwill of his elderly inmate-nurses without the inducement of gin and port rations, because of their own physical states and the conditions of their work,

Nurse Wright is 74 years of age and is suffering from a tendency to dropsical disease; the spirits act as a diuretic; Nurses Bryant and Letsom [...] have many disagreeable duties to perform in their constant attendance upon the patients many of whom are unable to obey the call of nature without assistance [...] Nurse Parker has care of the syphilitic ward – more disagreeable duties cannot be undertaken by any female [...] Nurse Gordon is in bad health and can take neither porter nor gin, and is therefore allowed wine instead of these.<sup>85</sup>

Underlining the social complexities that being both inmate and nurse involved, Evans alludes to the issue of endemic workhouse ill-health in his letter. Alcohol was required by his 'staff' to cope with balancing their own poor states of health whilst carrying out the tasks required of them as carers. Regularly deprived 'of their natural rest' due to the onerous nature of their duties, Evans believed that alcohol provided a 'necessary stimulus to the nervous system', without which they 'would be rendered more liable to take contagious diseases and [...] their health and

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<sup>83</sup> As Brian Abel-Smith has documented, nursing training did not really begin until the second half of the nineteenth century, and recruitment became more stringent. This was driven in part, he argues, 'to provide a suitable occupation for the daughters of the higher social classes.' Abel-Smith, *A History of the Nursing Profession*, p. 17.

<sup>84</sup> Charles Dickens, 'A Walk in a Workhouse', *Household Words*, 12 May 1850.

<sup>85</sup> Board of Guardian Minutes, Southwark St George the Martyr, 1849-1850. Letter from Edward Evans dated 22 May 1850, to the Board of Guardians, LMA/SOBG-11.

strength would be very seriously depressed.’<sup>86</sup> This latter point exposes a further issue worth repeated emphasis about care for the sick and dying in Southwark during the early to mid-nineteenth century. Although there were a variety of recourses to action and support that residents could and did adopt, the context of caring was for the majority circumscribed by their own physical as well as material conditions, which for most might well involve general poor health and ongoing chronic conditions.

Whilst this section demonstrates overall that individuals probably did their best to support the sick and dying, and were often proactive in assisting neighbours in need, ill-health was a serious and dangerous disruptor in such precarious circumstances, often tipping families into destitution. The framing of such care as was available as an extension of female domestic duty, whether in the home or the professional environment of a ward, meant that failures could be criticised or judged against standards of household management, rather than as a product of limited resources and material circumstances. What emerges is a dichotomy, between the fixation, epitomised by *Beeton’s*, of idealised nursing care, focused on models of middle-class morality and cleanliness, and the realities of the abject nature of the tasks involved, particularly for labouring and poorer communities, as outlined by Evans. These kinds of tensions are noteworthy because they influenced aspects of the public health mind-set, as exemplified by Edwin Chadwick’s reports. As addressed in the next section, Chadwick did, on occasion, conflate the health risks posed by the sick, dying and dead with female domestic mismanagement, rather than as a result of deep-seated structural social and economic issues such as squalid housing, insecure work and inadequate infrastructure.

## Care of the dead

The care of the sick, dying and dead came under increasing scrutiny by public health campaigners during the period 1830 to 1860. This was for several reasons, many of which were thrown into sharper relief by the intensity of urban expansion, with its

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<sup>86</sup> Board of Guardian Minutes, Southwark St George the Martyr, 1849-1850. Letter from Edward Evans dated 22 May 1850, to the Board of Guardians, LMA/SOBG-11.



attendant problems of overcrowded housing, inadequate sanitation and epidemic outbreaks. One of the most influential and prolific campaigners for public health and sanitary reform was Edwin Chadwick, whose best-selling publications of 1842 and 1843, the *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* and *Supplementary Report into the Practice of Interment in Towns*, examined various aspects of labouring-class life and death, with particular regard to the links between poverty, ill-health and early death. His views were shaped by his close association with Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham, and doctors Neil Arnott, Thomas Southwood Smith and James Kay-Shuttleworth, all of whom were advocates of public health reform.<sup>87</sup> As well as being an architect of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, Chadwick made a contribution to nineteenth-century sanitary reform, particularly through his campaigns for better sewerage and clean water supplies.<sup>88</sup>

The following section focuses on Chadwick's analysis of the treatment of the dead, and preparations for burial in labouring-class homes. His findings formed a substantial part of the basis for his conclusions about the causes of ill-health and poverty in labouring-class communities. These conclusions would inform legislative changes such as the banning of intramural burials, at least in the more 'populous' urban areas. They also enabled the inclusion of delayed burial as a social 'nuisance' under public health law. His reports and legislative influence were therefore significant because they impacted on the ways in which labouring-class

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<sup>87</sup> Neil Arnott (1788-1874) was a doctor and public health reformer, becoming in 1837 physician extraordinary to Queen Victoria. He contributed to Chadwick's *Report* and *Supplementary Report*, and propagated his own views about public health through, amongst other publications 'On the Fevers which have Prevalled in Edinburgh and Glasgow' that clean air, and exercise, and the avoidance of poisons and violence were the keys to a healthy life. Thomas Southwood Smith (1788-1861) was a physician, advocate of dissection, and sanitary reformer. After his appointment to the London Fever Hospital in 1824, he wrote several papers on ill-health, and he worked closely with Chadwick at the Central Board of Health from 1848-1854. James Kay-Shuttleworth (1804-1877), also a physician, wrote *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Class Employed in the Cotton Manufacture in Manchester* in 1832, a text much quoted by Frederick Engels in his 1845 *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Shuttleworth-Kay also assisted Chadwick, as well as founding Battersea Normal College to train the teachers of pauper children. After a major typhus outbreak in 1838, Chadwick persuaded the central Poor Law Board to inquire into the causes of the epidemic, and commissioned Arnott, Southwood Smith and Kay-Shuttleworth to assist with the investigation.

<sup>88</sup> G.M. Binnie, *Early Victorian Water Engineers* (London: Telford, 1981). Chadwick also worked closely with economist Nassau Senior to develop the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, which aimed to centralise a system largely untouched since the Elizabethan period. See M.A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System*.

communities were able to make decisions about treatment of their dead, as well as limiting their burial choices. As noted in the introduction to the thesis, the actions of urban communities regarding the dying and dead were inevitably influenced, and sometimes curtailed, by external factors such as changes in legislation, and Chadwick played a central role in this. However, this chapter argues that Chadwick's views about the dead and burial practices, as outlined in his *Report* and *Supplementary Report*, were based on an assessment that was limited by social, economic and gender-based assumptions. Chadwick tended to view labouring-class individuals and families as objects rather than subjects of study, merging them, as his first report title underlines, into a statistical 'population', rather than treating them as individuals or even sub-groups. The examples on which he based his studies, and his conclusions about their activities, sometimes essentialises a complex array of responses to the challenges of caring for the dying and dead in rapidly urbanising areas like Southwark. Basing his assessments on the reports of predominantly middle-class, professional men such as doctors and clergymen, he drew conclusions about the treatment of the dying and dead designed to reinforce his case for sanitary reform, rather than to try and understand why individuals and families behaved in certain ways.

Chadwick's reports centred much of their criticism on domestic behaviours, and what women did, or failed to do, to ensure the health of their families. In particular, by failing to ensure swift, and in his terms, hygienic, burial Chadwick concluded that children might become sickly through contact with corpses, or worse, corrupted by the presence of decaying flesh. Chadwick's tone was often moralising, claiming that the presence of the dead could create the conditions for decadent, licentious, disrespectful or downright irreligious behaviours. For Chadwick, the already indecent intimacy of labouring-class living was thrown into even sharper relief if an inhabitant was ill or died. Whilst wealthier families could care for, but also physically separate their dying and dead from the day-to-day running of their household, in labouring and poorer homes, death had to be directly integrated into limited living space. This might sometimes mean the living sharing a bed with the dead, adding a sexualised subtext to labouring-class deaths.

In the opening to the *Supplementary Report* Chadwick immediately focused his narrative on the dangers for the living presented by the infectious dying and dead. Early sections are dedicated to ‘the propagation of acute disease from putrid emanations’, ‘specific disease communicated from human remains’, ‘distinct effects produced by emanations by bodies in a state of decay’, the ‘tainting of wells by emanations from burial grounds’, in total ten different categories in which smell or seepage from the sick and dead might infect the living.<sup>89</sup> The danger of emanations from the dead frames his case about the risks of keeping bodies in the home after death, compounded by burying them in over-crowded urban burial grounds. Noting that, for the labouring classes, ‘the greatest proportion of deaths occur in the single rooms in which families live and sleep’, he calculated that in working districts roughly four-fifths of families lived in such cramped quarters.<sup>90</sup> However, the average size of these families, if his statistics are accurate, were just under three people per dwelling.<sup>91</sup> Whilst this was undoubtedly crowded, it reinforces the limitations of Chadwick’s frequent use of de-contextualised data. Whilst most of the families he described lived in single rooms, around 15 per cent of them occupied between two and four rooms.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, the quality of life in these rooms probably varied considerably, according to size and state of room, ages of occupants, furnishings, facilities both private and shared, relations with neighbours, how much of the day occupants were out of the home, and a host of other factors not accounted for.<sup>93</sup> Chadwick’s concern with overcrowding was rooted in middle-class notions of domesticity as private, family space. For many labouring individuals and families, not only were working hours long, but other convivial sites such as public houses and clubs, or even streets and courts, formed part of their domiciles and sense of space and community. Many residences used shared facilities for washing, cooking and storing goods, a so-called ‘promiscuous’ housing model.<sup>94</sup> In Southwark, for example, almost any unbuilt area, including cemeteries, might be claimed as

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<sup>89</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, pp. 1-30.

<sup>90</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 42.

<sup>91</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 32.

<sup>92</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 32.

<sup>93</sup> Daunton, *House and Home*, Ellen Ross “‘Not the sort that would sit on the doorstep”: Respectability in Pre-World War I Neighbourhoods’, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 27 (1985), 35-39.

<sup>94</sup> Daunton, *House and Home*, p. 12.

communal space, and used for keeping animals, children's play spaces, drying washing, or even preparing food. Inadequate domestic facilities meant that eating and drinking often took place on the street. Therefore, the relationship towards what places constituted 'home', or at least practical and usable areas for doing, making and consuming things in, was often not clear-cut.

Most deaths during the early to mid-nineteenth century took place in a domestic setting, even if that home was constituted by a single room shared with others. For obvious reasons, this limited the possibility for the middle-class ideal of a private, peaceful death, surrounded by family and intimates.<sup>95</sup> Chadwick expressed concern about the 'savage brutality and carelessness of life amongst the labouring population' that such over-familiarity around the moments of death that could create.<sup>96</sup> An anonymous clergyman interviewed for the *Supplementary Report* observed that for 'the upper classes, a corpse excites feelings of awe and respect; with the lower orders...it is often treated with as little respect as a carcase [sic] in a butcher's shop.'<sup>97</sup> The clergyman offered an interesting rationale for this apparently crude behaviour. Whilst the 'lower orders' might strive to have an imposing funeral, by retaining the body in the home after death while gathering funds and waking before burial, meant that the dead became a familiar sight, almost part of the family or furniture, and 'from familiarity it is a short step to desecration.'<sup>98</sup> Overcrowded living conditions meant that the body would be integrated into daily life, the clergyman noting the corpse might be pulled about by children and animals or used as a table or for resting a glass of beer or gin. The presence of the corpse diminished the power of death, and not only removed a 'wholesome fear' of mortality but also served to 'deaden every appeal of religion.'<sup>99</sup> For the clergyman, it appears to have been the everyday nature of the dead amongst the living that diminished the sense of awe that he felt good Christians ought to feel in the presence of death, underpinned by the loss of his own authority as a representative of religious practice. Such a casual mismanagement of death in labouring households thus

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<sup>95</sup> This was the ideal of middle-class death, analysed in Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>96</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 45.

<sup>97</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 45.

<sup>98</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 46.

<sup>99</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 46.

became conflated with a more generalised judgement about the immorality of 'lower class' living, reinforced by the body being used as a surface for that other sure sign of degeneration, alcohol.

This view was shared by John Liddle, a medical officer in Whitechapel during the 1840s, who predominantly visited dock labourers, bricklayers and navigators, a broadly similar demographic to Southwark's population.<sup>100</sup> He described how a corpse might be 'kept in that room where the inmates sleep and have their meals. Sometimes the corpse is stretched on the bed, and the bed clothes are taken off and the wife and family lie on the floor.'<sup>101</sup> This domestication of the dead resulted in what he also feared was an over-familiarity with the corpse,

What I observe when I first visit the room is a degree of indifference to the presence of the corpse: the family is found eating or drinking or pursuing their usual callings, and the children playing. Amongst the middle classes, where there is an opportunity of putting the corpse by itself, there are greater marks of respect and decency. Amongst that class no one would think of doing anything in the room where the corpse was lying, still less of allowing children there.<sup>102</sup>

Liddle's comment is revealing. The terms of 'middle-class decency' are never qualified or described but taken for granted as understood between, in this context, professional men. In contrast, labouring-class activities are scrutinised, criticised and invested with social problems. The idea of children playing around the corpse is not questioned as a product of economic reality, whereby families ('inmates') are forced to occupy limited space, including that in which they die. Rather, this is a display of domestic negligence and indifference, as though the dwellers are dulled into an emotionless state even in the presence of death. Yet Liddle, and the nameless clergyman quoted earlier, are also viewers of these scenes, seemingly only moved by the sight of death as an outrage to propriety. Despite their respective professions, they refer to themselves quite deliberately as observers, not participants, even though they are, in theory, present to offer comfort and advice to the bereaved.

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<sup>100</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, pp. 34-35

<sup>101</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 35.

<sup>102</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 35.

Chadwick was also concerned that the presence of a corpse in the home had the potential to physically as well as morally infect other, healthy residents. He calculated that upwards of 20,000 labouring-class people died in single-room households every year in London, each 'presenting a horrible scene of the retention of the corpse amidst the family.'<sup>103</sup> There was also the possibility that the body could cause 'mental pain and moral evil generally [...] and though only noticed incidentally, is yet more deplorable.'<sup>104</sup> These statements are, as with Liddle, somewhat presumptuous about the relationship between the dead and the living. Death is again presented as a spectacle, a 'horrible scene', but on no occasion are the labouring-class individuals or families living with the dead asked their views about their situation. Furthermore, the observations are predicated on Chadwick's supposition that all labouring-class households retained bodies in the home after death. It is not possible to get accurate statistics for the practice, but there is some evidence from Southwark that it was far from universal. For example, during a dispute about overcrowding in graveyards in Southwark in the 1840s, analysed in greater detail in chapter five of this thesis, churchwardens reported that burial was often swift,

Elizabeth Frances Lock aged four years died 23 July removed same day to the dead house and buried the next day at 3 o'clock, Harriet Horton and Mary Ann Priest taken to the dead house 24 July and buried the next day at 3 o'clock, Michael Leary 8 years died 2 August taken to the dead house same day and buried next morning at half-past 10 o'clock, Walter Cook, 14 years, drowned taken out of the river on Friday morning 10 August, inquest held the next afternoon Saturday and buried the same evening.<sup>105</sup>

In those instances where families did retain corpses, there were often practical reasons underpinning the decision. Although Southwark had two major teaching hospitals, Guy's and St Thomas's, and various smaller institutions that helped with care of the sick, these institutions had very limited, if any, mortuary space. The workhouses and some of the cemeteries had 'dead houses', but these were generally only available for those who died on their premises or were being stored for coroner's inquests. In a meeting on 21 April 1840, St Saviour's vestrymen observed

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<sup>103</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 44.

<sup>104</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 44.

<sup>105</sup> St Saviour's Vestry Minutes, 11 September 1849, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

the poor state of the workhouse dead house, noting that it was ‘very confined and we think must shock the feelings of those who go to see the remains of their friends and relations.’<sup>106</sup> Mortuaries did not become more widely available until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and most undertakers did not begin to store bodies prior to burial until much later in the century, when embalming technologies became available.<sup>107</sup> For most households, regardless of class, there was little option but to keep the body at home before burial.

Chadwick based much of his analysis about the retention of bodies in the home on interviews with a Southwark undertaker, John Wild. Wild reported that he buried around 600 people annually, roughly 350 of whom were from the labouring classes. In Southwark, Wild reported that ‘three-fourths of the rooms we have to visit are single rooms [...] Generally speaking, we only find one bed in the room and that occupied by a corpse.’<sup>108</sup> He reported that, on average, families retained bodies for between five and twelve days before burial, and ‘they would keep them much longer, if it were not for the undertaker who urges them to bury them.’<sup>109</sup> Some families had been known to retain dead bodies for weeks, in cases of rapid decomposition ‘tapping’, or draining the coffin to let the fluid out: ‘I have known them to keep the corpse after the coffin had been tapped twice’.<sup>110</sup> Wild also noted that children would sometimes be left entirely alone with a maggoty corpse ‘whilst the widow is out making arrangements connected with the funeral.’<sup>111</sup> Many of the accounts in the *Supplementary Report* describe the death of a husband, with widow and children left behind to cope. Given the mortality statistics outlined in the first section of this chapter, labouring households were most likely to have to manage the death of a baby or child. However, the imagery of a dead husband and helpless, bereft dependents arguably heightens the drama of Chadwick’s depiction of labouring-class death, as it strikes at the core of nineteenth-century middle-class mores about the emotionally and economically sustainable domestic realm, which required a

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<sup>106</sup> St Saviours Vestry Minutes, 21 April 1840, LMA/P92/SAV/459.

<sup>107</sup> Pam Fisher, ‘Houses for the Dead: The provision of mortuaries in London 1843-1889’, *The London Journal*, 34 (2009), 1-15.

<sup>108</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 38.

<sup>109</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 38.

<sup>110</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 46.

<sup>111</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 39.

wage-earning man at its head.<sup>112</sup> Widows and orphans were also amongst the most likely to require the support of the workhouse or parish, or worse, fall into immoral ways, making their predicament part of the collective social interest.

Retention of the dead in the home could occur for a variety of reasons, including work patterns, religious and cultural traditions, the need to collect or raise burial funds, and the time required to organise the social aspects of a funeral. These factors were not fully extrapolated by Chadwick, although he did understand that getting burial club monies took time.<sup>113</sup> In his study of the London parish of St Mary Woolnoth, Stephen Porter found that the average time between death and burial during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was two or three days, and this timeframe is supported by other records of the period.<sup>114</sup> Before the rapid expansion of small parishes into large urban settlements, a modest interment in a small community could be quickly funded through family or other social networks, and news of a death could be easily communicated. In the larger, and often more transitory communities of cities and towns time was needed either to raise funds from the burial or benefits club if the deceased was a member, organise a more informal street raffle or collection from neighbours, or apply to the parish if not. It was also necessary to have time off work to attend a funeral. Given the precarious nature of most working people's household budgets, and in a highly casualised labour market such as Southwark's, this could be complex to negotiate.<sup>115</sup> Such employment patterns brought the dual challenge of either fixed or highly contingent hours, offering little compromise for workers, even at a time of family crisis.<sup>116</sup> Although casual labour was theoretically flexible, the necessity of continual

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<sup>112</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 38.

<sup>113</sup> See Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, pp. 57-71. Narelle McCoy, 'The Quick and the Dead: Sexuality and the Irish Merry Wake', *Continuum*, 26 (2012), 615-624, shows that there were no fixed times per se for a wake to last; *The Kaleidoscope* of 4 January 1820 describes various wake rituals, including using the body as a snuff and tobacco stand, but does not attribute specific timeframes to how long waking should last.

<sup>114</sup> Stephen Porter, 'Death and Burial in a London Parish: St. Mary Woolnoth 1653-1699', *The London Journal*, 8 (1982), 76-80.

<sup>115</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship Between Classes in Victorian London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971). Jones writes of the 'unparalleled opportunities for casual employment, the possibility of scraping together a living by innumerable devious methods' as a characteristic of London's working arrangements for working people. P. 15.

<sup>116</sup> E.P. Thompson, 'Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism', *Past and Present*, 38 (1967) 56-97.



attendance at dockyards or warehouses for jobs that may or may not materialise, made planning, even a few days in advance, difficult to do.<sup>117</sup> This meant that for labouring communities the most common day for interments was a Sunday. Sundays could become so intensely busy for burials that Wild described an almost production-line format, 'During last Sunday, for example, there were fifteen funerals all fixed during one hour at one church.'<sup>118</sup> This equates to approximately four minutes per funeral, meaning that the clergyman would conduct a curtailed service as families queued around the corner to bury their dead.<sup>119</sup> Surviving Southwark burial records support Wild's testimony that it was common to have several funerals on one day during this period. At the two main Anglican graveyards, St Saviours and Christ Church, there were up to seventy-one interments per month, and around three-quarters of these took place on Sundays.<sup>120</sup>

Wild suggested that a further reason for long periods between death and burial was often the sheer scale and size of labouring class funerals, making logistics complicated,

They have a great number [of mourners] to attend, neighbours, fellow-workmen, as well as relations. The mourners with them vary from five to eight couple; it is always an agreement for five couple at the least.<sup>121</sup>

Such elaborate funerals and their costs concerned Chadwick. Wild reported that the average costs of a funeral for labouring adults was around £4, and 30 shillings for children.<sup>122</sup> Southwark advertisements from burial clubs from this period, discussed in chapter two of this thesis, generally paid between £3 and £10 for an adult funeral and 30 shillings for children, so support this assessment. Burial receipts from F.A. Albin Brothers, a Southwark undertaker founded in the early nineteenth century, show that during the 1850s, they were offering an economical burial in St Giles' Cemetery in Camberwell for as little as 13 shillings. Various factors kept the cost of these low, including the time of day, as after 3 o'clock was cheaper, whether the

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<sup>117</sup> Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, p. 15.

<sup>118</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 81.

<sup>119</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 81.

<sup>120</sup> Christ Church Southwark Burial Register LMA/P92/CTC/61.

<sup>121</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p.47.

<sup>122</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p.48.

allotted ground had permission for a headstone or monument, and whether the grave was to be turfed or not. The Reformed Funerals Company offered, as its cheapest option a 'Class G, an ORDINARY FUNERAL', which ranged in price from £5 15s. to £3.15s, 'according to Style and Accompaniments; and any HIGHER CLASS in proportion.'<sup>123</sup> Although, as discussed in chapter two of this thesis, undertakers had a reputation for greed and exploitation, it appears that prices for interments changed remarkably little during the early to mid-nineteenth century. Furthermore, whilst Chadwick thought that lavish funerals were a needless expense, the reality appears to have been that the majority opted for something affordable within their burial club savings, and as 96 per cent of Southwark burials were privately funded, most clearly found the means to do so.

Notwithstanding his fixed ideas about their approaches to managing dying and death, Chadwick's reports remain an important resource for understanding labouring-class urban conditions of living and dying in the mid-nineteenth century. The circumstances of overcrowded, fever-nest housing, where epidemics and sickness routinely wiped out over 50 per cent of children remained largely unchanged in Southwark until child mortality rates began to slowly decline in the last quarter of the century.<sup>124</sup> In one sense, therefore, Chadwick's analysis about poverty and ill-health was correct. Domestic abjection created the conditions for sickness and early death, which in turn made vulnerable households even more precarious and lacking in resilience to loss, particularly of breadwinners. Where Chadwick and other contributors to his reports were more limited in their assessments, however, was in an inability to read beyond the social and cultural assumptions of their middle-class mores, particularly about domestic standards, when they interpreted the behaviours and responses of their labouring-class counterparts. By focusing their critique on the state of labouring-class homes, and especially the retention of the corpse in the home, Chadwick and colleagues failed to see, and therefore address the greater economic and social questions that beset

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<sup>123</sup> The Reformed Funerals Company Ltd., *Scale of Charges*, 1871.

<sup>124</sup> There is some debate about whether child mortality began to decline in the 1850s or 1870s, but there is consensus that it declined during the second half of the century. As noted in the chapter, the statistics for Southwark, although flawed, appear to show a relative consistency. Simon Szreter, 'Author response: Debating mortality trends in nineteenth century Britain', *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 33 (2004), 705-709, is a useful summary of the arguments.

the rapid development of urban communities like Southwark. These included inadequate wages, unreliable employment, terrible housing, and the lack of political and social influence to address such issues in an organised way. They also failed to see the actions that labouring communities *did* take to manage their circumstances, activities such as mutual and neighbourly support, the development of savings clubs, and the planning and paying for economical burials, rather than relying on the patronage of the parish.

## Conclusion

Assessing what labouring-class individuals were able to do to care for their dying and dead in the early to mid-nineteenth century is frustrated by a lack of first-hand accounts from those communities themselves. Interpretations of their actions and behaviours can draw on contemporary sources, such as Edwin Chadwick's reports into urban labouring life and death, which used interviews with doctors, undertakers and clergymen, but this runs the risk of objectifying such communities through the lens of male, professional perspectives. This chapter argues that an analysis of what people did to manage high levels of mortality can sometimes run counter to Chadwick's findings. When contextualised by the issues that confronted an urban community like Southwark during an intense period of economic and social change, the range of responses demonstrates that individuals and groups did not necessarily behave in consistent or uniform ways. They made decisions about whether to call upon medical assistance, when to request the support of neighbours, or the parish, and how to dose or feed the sick and dying. For labouring-class women in particular, a variety of roles were defined through sickness and death. As well as their own domestic duties in looking after sick family, they might find employment as professional or hired nurses, for example, or more informally take control of running a neighbour's household during a period of ill-health or death or be coerced into caring responsibilities as part of their duties in the workhouse.

What may have appeared to be the irrational and unhealthy management of the dying and dead, at least from Chadwick's perspective, were, the chapter argues, actions adopted to mitigate the contingent circumstances that impacted on the daily

domestic landscape. It is statistically indisputable that caring for the sick and dying was a frequent feature of labouring-class life. Although this chapter has not attempted to differentiate between actions taken to manage different kinds of sickness and death, such as specific diseases that might be long or short-term, or sudden or accidental fatalities, and how that impacted on care, every situation was experienced and managed according to a myriad of individual responses and circumstances. Whilst this may be an obvious point to make, Chadwick's professional interviewees did not, overall, allow for this nuance. Even the issue that most exercised Chadwick, that of retaining the corpse in the home prior to burial, did not explicitly link the practice to the economic realities of labouring-class work patterns or the wherewithal to raise funds for burial. Nor does Chadwick's dramatic assertion that 20,000 dead bodies were being retained in homes across the metropolis every always stand up to scrutiny, with evidence from Southwark suggesting that many were buried quickly and efficiently, if resources were available to do so.

In the context of this thesis, these issues are pertinent because they underline that the management of the dying and dead during this period was a product of economic and social structures, material conditions that both enabled and constrained actions and behaviours. When interpreted in this way, what individuals did can be viewed quite differently from the conclusions that Chadwick reached. As noted in the previous chapter, most Southwark interments were privately funded by families and friends of the deceased, suggesting that death was integrated and planned for within even the most constrained of budgets. The end of life was thus woven into domestic structures, women's work, neighbourly support, and the social and cultural expectations invested in burial. Attempts to manage these circumstances and relationships may have been misunderstood or misinterpreted by Chadwick and other middle-class observers, but they suggest that for labouring individuals themselves, caring for the dying and dead could be rooted in all kinds of domestic, neighbourly and collegiate cooperation.

## Chapter four: Inquest and verdict in Southwark

At the appointed hour arrives the Coroner, for whom the jurymen are waiting and who is received with a salute of skittles from the good dry skittle-ground attached to the Sol's Arms. The Coroner frequents more public-houses than any man alive. The smell of sawdust, beer, tobacco-smoke, and spirits is inseparable in his vocation from death in its most awful shapes. He is conducted by the beadle and the landlord to the Harmonic Meeting Room, where he puts his hat on the piano and takes a Windsor-chair at the head of a long table formed of several short tables put together and ornamented with glutinous rings in endless involutions, made by pots and glasses. As many of the jury as can crowd together at the table sit there. The rest get among the spittoons and pipes or lean against the piano. Over the Coroner's head is a small iron garland, the pendant handle of a bell, which rather gives the majesty of the court the appearance of going to be hanged presently.

Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*<sup>1</sup>

As the Charles Dickens quotation above suggests, during the early to mid-nineteenth century coroner's inquests presented something of a dichotomy. Despite the seriousness of their work, investigating sudden, unexpected or suspicious deaths, coroners had no dedicated offices or courts, and inquests and even post-mortems were sometimes conducted in the informal surroundings of public houses.<sup>2</sup> Dickens emphasises this dissonance by setting his inquest in the banal surroundings of the Harmonic Meeting Room, complete with a distinctly unmelodious skittles match clattering in the background and the sticky rings of glasses on the tables. Such details underline a theme that was often repeated in his novels, about the anonymous and prosaic nature of death in the city, particularly for labouring people. Their lives and deaths were marginalised by the callousness of an economic order obsessed only by the business of making money, and the bureaucratic facelessness displayed by various layers of public authority, including the church. To underline this point, the inquest described in the quotation is for Nemo, or 'nobody', and in the novel it is

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* [1852-53] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 159-160.

<sup>2</sup> There were very few places to store corpses, other than in the home, whether the circumstances of death were suspicious or not. Pam Fisher, 'Houses for the dead: the provision of mortuaries in London, 1843-1889', *The London Journal*, 34 (2009), 1-15.

followed by his unceremonious ‘funeral’, which involves the dumping of his body in an unmarked pauper’s grave.<sup>3</sup>

Dickens had direct experience of inquests, having served as a jury member at Marylebone workhouse in January 1840. It was presided over by the doctor, campaigner and founder of the *Lancet* Thomas Wakley, who was elected coroner for Middlesex in 1839. The case involved the death of a baby, and the jurors were charged with ascertaining whether the mother had ‘committed the minor offence of concealing the birth, or the major offence of killing the child.’<sup>4</sup> Reminiscing about the case after Wakley’s death in 1862, Dickens recalled being impressed by the ‘patient and humane’ approach of the coroner, whose manner persuaded the jurors to reach the compassionate verdict of ‘found dead’, rather than murder, which would have carried the death penalty for the baby’s mother.<sup>5</sup> Dickens’s literary depiction of Nemo’s inquest is a rather more perfunctory and anonymous affair than the one he described experiencing as a juror. To emphasise the administrative coldness of the process, ‘the Coroner’ in *Bleak House* is not even given a name but referred to throughout by his title alone.

This chapter, based on an original analysis of 5110 Southwark inquests held between 1830 and 1860, shows that investigations into sudden or unexpected deaths in the Borough were not as dismissively treated as Dickens implies. Southwark’s coroner, William Payne, was well-known locally and nationally, and a campaigner for reform of the coroner’s profession.<sup>6</sup> Some of Payne’s more detailed surviving notes of cases show that care was taken to examine the individual circumstances of the deceased. On occasion, Southwark jury verdicts offered a critique of the social and economic conditions in which a death had occurred.

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* [1852-53], (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 165.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Richardson, ‘Coroner Wakley: two remarkable eyewitness accounts’, *Lancet* 22 December 2001, p. 2151.

<sup>5</sup> Richardson, ‘Coroner Wakley’, p. 2151. Dickens described his experiences as a juror in an obituary for Wakley, whom he admired deeply.

<sup>6</sup> Payne was one of the key founders of the Coroner’s Society, established in 1846, established to give professional development and advice, for coroners. It is still in existence today, as a representative rather than a regulatory body, to promote the work of coroners. See [www.coronersociety.org.uk](http://www.coronersociety.org.uk).

Although detailed records of Southwark inquests, such as witness statements and expert testimonies, have not always survived, there is a complete record of jury verdicts.<sup>7</sup> The chapter argues that these verdicts, although often very short, can be interpreted as a form of active response to death during this period. This is because, as the first section of this chapter underlines, the verdict is a summary of a series of participatory processes and debates leading to a consensual conclusion. Furthermore, the chapter later shows how the forms of words used to describe death changed during the period 1830 to 1860, demonstrating an active and changing relationship with the language of dying and death. The chapter argues that this change was strongly influenced by new legislative requirements for death certification, and a growing concern about the spread of disease in the Borough. This is reflected in a noticeable shift in the way verdicts were expressed, from a vernacular style in the 1830s, to more medicalised and specialist terminologies by 1860.

The chapter contends that jury verdicts offer a further insight into the complexities and contradictions inherent in the responses of Southwark individuals and groups towards dying and death, during a period of intense social and economic change. Whilst juries were exclusively made up of male householders and professionals, and thus inevitably circumscribed by gender and social biases, they were invested with authority to interpret unexpected or suspicious death on behalf of their whole community. There are no records of individuals or groups disputing the findings of Southwark juries during the period c.1830 to 1860, suggesting either acceptance of, or indifference towards, their conclusions.<sup>8</sup> That roughly two-thirds more male than female or child deaths were investigated by Southwark inquests underlines an inherent gender bias, but also the fact that men were more likely to have work-based accidents than women. The accident category of sudden death remained by far the most investigated and/or contentious during early to mid-nineteenth century

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<sup>7</sup> This is due to the records kept by Sergeant William Payne, Coroner for Southwark and the City of London from 1829 to 1872. They are now held by the London Metropolitan Archives (LMA).

<sup>8</sup> Pamela J. Fisher, 'The Politics of Sudden Death: The Office and Role of the Coroner in England and Wales, 1726-1888' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 2007). Fisher outlines the case of the death of police constable Culley at a political rally in Cold Bath Fields in May 1833, which caused a public sensation when the jury, against the advice of the coroner, found a case of 'justifiable homicide' on the part of the protestors. However, this was a spectacular and highly publicised and politicised case. pp. 136-137.

Southwark, compared to, for example, miscarriage of a pregnancy or domestic incidents. Notwithstanding these caveats, the dynamics of inquests appear to have been more complex than simple divisions along gender and social or economic lines. The chapter reveals that the interaction between juries, witnesses, and medical and legal authorities can also show competing priorities and shifting interpretations of sudden or unexpected death. These could involve women challenging the behavior of male doctors or discussing the unfair social shaming of women who had illegitimate children, for example. Thus, the ways in which individuals and groups responded to, or represented their views about sudden or unexpected death were varied and determined by several factors beyond gender and/or social or economic status.

In this context, inquests have been described by some historians as a 'people's court' because, at least in theory, personal circumstances did not bar an individual from requesting an investigation into a sudden or unexpected death.<sup>9</sup> This interpretation is also worthy of scrutiny. As inquests were funded through the rates, there is evidence to suggest that the request to hold one could be curtailed by local financial considerations, for example.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Olive Anderson has suggested that the wealthy and well-connected were able to use their influence to evade such intrusive public inquiry.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the power of inquests was limited. They could only rebuke or criticise individuals such as neglectful employers, doctors or workhouse staff, unless their behaviour was proved to be criminal, in which case a trial might be initiated. Inquests had no power to close dangerous places of work, for example, or stop negligent doctors from practising.

In order to address the different aspects of Southwark inquests, the chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section is an overview of the coroner and inquest system in Southwark, and how it was influenced by the local, internal

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<sup>9</sup> Joe Sim and Tony Ward, 'The Magistrates of the Poor? Coroners and deaths in custody in nineteenth century England', in Michael Clark and Catherine Crawford (eds), *Legal Medicine in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 245-267.

<sup>10</sup> Fisher, *The Politics of Sudden Death*, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Olive Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) pp. 22-23, argues that doctors offering private medical supervision would try to 'avoid offending their patients', or indeed their families with a death certification of suicide. Furthermore, social class often determined whether cases even went to the coroner in the first place.



dynamics of the Borough, and external legislative changes, such as the Registration of Births, Marriages and Deaths Act of 1836. The second section is a brief statistical analysis of Southwark inquest data, in order to examine the kinds of sudden and unexpected deaths that merited investigation through inquest. The third section provides a qualitative examination of the variable ways that inquests were used, assessed through the language deployed to interpret sudden and unexpected deaths, through verdicts, witness testimonies and expert opinions. These demonstrate the active nature of the inquest as a response to dying and death.

Much historiography about inquests has underlined their inherent structural weaknesses, due to inadequate definitions of overall purpose, lack of consistency in the way they were organised, and a failure to prioritise between medical or legal expertise, and this section explores some of those key arguments in relation to Southwark.<sup>12</sup> Joe Sim and Tony Ward argue that failure to reform the inquest system during the early to mid-nineteenth century resulted in multiple challenges.<sup>13</sup> The lack of clarity about the purpose and scope of an inquest could result in tensions between magistrates, who in some areas also oversaw prisons and workhouses, and coroners called to investigate deaths in these institutions. There was uncertainty about whether coroners were responsible to local or national authorities, and there was increasing rivalry between medical and legal professionals about whose expertise should take precedence in inquest investigations. This chapter argues, however, that these fault lines could make the process rather adaptable and flexible. In a rapidly urbanising area like Southwark, the fluid features of the inquest can be seen to have enabled the coroner, juries and different interest groups to navigate some of the complex debates and shifting attitudes that surrounded how the causes of death were understood during this period. Verdicts could be framed in ways that were actively embedded in, and responsive to local concerns, such as the inadequate condition and provision of housing, or poor employment practices, for example. The focus here is on how the causes of death were understood and expressed, and how different definitions of death were categorised, or not, by juries. Verdicts reveal

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<sup>12</sup> See for example Fisher, *The Politics of Sudden Death*, Sim and Ward, 'The Magistrates of the Poor?', Ian Burney, *Bodies of Evidence: Medicine and the Politics of the English Inquest 1830-1926* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Sim and Ward, 'The Magistrates of the Poor?', pp. 245-267.

remarkable inconsistencies in language, even when juries had been guided by professional or expert witnesses such as doctors or lawyers. This suggests that juries could make quite local and independent decisions about the final wording of their verdicts.

To hold an inquest and record a verdict is an active response to death from many different perspectives, but this does not mean that their purpose and meaning remained unchanged over time. The chapter demonstrates that the pressures and possibilities of rapid urbanisation in early to mid-nineteenth century Southwark means that how sudden and unexpected death was understood and acted upon needs to be reassessed in this broader context. Perhaps paradoxically, this included a growing role for central bureaucracy through the Registration of Births, Marriages and Deaths Act of 1836, which this chapter argues played an important, but ultimately limited, role in both trying to define and control the actions of individuals and groups in response to deaths in their midst. In this sense the chapter makes an original contribution to the analysis of inquests and verdicts during this period as representing important local social and emotional actions for individuals and groups caught up in the dramas of 'death in its most awful shapes'.

### Southwark coroner and inquest system

The post of coroner was established in England in 1194, to undertake assorted tax gathering duties, and investigate by inquest sudden, suspicious or otherwise unexpected deaths.<sup>14</sup> Despite demographic changes, and technological and medical advances over the centuries, the role remained largely unchanged until the late nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> There was remarkably little guidance about what kind of expertise, if any, was required to be a coroner, or the circumstances under which an inquest should be held. Therefore, decisions about when and how inquests were

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<sup>14</sup> Fisher, *The Politics of Sudden Death*, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> The Coroner's Act 1887 considerably reformed the profession, defining in clearer terms the circumstances under which an inquest should take place, the location of such proceedings, how to deal with infant deaths, 'lunatics' and 'habitual drunkards' and other important details. See Sir John Jervis, *The Coroner's Act 1887: With Forms and Precedents* (London: H Sweet & Sons, 1888).

organised were open to interpretation and left very much in the hands of individual coroners, which resulted in wide variations in practice between different locales.<sup>16</sup> This section argues that, at least in the Southwark context, the lack of definition and purpose behind the inquest system gave it a resilience and permeability during the early to mid-nineteenth century, a time of rapid and profound change. James Vernon has described the emergence of kinds of abstract authority that could be subject to local circumstance as a response to the intense and interrelated experiences of migration, urbanisation and social and economic ruptures that were occurring in areas like Southwark during this period.<sup>17</sup> This is a useful lens through which to view Southwark inquests, the more so if such notions of abstract authority are interpreted as being conflated with both individuals and processes, in relation to the 'person' of coroner and the 'process' of the inquest.

Sergeant William Payne served as coroner for the City of London and Southwark from 1829 until his death in 1872. He was trained as a lawyer and elected as a Sergeant-at-Law, an elite group of barristers at the English bar, in 1858. He was a councillor in the City of London standing first as an Independent Radical, and in later elections as a Liberal, and a founding member and first president of the Society of Coroners.<sup>18</sup> The *Illustrated London News* reporting on the City elections of 1847 described him in their 'Portraits of Candidates' as 'the well-known Coroner of London and Southwark.'<sup>19</sup> Payne's role as coroner was largely reactive, as inquests were generally requested by the police, medical professionals or members of the public. After briefly assessing the circumstances of a death he had to decide whether to proceed with an inquest, including, if necessary, a post-mortem.<sup>20</sup> He would then

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<sup>16</sup> Fisher, 'The Politics of Sudden Death'.

<sup>17</sup> James Vernon, *Distant Strangers: How Britain Became Modern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014). As Vernon has noted, sometimes the cleaving to 'ancient tradition' in the nineteenth century has been interpreted as a resistance to modernity when it is an attempt to 'localize and personalize new abstract systems.' p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> The Society of Coroners of England and Wales was founded in 1846, with the intention of giving more consistency and credibility to the role of coroner and educating members in new research on relevant topics such as toxicology.

<sup>19</sup> *London Illustrated News*, 31 July 1847, p. 66. The way in which coroners were selected varied greatly from area to area. During the early to mid-nineteenth century, the City of London managed to retain its anachronistic electoral structure of Aldermen and evade reform by the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835. A Charter bestowed on Southwark in 1550 allowed the Borough to appoint its own coroner, without election, a right that was only abolished in 1990.

<sup>20</sup> Numbers of post-mortems varied widely, as there was no statutory means of paying for one before 1926. William Farr of the General Register Office was a strong advocate of the need for a post-mortem

engage officials, consisting of constables and a beadle, and select a jury of between twelve and twenty-three local male householders.<sup>21</sup> Payne chose his juries from, in his own words, ‘tradesmen and the higher classes [...] of superior intelligence’, and the numbers involved over the period of his forty-three year tenure must have been in the thousands, even if he deployed the same individuals more than once.<sup>22</sup> His juries were socially mixed, however, because the required ratepaying status to be a juror covered a broad demographic in Southwark, as discussed in chapter one of this thesis. During the thirty years from 1830 to 1860, Payne was conducting around 200 inquests in Southwark per annum, so depending on the size of juries he used this could have involved between 61,272 and 117,438 jurors overall.

To be a member of an inquest jury was to participate in an active process of investigation. After swearing-in, inquests began with the collective act of viewing the body, a visit which was nearly always held in the home of the deceased or in an accessible, local venue such as a public house or workhouse. The jury’s examination of the body could take place before or after a post-mortem, if one had been conducted. Post-mortems were also sometimes carried out in private households due to lack of hospital or mortuary facilities.<sup>23</sup> The use of these spaces immediately domesticated and localised the inquest, offering an intimate glimpse of the living, and in some instances, dying place of the deceased.<sup>24</sup> Given the circumstances under which bodies were viewed, it is perhaps unsurprising that juries sometimes made explicit links between social and economic conditions and sudden death.

Thereafter witnesses, both expert and lay, could be summoned by coroner or jury, to give evidence and be cross-examined as deemed necessary, and jurors actively participated in this process. Anyone was entitled to attend an inquest to listen to evidence, and these events were publicly advertised and in notorious cases, often

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for every inquest, but the costs may have been prohibitive in some contexts. Fisher, *The Politics of Sudden Death*, p. 119.

<sup>21</sup> Statistics from Southwark Coroners Records, London Metropolitan Archives. Combined with his City of London work, Payne must have been conducting an inquest on most working days throughout the year.

<sup>22</sup> Evidence of Sergeant William Payne, PP 1860 (193) XXII, p.16, Q.478. He did not describe how he defined ‘superior intelligence’.

<sup>23</sup> Fisher, *The Politics of Sudden Death*, p. 265.

<sup>24</sup> Fisher, *The Politics of Sudden Death*, p. 265.

well-attended. For example, Payne presided over a murder inquest on the 21 July 1840, for Lucy Wetherley, who had been killed by her lover William Healey. Healey subsequently took his own life which is why there was a double inquest rather than a criminal trial. The case caused a lot of local interest and press coverage, and Payne was obliged to ask the police to control the crowds who gathered to watch the proceedings.<sup>25</sup>

At the end of the evidence for all inquests, the jury, guided by the coroner, gave a majority-decision verdict on the cause of death. In Southwark there were relatively few occasions during the period 1830 to 1860, that a jury failed to reach a consensus, with the main exception being those bodies that were deemed too decayed to assess accurately.<sup>26</sup> The verdict 'cause unknown' ranged from 1.7 per cent of cases in 1837 to 11.5 per cent in 1842, but for most years the number was about 3 – 5 per cent of verdicts.<sup>27</sup> Verdicts were expressed in the jury's own words, rather than in fixed legal terms, although there were certain categories such as 'accident' or 'natural causes' that were deployed to cover broad categories of death.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the language used for verdicts could vary widely, even if the cause of death was theoretically the same.

Beyond these formalities, individual coroners had much flexibility in how they conducted an inquest.<sup>29</sup> For example, Payne's contemporary, Middlesex coroner Thomas Wakley, introduced several innovations, including abolishing the role of the beadle in selecting the jury, and conducting inquests into all workhouse and prison deaths. Such inquests were not generally undertaken as a matter of routine in these institutions even if a death was considered suspicious.<sup>30</sup> Wakley thus used his role to support his wider campaigning activities against the Poor Laws, and to draw

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<sup>25</sup> *The Standard*, 22 July 1840.

<sup>26</sup> Index to London and Southwark Coroner's Inquests 1788-1837, LMA/CLA/041/IQ/02/055 and Index to Southwark Coroner's Inquests 1838-1860, LMA/CLA/042/IQ/01/097.

<sup>27</sup> Index to London and Southwark Coroner's Inquests 1788-1837, LMA/CLA/041/IQ/02/055 and Index to Southwark Coroner's Inquests 1838-1860, LMA/CLA/042/IQ/01/097.

<sup>28</sup> As noted in the next section, accidents could cover everything from a fracture to a work-related incident, and the details of causes are not always provided. Similarly, natural causes covered a range of diseases, and other conditions.

<sup>29</sup> Fisher, *The Politics of Sudden Death*.

<sup>30</sup> Richardson, 'Coroner Wakley'.

attention to what he perceived as a systemic failing to protect the vulnerable by various public authorities.<sup>31</sup> Limited attempts to reform the inquest system before the late nineteenth century included, from 1837, the right for expert medical witnesses to charge fees for giving evidence, and, perhaps more significantly for this thesis, the introduction of formal death registration. This delighted Wakley's *Lancet*, which had campaigned in favour of both issues, as both pieces of legislation reinforced the importance of medical, rather than legal, opinion in determining causes of death, and might also diminish the potential for suspicious deaths going unrecorded, as death certification required the signature of a doctor.

The General Registrar Office's Registration of Births, Marriages and Deaths Act of 1836 required that local registrars had to be informed of all deaths within three days, and before burial could take place.<sup>32</sup> Within eight days of a death, a relative or someone present at the death, or an 'occupier of the house or tenement' was charged to,

the best of his or her knowledge and belief, of the several particulars hereby required to be known and registered touching the death of such a person. Provided always, that in every case in which an inquest shall be held on any dead body, the Jury shall inquire of the particulars herein required to be registered concerning the death, and the Coroner shall inform the Registrar of the finding of the Jury, and the Registrar shall make the entry accordingly.<sup>33</sup>

The framing of the Act, although never explicitly stated, was in part a response to the pressures of rapid urbanisation, and the social and practical challenges it created. For the first time, responsibility for reporting a death was formally extended beyond immediate family, to any shared 'occupier of [...] house or tenement', in effect a proxy for labouring class and poorer, urban communities. As discussed in chapter one of this thesis, most Southwark residents lived in large,

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<sup>31</sup> Wakley used the *Lancet*, as well as his position as a MP and coroner to argue for various social and professional reforms. Roy Porter notes that Wakley 'battled to raise medicine into a respected profession, with structured, regulated entry and lofty, ethical ideals', ideals which extended to criticism of workhouse and prison medical care, for example. Roy Porter, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), p. 351.

<sup>32</sup> *A Bill for Registering Births, Marriages and Deaths in England, 1836*, Parliament of the United Kingdom, 17 February 1836.

<sup>33</sup> Section 25, *A Bill for Registering Births, Marriages and Deaths in England, 1836*, p. 9.

multiple-occupancy buildings and courts and many individuals and families were peripatetic, following work and opportunities around the Borough, to other parts of London or further afield. Therefore, the duty placed on any domestic 'occupier' to register a death in their residence, regardless of their relationship to the deceased, acknowledged the transitory nature of life and death in the city, whilst at the same time coercing individuals and groups into an active response to that death. Furthermore, in those instances where a death went to inquest, the Act formalised the role of the jury, requiring that their findings were for the first time reported to a central body, via the coroner and registrar, rather than a more informally-kept local record.<sup>34</sup> Ian Burney contends that the development of this growing, and centralised bureaucracy, with its drive to gather detailed statistics by improving accuracy and consistency in areas such as death certification, impacted on those coroners and juries who wished to underline the role of social and economic circumstances in causing unexpected or sudden death.<sup>35</sup> Taken to its logical conclusion, the expert inquest driven by medical 'facts' would simply establish the cause of death through identification of specific disease or other medical condition. This would be stripped of all contextual detail that might have precipitated a death, such as systemic neglect, cruelty or negligence.

These changes do appear to have impacted on the recording of death in Southwark, as will be discussed in greater depth in the following sections of this chapter. Nonetheless, some coroners like Wakley, and to a lesser extent Payne, and their juries, continued to highlight the relationship between social conditions and medical outcomes, even whilst supporting the need for better statistical evidence about the registered causes of death. Indeed, the loose and flexible nature of the inquest was arguably the perfect platform from which to do this, because whilst the reporting of the causes of death became more formalised, the active process of reaching a conclusion about those sources remained very much in the hands of local coroners, juries and witnesses. In the context of Southwark inquests, assessed in more depth in the following sections through quantitative and qualitative analyses, it is important to note that the statistical and oral records are themselves an account of

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<sup>34</sup> Section 25, *A Bill for Registering Births, Marriages and Deaths in England, 1836*, p. 9.

<sup>35</sup> Ian Burney, *Bodies of Evidence*.

actions, each one a summary of group processes from viewing a corpse, to inviting witnesses, conducting cross-examinations and debating causes and verdicts. This is the background context to understanding the statistical overview, because the numbers quoted represent thousands of such inquiries, and numerous often unpleasant, brutal, painful sudden or otherwise unexpected deaths. These were the deaths that it was deemed demanded an explanation to their families, friends and colleagues, and sometimes the communities in which they lived and died.

### Southwark inquest statistics

This section provides a statistical analysis of the verdicts from 5110 inquests held in Southwark from 1 January 1830 to 31 December 1860. Around 6 per cent of deaths in the Borough went to inquest during this period, but because not all coroners kept records as thorough as Southwark's William Payne, it is not possible to state whether this represented a high, low or average number of such investigations for an urban community. Verdicts from inquests were inevitably limited by the level of contemporary technical or expert knowledge about medical conditions or other potential causes of sudden or unexpected death. Thomas McKeown's analysis that, even after the new requirements of death registration in 1837, 'problems arise from vagueness and inaccuracy of diagnosis and from changes in nomenclature and classification' is broadly accurate.<sup>36</sup> However, the primary purpose of assessing inquest findings is not to record a statistically or epidemiologically accurate study of the causes of death in the Borough, but rather to analyse what such verdicts might reveal about the actions Southwark individuals and groups took in response to those deaths. The evolving priorities of the coroner and juries, who by the 1850s show a shift towards examining greater numbers of deaths caused by disease, suggest that disease-related death was becoming a more important issue for Southwark residents.<sup>37</sup> A thread pursued throughout this thesis has revealed that disease was becoming an issue of increasing concern in the context of intense urbanisation and a growing awareness about public health issues,

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<sup>36</sup> Thomas McKeown, *The Modern Rise of Population* (London: Edward Arnold, 1976), p. 50.

<sup>37</sup> This latter point is elaborated in chapter 5 of the thesis, through an analysis of an ongoing dispute about the Cross Bones cemetery in Southwark, and whether it should be closed for reasons of public health and the dangers of disease spreading.



including the relationship between environment and sickness. This contention is supported by the pattern of inquests in Southwark.

For the purposes of the following analysis inquest data have been separated into the period 1830 to 1837 and 1838 to 1860, to reflect some of the changes wrought by the Registration of Births, Marriages and Deaths Act of 1836. The Act made medically certified death registration a legal requirement from the summer of 1837. From 1 January 1830 to 31 December 1837 there were 855 inquests held in Southwark, or an average of 121 per annum.<sup>38</sup> Of these, the majority, 60.7 per cent, were held to investigate the deaths of men, 20.7 per cent for women and 18.5 per cent for children and infants.<sup>39</sup> Between 1 January 1838 and 31 December 1860, there were 4255 deaths investigated, making an average of just over 193 inquests per annum.<sup>40</sup> The increase in the number of inquests probably reflects population growth in the Borough, and/or the already noted increasingly stringent requirement for death certification after 1837. A 59.5 per cent rise in the number of inquests is roughly congruent with population increase in the Borough over the same period.<sup>41</sup> The majority of inquests were still held for men, 2871 in total, or 67.5 per cent, and 1257, or 29.5 per cent for women. This leaves only 125, or just under 3 per cent of inquests conducted on children and infants. As there is no apparent reason for such a dramatic decline in the number of child inquests, and child mortality in the Borough was fairly consistently between 54 and 56 per cent during the period 1830 to 1860, it seems likely that this drop is largely due to fewer details in the recording of verdicts, rather than a sudden, dramatic reduction in the number of unexplained child deaths.

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<sup>38</sup> Index to London and Southwark Coroner's Inquests, 1788-1837, LMA/CLA/041/IQ/055 and LMA/CLA/041/IQ/02/056.

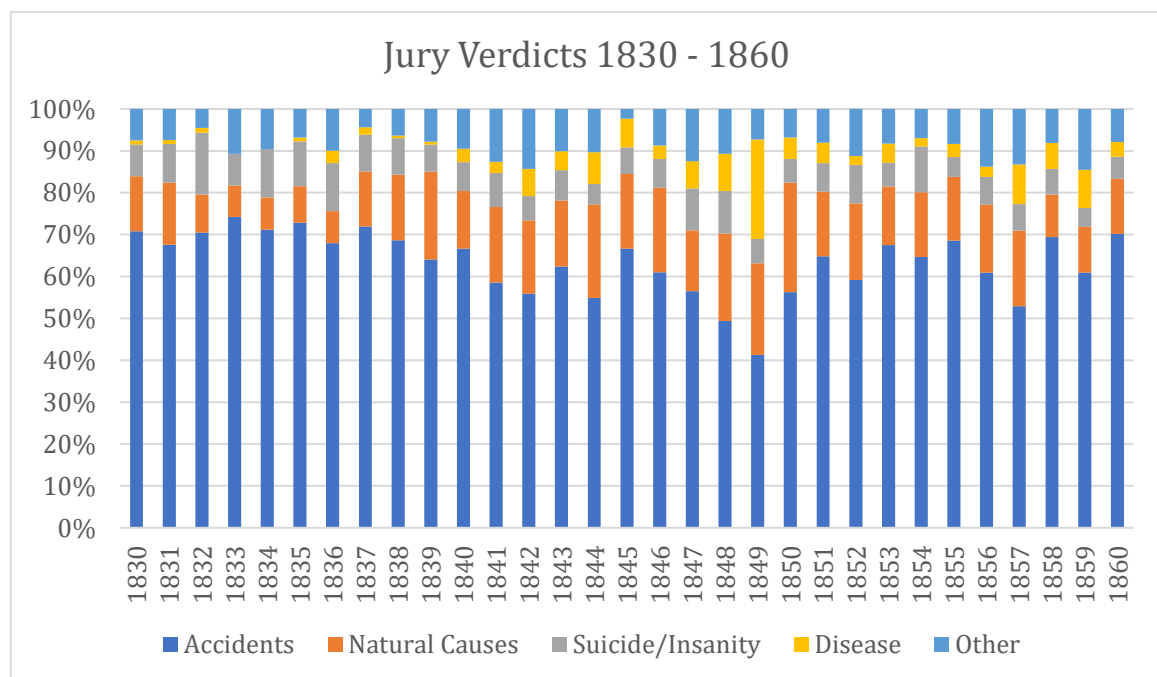
<sup>39</sup> Index to London and Southwark Coroner's Inquests, 1788-1837, LMA/CLA/041/IQ/055 and LMA/CLA/041/IQ/02/056. Children were defined as those aged 15 and under.

<sup>40</sup> Index to Southwark Coroner's Inquests, 1838-1860, LMA/CLA/042/IQ/01/097.

<sup>41</sup> As examined in chapter one of this thesis, the population in Southwark rose between 50 and 79 per cent in Southwark during 1830 to 1860, depending on parish. For example, Leonard Reilly in *The Story of the Borough* (London Borough of Southwark, 2009) estimates a 79 per cent increase, but Parliamentary Papers 1852 – 53 lxxxv (1631) estimate 50 per cent.

The majority of deaths subject to inquests were those caused by accidents, and in every year from 1830 to 1860 they constituted by far the largest category of verdicts. Nonetheless there were disparities between years in the number of accident verdicts, ranging from 74.2 per cent in 1833, to 41.3 per cent in 1849. The most obvious reason for this difference is that in 1833 there were relatively few inquests, 93 in total, which lowered the number of other categories of verdict.<sup>42</sup> Hypothetically, this may have related to difficulties experienced in raising rates during 1831-32, or that such rates as were collected were needed to respond to the cholera outbreak of 1832.<sup>43</sup> During 1849, in which there were 206 inquests in total, there was a major cholera outbreak in Southwark, leading to a spike in disease verdicts. This underlines the changing way in which cholera was being viewed in Southwark between the 1830s and late 1840s, reflecting growing local concerns about miasma, the filthy urban environment and the attendant health problems that this created.

Figure 3: Southwark Jury Verdicts 1830-1837 and 1838-1860<sup>44</sup>



<sup>42</sup> Compared with, for example 104 inquests in 1834 or 103 in 1835. Index to London and Southwark Coroner's Inquests, 1788-1837, LMA/CLA/041/IQ/02/055 and LMA/CLA/041/IQ/02/056.

<sup>43</sup> Ratepayers in St Saviour objected to the 'exorbitant' rises in their rates in April 1832 and forced the Vestry Chair Reverend James Mapleton to resign as a result of their protests. St Saviour's Parish Vestry Minutes, 7 April 1832, LMA/P92/SAV/2221.

<sup>44</sup> Index to London and Southwark Coroner's Inquests, 1788-1837, LMA/CLA/041/IQ/02/055 and LMA/CLA/041/IQ/02/056.

As can be seen from figure 6, during twenty-five of the thirty years from 1830 to 1860, the second most common verdict given by Southwark juries, 816 in total, was death from natural causes. Verdicts of natural causes were not always qualified with a subsidiary explanation, but when they were, they covered a wide range of reasons such as old age, exhaustion, apoplexy, assorted diseases, or malnourishment and deprivation. From 1830 to 1837, the average number of deaths from natural causes was just under 11 per cent per annum, but from 1838 to 1860 this increased to an average of 17 per cent per annum. Twelve cases across the whole period were attributed to a 'Visitation of God' which also implied natural, if undetermined, reasons for death. As there are no accounts describing what different Southwark juries perceived as a 'natural' death, what it was defined against, and how its meaning might have changed over time, the reason why percentages increased are open to speculation. Other than verdicts for completed suicides, there is a limited historiography on the choice of words used by juries and if, how and why they changed during this period.<sup>45</sup> For example, one jury might define a death from typhus as 'natural', and another link the disease's cause directly to the 'unnatural' and inhumane social conditions caused by poverty and poor housing. Verdicts were framed in the jury's own words and reached through discussion, negotiation and majority view. Therefore, the lack of consistency in language deployed is on the one hand statistically frustrating, but on the other underlines that interpreting the causes of death was a changeable, discursive process.

During the years 1832 to 1836 completed suicide was the second most frequent verdict, with an average of eleven cases per annum.<sup>46</sup> The highest number of suicide deaths were in 1836, 1838, and 1854, ranging from fifteen to twenty-two. The rise to twenty-two in 1854 may reflect a legislative change in 1853 which required that all suicides that occurred in private lunatic asylums had to be reported to the coroner. It is probable that actual levels of completed suicide were much higher than

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<sup>45</sup> Although Anderson notes that suicide verdicts were the result of 'the ideas of ordinary people [...] thanks to trial by jury' which meant that if the perception was that the law was too harsh on the individuals being judged, even if they were a corpse at inquest, then there was a habit 'of downgrading the offence.' Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, pp.219-220.

<sup>46</sup> Index to London and Southwark Coroner's Inquests 1788-1837, LMA/CLA/041/IQ/02/055 and LMA/CLA/041/IQ/02/056.

the officially recorded statistics suggest, and that many of those ‘found drowned’, ‘found dead’, or poisoned, strangled or over-dosed had also ended their lives. Anderson notes that it is highly likely that there has been an underestimate of female suicide in the nineteenth century because of the greater use women made of drowning, and ‘since there was often no clear evidence of how the body came to be in the water [...] a verdict of suicide was easily avoided in drowning cases.’<sup>47</sup> Unsurprisingly, given the riverside location of much of the Borough, there were several cases of ‘found drowned’, constituting nearly 10 per cent of verdicts between 1830 and 1837 and a lower proportion of just under 4 per cent during 1838 to 1860. The reason for the decline in numbers is unknown, perhaps fewer drowning cases appeared to merit investigation if the cause of death was so obvious. During the period 1830 to 1837 22 per cent of deaths were attributed to burns, and nearly all of these, where ages of the victim are provided, were babies and children.<sup>48</sup> From 1837 to 1860 only 5.3 per cent of verdicts were directly attributed to burns, but again, it is likely that these incidents were filed under the more generic accident category after 1837. The reasons for this are examined more fully in the next section of this chapter.

This brief overview of Southwark verdict findings shows that the main cause of sudden or unexpected death that reached inquest during 1830 to 1860 were defined as accidents. In a largely labouring-class district, with extensive, and largely unregulated employment in docks, warehouses, manufactories and building works, this is unsurprising. There was also a remarkable stability in the proportional number of deaths attributed to natural causes and completed suicide. The most striking difference between 1830 and 1860 was the steady growth in the numbers of deaths attributed to various diseases. It is probable that this change was due to three main factors: the increasing involvement of medical witnesses in inquests, from 1837 the requirement of precise causes of death to be described on a certificate signed by a doctor, and a growing concern about disease-related deaths in the Borough. This latter point is difficult to prove, but as chapter five of the thesis

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<sup>47</sup> Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>48</sup> Index to London and Southwark Coroner’s Inquests 1788-1837, LMA/CLA/041/IQ/02/055 and LMA/CLA/041/IQ/02/056.

underlines, the prevalence of certain diseases, particularly cholera, certainly became a vocal and growing issue for some residents from the 1840s onwards.<sup>49</sup>

Without comparative analyses of jury verdicts, it is difficult to assess how typical Southwark's inquest statistics are for an urban community in the early to mid-nineteenth century.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, these verdicts can also be interpreted on their own terms, as specific reflections of the Borough and the social and economic ecologies of the area, its employment and housing structures and therefore vulnerabilities to certain kinds of work-related or domestic accident, or disease outbreak. For example, during the first major cholera outbreak in England in the 1830s Southwark was particularly badly afflicted due to the appalling state of the drains and water supplies. Compared to other parts of London the Borough remained vulnerable to aggressive cholera epidemics throughout the nineteenth century, arguably justifying local anxieties about the disease.<sup>51</sup> It is not possible to prove whether the threat of disease increased per se during the period 1830 to 1860, but the *perception* of its dangers certainly did grow. For some residents, diseases of all kinds appear to have represented some of the worst aspects of rapid urbanisation, a hostile aspect to their changing environment and times, and one increasingly worthy of the coroner's attentions.

### Representing death: The uses and language of inquests

This section adds a qualitative dimension to inquest statistics by analysing the narratives that juries and witnesses used to describe some of the deaths they investigated. No historian of early to mid-nineteenth century urban, working life would be surprised at the kinds of accidents and diseases that killed the predominantly labouring classes of Southwark. The employment possibilities in the

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<sup>49</sup> Chapter five of the thesis is an analysis of the dispute between 1832 and 1854 over Southwark's Cross Bones Cemetery, and whether it should be closed or not. It was considered by some residents to be a danger to health, particularly the spread of cholera.

<sup>50</sup> Such studies as there are on inquests have tended to focus on certain categories of death, such as Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, or Victor Bailey, *This Rash Act: Suicide Across the Life Cycle in the Victorian City* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), which analyses suicide inquests in Kingston Upon Hull.

<sup>51</sup> Michael Durey, 'Cholera and the Environment: The Case of London', in *The Return of the Plague: British Society and the Cholera 1831-1832* (Dublin: Gill & MacMillan Humanities Press, 1979), pp. 50-76.

Borough, including docks, warehouses, building sites, breweries, tanneries, manufactories, and timber and mason's yards were not safe working environments. A rapidly growing population resulted in busier streets, increasing the potential for traffic accidents. In crowded homes, dangers from open fires, scalding from rudimentary cooking facilities, or falls on rickety stairs were all causes of sudden death. Under-supervised babies and small children had to survive not only a myriad of potentially fatal childhood infections and diseases, but were also at risk from burns, or being accidentally squashed or smothered by sleeping parents. Fractures and cuts were often fatal, open to secondary infections such as erysipelas or tetanus. With a long riverside boundary, drownings, suicidal or accidental, were also a feature of Southwark's local 'awful shapes' of death.

This section demonstrates two main points. First, that the language used in inquests, through verdicts, witness testimonies and expert opinions, reflect some of the complex economic, social and cultural shifts occurring in early to mid-nineteenth century Southwark, which have been partially revealed by the preceding assessment of the context of inquests and their statistical findings. Second, through an analysis of three cases, involving deaths from a miscarriage complicated by probable tuberculosis, cholera, and malnourishment, that the uses and purposes of inquests were adapted to reflect a range of concerns beyond simply establishing the causes of death alone. Rather, it is argued here, these cases reflect attempts to draw attention to a variety of local issues including medical negligence and poor housing, and that it was the very flexibility of the inquest process which enabled this to happen.

As noted in earlier sections, from the late 1830s and 1840s, after the Registration of Births, Marriages and Deaths Act of 1836, there was a marked rise in the use of medical terminology in verdicts, although juries did not entirely abandon the vernacular of the early 1830s. The ways in which medical terms were used by juries was also highly inconsistent. This has two main implications pertinent to this thesis. First, that doctors and other expert witnesses used in inquests varied in their

interpretations and descriptions of death and its causes.<sup>52</sup> Second, that juries continued to impress their own linguistic stamp on the verdicts they wished to give, perhaps also taking into account the views of witnesses and associates of the deceased as well. For example, tuberculosis, nearly always described as phthisis in post-mortem reports and by doctors, was also called consumption, pulmonary infection, inflamed lungs, congested lungs, or congestion.<sup>53</sup> Juries used all these terms, except phthisis. Tetanus could also be lockjaw, paralysis, ague, trismus, or spasms, and typhus might also be gaol fever, Irish fever, spotted fever, hospital fever, camp fever, ship fever, putrid fever, famine fever, or simply fever. There were also occasions when juries abandoned medical terms altogether and resorted to religion, describing death as ‘a visitation of God’, a verdict that recurred twelve times during 1830 and 1860.<sup>54</sup>

Suicide formed the second largest category of Southwark verdicts for five years from 1832 to 1836. The social, cultural and economic contexts surrounding suicide during the nineteenth century have been extensively analysed, and a full discussion of the implications of its debates are beyond the present scope.<sup>55</sup> Despite local variations in the ways deployed to complete suicide, it appears that there were some statistical consistencies during this period, insofar as men were more likely to end their lives than women. As mentioned in the previous section, this may in part have been the decision to not define deaths as suicide in some female cases, in favour of ‘found drowned’, for example. In Southwark men constituted two-thirds of the total of the 374 deaths attributed to completed suicide.<sup>56</sup> There is no evidence from the jury verdicts that suicide carried a significant stigma in the Borough, and Olive Anderson, in her comprehensive analysis of the topic has rejected the claim that

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<sup>52</sup> McKeown, *The Modern Rise of Population*. Although Porter discusses the rise of certain diseases connected with industrial towns and urbanisation, such as tuberculosis, he notes it was described as ‘consumption’. Southwark records suggest it had several other names and descriptions on verdict summaries. Porter also notes that the pre-bacteriology era did lead to the rise of generic ‘fevers’, such as putrid and enteric. Porter, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind*, pp. 401-402.

<sup>53</sup> Index to London and Southwark Coroner’s Inquests 1788-1837, LMA/CLA/041/IQ/02/055 and Index to Southwark Coroner’s Inquests 1838-1860, LMA/CLA/042/IQ/01/097.

<sup>54</sup> Index to London and Southwark Coroner’s Inquests 1788-1837, LMA/CLA/041/IQ/02/055 and Index to Southwark Coroner’s Inquests 1838-1860, LMA/CLA/042/IQ/01/097.

<sup>55</sup> See for example, Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, Bailey, ‘*This Rash Act*’.

<sup>56</sup> Index to London and Southwark Coroner’s Inquests 1788-1837, LMA/CLA/041/IQ/02/055 and Index to Southwark Coroner’s Inquests 1838-1860, LMA/CLA/042/IQ/01/097.

nineteenth-century urban communities were particularly superstitious or prejudiced about individuals who ended their lives in this way.<sup>57</sup>

Southwark juries used a variety of terms for suicide verdicts, the reasons for which are not always clear. Prior to December 1836, most individuals who completed suicide were described as 'lunatic', but on 9 December 1836, a Southwark jury recorded their first verdict of 'temporary insanity', in the case of Elizabeth Piggott, who had poisoned herself.<sup>58</sup> Thereafter, 'temporary insanity' became most common form of words used, recurring 285 times. There is no obvious or apparent reason for the transition in language from lunatic to insanity, except that insanity was increasingly denoted as a short-term rather than the longer-term or permanent state of lunacy.<sup>59</sup> Given a verdict of temporary insanity, families were entitled to claim insurance or burial club money, the clothes and other possessions of the deceased, and if they so wished, to conduct a burial in consecrated ground, all of which would have been denied by a verdict of suicide. During the period 1830 to 1860, the verdict 'suicide' was used only once, in the case of Mary Demorous Grattan, at her inquest on 23 February 1843.<sup>60</sup> It was not explained why the jury reached this conclusion in her case.

The changeable approach to language used suggests that verdicts formed a series of complex, and context-based interactions between individuals, groups and experts. It also indicates that juries operated with a fair amount of autonomy, as the words chosen were their own, not those of the coroner. The mobile format of the inquest, weaving its way through private and public places, drawing on intimate and impersonal descriptions of events, and comprising informal and bureaucratic elements, reflects this. How death was discussed, cause determined and, if relevant, responsibility assigned, was a subtle, and sometimes not-so-subtle series of

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<sup>57</sup> In her chapter 'Standard Commonplaces and Personal Reactions: Mid-Victorian London', Anderson argues persuasively that there was no stigma attached to suicide during this period, indeed it cropped up frequently in popular culture and even comedic references. Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian London*, pp. 191-232.

<sup>58</sup> Index to London and Southwark Coroner's Inquests 1788-1837, record for 9 December 1836, LMA/CLA/041/IQ/02/055

<sup>59</sup> The Lunatic Act of 1845, and appointment of Lunacy Commissioners, was an important transition in the treatment of mental health.

<sup>60</sup> Index to Southwark Coroner's Inquests 1838-1860, 23 February 1843, LMA/CLA/042/IQ/01/097.



negotiations. As noted in the previous section, most verdicts defined cause of death through the categories of accident, natural causes, and various articulations of completed suicide. Accidents sometimes carried sub-categories of burns, scalds, suffocations and drownings. In total there were 286 verdicts that did not fit in to any of these definitions. These included fifty-five deaths from apoplexy, forty-one from cholera, twenty-four from assorted definitions of tuberculosis, and twenty from childbirth and related complications. Only five bodies were categorised as 'cause unknown', and thirty-two corpses deemed too decayed to accurately assess.

A handful of deaths were the result of utterly freak circumstances, such as the unfortunate John Bray, who 'died from the effects of a fish called a conger eel' in October 1848. James Dyson was reported to have 'died from shock after witnessing an operation on a patient' at his inquest on 30 March 1846. George S. Chard was 'casually and by misfortune – killed by an antelope' according to his inquest on 20 August 1833, although little other detail is available to explain this intriguing, if unfortunate, incident.<sup>61</sup> Sometimes the wording used by juries is hard to interpret, such as that describing William Hastings who 'died from the effect of pills while at play' on 16 June 1851, or a man whose inquest on 11 May 1843, noted he had 'died from the dirty effects of his body.' A 'male child called Buckingham' apparently 'died of a fit occasioned by excitement in the mother injuring her milk', according to a verdict produced on 11 September 1848. There were also a handful of deaths attributed to banal reasons, for example Lucy Dancer was described at her inquest on 7 October 1856 as suffering from 'gradual decay', and an unnamed female on 16 May 1845 simply 'did die.'<sup>62</sup>

Of work-related accidents, by far the most common category at inquest for the entire thirty-year period of 1830 to 1860, all deaths, with one exception, involved men. Examples include cases like that of Thomas Abbott, who fell from a ship he was working on in May 1836, William Bradley who dropped from a mast onto the deck of a vessel in June 1835, Joseph Hague, crushed by a fall of earth on a building site in

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<sup>61</sup> Index to London and Southwark Coroner's Inquests 1788-1837, LMA/CLA/041/IQ/02/055 and Index to Southwark Coroner's Inquests 1838-1860, LMA/CLA/042/IQ/01/097.

<sup>62</sup> Index to London and Southwark Coroner's Inquests 1788-1837, LMA/CLA/041/IQ/02/055 and Index to Southwark Coroner's Inquests 1838-1860, LMA/CLA/042/IQ/01/097.

December 1834, or Henry Beadle, who had the misfortune to fall into a vat of boiling beer in March 1835.<sup>63</sup> As noted in the opening to this chapter, two-thirds of Southwark inquests overall were to investigate the deaths of men. Of a limited number of surviving post-mortem reports from Guy's Hospital there is a similar gender split, being roughly two-thirds male autopsies to female, although not every post-mortem was conducted for the purposes of inquest, and not every inquest required one.<sup>64</sup> The primary explanation for this imbalance is straightforward, in that more men than women did physically dangerous jobs, and accident-related deaths outside the home were the most likely to merit investigation by the coroner. Furthermore, men were more likely than women to complete suicide, or at least to be defined as having done so. Nonetheless, this does not answer why certain kinds of death apparently warranted an inquest and others did not. It is striking how few children's deaths appeared to merit inquests, given child mortality rates of over fifty per cent in the Borough. Furthermore, only twenty cases of women's deaths by miscarriage, childbirth or post-partum complications went to inquest.<sup>65</sup>

The gendered and class-bound aspect of inquests is exposed in one of the few cases of a pregnancy miscarriage that was examined by jury, on 18 November 1857, that of 37-year-old Mary Emily King. King's mother, a Mrs Rix, reported that her daughter, who was around five months pregnant at the time, had turned up at her house the week before her death complaining of chest and loin pains, probably related to tuberculosis. Procuring a prescription from the parish surgeon, she gave her daughter a mustard poultice. As this appeared to have no effect, Mrs Rix went later to the surgeon's house, where she,

[...] rang the bell for a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes and she told him the situation her daughter was in. He inquired whether the child [Elizabeth's baby] was dead, and she replied in the affirmative. She told him that she should like him to see her daughter, and he replied that it would be better for her [if] he would call on the morrow.

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<sup>63</sup> Index to London and Southwark Coroner's Inquests 1788-1837, LMA/CLA/041/IQ/02/055 and Index to Southwark Coroner's Inquests 1838-1860, LMA/CLA/042/IQ/01/097.

<sup>64</sup> Guy's Hospital Post-Mortem Records, 1854. These have not, at time of writing, been catalogued.

<sup>65</sup> Index to London and Southwark Coroner's Inquests 1788-1837, LMA/CLA/041/IQ/02/055 and Index to Southwark Coroner's Inquests 1838-1860, LMA/CLA/042/IQ/01/097.

She then inquired of him what was best to do for her, when he shut down the window, but did not come with her.<sup>66</sup>

Despite the dangers posed by a miscarriage, the surgeon refused to come to his door, or accompany Mrs Rix home, and she returned home to find that her daughter had died. As already noted, given the cause of her death, that Elizabeth's case came to inquest at all was unusual. The purpose of this case appears to have been to hold the doctor to account for his negligent behaviour in refusing to attend to a patient. The doctor under scrutiny was a parish surgeon, funded through the rates, and although the coroner had no authority to suggest he be suspended or prosecuted, Payne and the jury could, and did, condemn his dereliction of duty. The case also provided a platform for King's mother, a labouring-class woman, to criticise the careless and disrespectful behaviour of a male member of the professional classes. Whilst underlining the circumscribed powers of the inquest process, the case was, at least for Mrs Rix, a chance to register her feelings about the death of her daughter in a public forum, and to have her views about neglectful medical practice officially documented.

After 1837 the language used by Southwark juries in their verdicts underwent some changes. Summaries became, overall, much briefer. Accident verdicts offered fewer contextual details, frequently just noting a fracture or cut as a cause of death. For example, little information was given for the only two accidents after 1837 that were not attributed directly to fractures, that of John Bales, whose leg was torn off in December 1845, or James Austin whose inquest on 31 October 1856 stated he had 'fallen from a window'.<sup>67</sup> Cross-referencing verdicts with the limited number of surviving post-mortem reports available from Guy's Hospital, adds little further information. For example, thirty-two-year-old Charles Hayes, whose post-mortem and inquest occurred on the same day, 27 May 1854, was described in autopsy notes as dying of 'an injury to the head', but with no further detail as to how or why it happened, and his verdict recorded simply, 'accident.'<sup>68</sup> William Casey's post-mortem, conducted on 27 March 1854, recorded that the fifty-six-year-old had died

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<sup>66</sup> *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 22 November 1857.

<sup>67</sup> Index to Southwark Coroner's Inquests 1838-1860, LMA/CLA/042/IQ/01/097.

<sup>68</sup> Guy's Hospital post-mortem reports, 1854.

of apoplexy, a cause that was attributed to a generic 'accident' at his inquest the following day.<sup>69</sup>

One of the most striking differences in inquests over the period 1830 to 1860 was the increase in numbers of investigations into disease, particularly from 1838 onwards. Verdicts from 1830 to 1837 only returned three deaths as attributable to disease, two from hydrophobia, or rabies, and one to 'lockjaw', or tetanus. The only other medical terms used were for four deaths from apoplexy and one from an erysipelas infection. Verdicts from 1838 to 1860 list a number of disease-related inquests, including cholera, cancer, consumption, bronchitis, dysentery, asthma, abscesses, various lung, liver and heart diseases, erysipelas, tetanus, typhus, ruptured intestines, hernia, rabies, smallpox, whooping cough and scarlet fever and 'general sicknesses' amongst others. The growing drive to investigate and designate disease as a cause of death appears to have been primarily due, as already noted, to the new legal requirement to certify a medically defined reason for a sudden or unexpected death. The increased use of medical witnesses probably helped to provide the technical language required to define these causes. What is salient here, though, is the fact that deaths from disease started to come to inquest at all, given that this aspect of sudden death was so rarely investigated in the early 1830s. Prior to the requirements of death registration, and greater statistical awareness of the risk posed by disease, historian Tina Young Choi has argued that high mortality rates were normalised as part of the everyday collateral or risk of urban environments.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, and as examined in chapter three of this thesis, death was mostly a domestic affair during most of the nineteenth century. Relatives or friends could report a death to the local clergy, and many non-conformist religious groups did not officially register deaths at all.<sup>71</sup> In these informal contexts, a period of sickness and death were not necessarily ascribed to a specific cause or disease, or reported as anything other than a general decline. Symptoms of certain conditions may not have been recognised, unless determined by a doctor, and even then, diagnoses could be

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<sup>69</sup> Guy's Hospital post-mortem reports, 1854.

<sup>70</sup> Tina Young Choi, 'Writing the Victorian City: Discourses of Risk, Connection and Inevitability', *Victorian Studies*, 43, (2001), 561-589.

<sup>71</sup> Before the 1850s most burials were recorded in Church of England registers, so information about nonconformist groups is limited.

inconsistent. Other than during a period of epidemic, when the authorities might intervene, there was therefore no statistical basis on which to assess risk from disease.

Disease inquests were a gradually growing phenomenon in Southwark during the period 1830 to 1860, and cholera was by far the most common cause to be investigated, with forty-one cases coming to inquest.<sup>72</sup> Cholera carried a particularly grim resonance for Southwark residents, particularly as in 1832 and 1849 the Borough experienced two terrible epidemics.<sup>73</sup> Anxieties about cholera were expressed by Southwark residents throughout the early to mid-nineteenth century, anxieties which were, it is argued in chapter five of this thesis, often a proxy for local social, economic and demographic changes associated with rapid urbanisation. The inquest of 55-year-old John Hickie exemplifies this point. Hickie died of cholera, and his inquest was held in September 1853 at the Mint Street Workhouse. Hickie's case underlines local concern about cholera, but arguably also a desire to better understand its causes and social context as well. Hickie, who had lived in an area 'surrounded by knackers' yards, bone boilers and cat-gut makers' left for work early on Saturday 10 September 'well and hearty' but returned home at lunchtime with cramps and pain in his bowels.<sup>74</sup> His wife, Ann, described his excruciating final hours, during which she obtained help from one of the workhouse doctors, Edward Evans, as well as brandy, mustard poultice and blankets.

Demonstrating the dynamic process of the inquest, the jury's investigation quickly evolved beyond Hickie's death, to examine the wider social and environmental circumstances in which he got sick. The Hickie's abject, single-room quarters were located under a 'bone manufactory', and 'there were very bad smells in the house', as well as an open drain from the water-closet running alongside the buildings, which also 'smelt very bad.'<sup>75</sup> Their room was full of damp patches, and according to William Endean, relieving officer of St George the Martyr's Board of Guardians, was

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<sup>72</sup> Index to London and Southwark Coroner's Inquests 1788-1837, LMA/CLA/041/IQ/02/055 and Index to Southwark Coroner's Inquests 1838-1860, LMA/CLA/042/IQ/01/097.

<sup>73</sup> See 'Cholera and the Environment: The Case of London', pp. 50-76, in Michael Durey, *The Return of the Plague: British Society and the Cholera 1831-32*.

<sup>74</sup> 'Asiatic Cholera in Southwark', *Daily News*, 14 September 1853.

<sup>75</sup> 'Asiatic Cholera in Southwark', *Daily News*, 14 September 1853.

‘in a very dirty state.’<sup>76</sup> Endean also commented on the stench, not only from the drain and yard, but also the quantity of decaying animal matter surrounding the residences. Endean went on to detail the foul industries that surrounded the houses, including a Mr Winkley’s horse slaughter-yard next door. The drains were so fully blocked they had become noxious cesspools, topped up by the already overflowing sewerage from the rented rooms and overspill of animal intestines.

The disgraceful state of the dwellings was confirmed by Mr Wakem, one of the parish surgeons employed by St George the Martyr, whom Payne had asked to investigate and give his medical assessment of the Hickie’s domestic situation. Wakem reported on the ‘horrible condition’ of ‘apartments totally unfit for human inhabitation’, which were never without fever, if not attended by cholera.<sup>77</sup> A ‘great number of families had been destroyed in that very place.’<sup>78</sup> The evidence given at this inquest enabled Payne, in his summing up, to argue that the state of living conditions endured by some Southwark residents should be grounds for criminal prosecution. By weaving the surgeon’s assessment of Hickie’s death from cholera with the appalling conditions endured by those in slum housing Payne cleverly both bolstered and tempered the role of medical expertise in the context of inquest. A de-contextualised medical cause of death recorded for Hickie would have been an insufficient platform from which to critique these broader social conditions. The jury agreed with Payne and returned a verdict that ‘the deceased died from Asiatic cholera, induced from the unwholesome trades carried on in the neighbourhood; that it is the opinion of the jury that the board of guardians ought to be invested with the authority that they formerly held under the Board of Health in such matters, and that that power should be continuous.’<sup>79</sup>

The findings of this inquest reveal several issues pertinent to the argument of this thesis. As explored in chapter one, the standard of Southwark housing had been in sharp decline since the 1830s, due to overcrowding, failure to maintain buildings, and a lack of any accountability from a complex web of property ownership and

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<sup>76</sup> ‘Asiatic Cholera in Southwark’, *Daily News*, 14 September 1853.

<sup>77</sup> ‘Asiatic Cholera in Southwark’, *Daily News*, 14 September 1853.

<sup>78</sup> ‘Asiatic Cholera in Southwark’, *Daily News*, 14 September 1853.

<sup>79</sup> ‘Asiatic Cholera in Southwark’, *Daily News*, 14 September 1853.

private landlords. Indeed, it has been estimated that by the 1850s nearly half the Borough's housing stock fell into the slum category, with local vestries or boards of health often powerless to do much about it. Furthermore, infrastructure, such as drains and water supplies were completely inadequate for coping with increasing population, leading to almost permanent problems of stench, dirty water and thriving conditions for infections and disease. Rather than criticising the private landlord who presumably profited from renting the Hickies their appallingly inadequate lodgings, the jury instead focused their response on a much broader question of authority, by arguing that the local board of guardians should be re-invested with the power to intervene in such cases.

During the early to mid-nineteenth century there was an ebb and flow of cooperation and rancour between Southwark vestries, residents, and national/government organisations and agencies on where the centre of authority on various issues resided. This issue is further analysed in chapter five of this thesis, which examines a protracted dispute about a burial site in the Borough. Such issues reinforce James Vernon's argument about notions of 'abstract authority', discussed in the opening of this chapter.<sup>80</sup> The negotiation and re-negotiation of local power could create a blurring of responsibilities, with the result of inadequate, often declining, services and infrastructure for residents.<sup>81</sup> In theory any number of authorities might have prevented housing like the Hickie's from being rented at all. For example, the Public Health Act of 1848 extended the powers of local boards of health to control the state of sewers, streets, slaughterhouses and other potential health problems, or 'nuisances', which ought to have prevented disgraceful domiciles being located in the midst of catgut making and knackers yards. In Southwark this was complicated by the Metropolitan Commission of Sewers Act of 1848 which meant that sewerage commissioners *also* had responsibilities for sewers and water supplies and their impact on residences.<sup>82</sup> The result was that no single body took control, and very little was done to improve Southwark's water and sewerage system until the late nineteenth century.<sup>83</sup> Official inertia, combined with

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<sup>80</sup> Vernon, *Distant Strangers*.

<sup>81</sup> Durey, *The Return of the Plague*. See particularly pp. 50-76.

<sup>82</sup> Durey, *The Return of the Plague*, pp. 50-76.

<sup>83</sup> Durey, *The return of the Plague*, pp. 50-76.

an overall laissez-faire approach towards private house rental arrangements, rapid urban expansion, and insufficient infrastructure to cope, meant countless numbers lived and died in the kinds of disease and filth-ridden hovels that the Hickie's endured. The various expert testimonies and ultimately the jury's verdict about his death hint at these kinds of structural tensions and problems. Indeed, the matter of Hickie's individual death is perhaps rather lost in the politicking around these different layers of authority.

Although inquests into disease-related deaths increased overall over the period 1830 to 1860, children's deaths from disease rarely went to inquest. The occasional case of whooping cough or croup, or deaths such as those of siblings Charlotte and Frederick Huddart, whose inquest on 1 March 1841 noted scarlet fever as cause, were recorded.<sup>84</sup> An inquest held in October 1852, to investigate the death of a four-month old baby 'known as George Brown' was therefore unusual enough to be reported in the press.<sup>85</sup> In this instance the baby's short life and death were described to Payne and the jury by a mainly female witness group. A woman called Ellen Frost described being followed and approached one evening by a mysterious, but well-dressed gentleman while out walking in a park. The man asked if she would be able to nurse a baby for a fee of ten shillings. Frost did not wish to do this, but put him in touch with her neighbour, a Mrs Duffet, who agreed to take the child.<sup>86</sup> Both Mr and Mrs Duffet were described as 'extremely fond of children', and, when Mrs Duffet was asked why she would take on the rearing of a child for so little money reportedly said, 'Oh! I should never miss the victuals.'<sup>87</sup> Despite the Duffets' best efforts and aided by several attempts from women in the neighbourhood to 'put him [George] to breast' as advised by parish surgeon Dr Brookes, George failed to thrive. The women attempted to feed him with a mixture of flour and water to sustain him but to no avail. His post-mortem, confirmed by the jury's verdict, was recorded as 'natural death, from inability to take sufficient nourishment.'<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Index to Southwark Coroner's Inquests 1838-1860, 1 March 1841, LMA/CLA/042/IQ/01/097.

<sup>85</sup> *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 10 October 1852, p. 113.

<sup>86</sup> Wet-nursing and other forms of out-sourced baby care were not unusual during this period. Valerie A. Fildes, *Breasts, Bottles and Babies: A History of Infant Feeding* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1986).

<sup>87</sup> *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 10 October 1852, p. 113.

<sup>88</sup> *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 10 October 1852, p. 113.



There was no blame to be apportioned in this case, but a rather touching picture does emerge of Southwark women and neighbours consulting and cooperating with each other whilst trying to save the life of the unknown baby. Frost hinted but never directly said in her evidence that George was probably the illegitimate child of a 'very young' middle-class girl who she had seen with the mysterious gentleman.<sup>89</sup> Although they promised to come to Southwark and visit the child, the couple never materialised, and an address in Chelsea given to Frost and Duffet, which they visited to inform the presumed parents of the child's likely death, turned out to be a false one. George Brown's inquest underlines the ways in which sexual and economic mores circumscribed the experiences of all social classes in the early to mid-nineteenth century. There is no way of knowing if his 'parents' did reside in Chelsea or not, but his probable illegitimacy certainly made his death far more likely. During this period, salubrious Chelsea had a 26 per cent child mortality rate, whereas St George the Martyr, the labouring district where Frost and the Duffets lived, and to which the baby was sent, death rates were 56 per cent.<sup>90</sup> Nonetheless, the witnesses evidence from baby George's inquest were remarkably unjudgmental about his abandonment, the, by implication, underage mother, or his farming out for a fee. The inquest, like that of Elizabeth Rix, gave labouring-class women a platform from which to articulate their experiences, and to speak out about their treatment of an illegitimate child whose life they had tried to save.

Although the jury returned the verdict of natural causes in this instance, the case underlines the fact that even after the Registration of Births, Marriages and Deaths Act, it was still relatively straightforward during the early to mid-nineteenth century to avert the gaze of authority or circumvent the processes of official interference when required. Unwanted children like George constituted 50 per cent of Southwark inquest's 'unknown dead' verdicts during 1830 to 1860. Children's bodies were fished out of the Thames, found hidden in boxes and makeshift coffins, and stuffed into privies, ditches and drains. In these instances, most were too decayed to identify

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<sup>89</sup> *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 10 October 1852, p. 113.

<sup>90</sup> Edwin Chadwick, *Supplementary Report into the Practice of Interment in Towns* (London: Clowes & Sons., 1843), pp. 256-266.

their fates, except for one badly dismembered body discovered in 1833 described as murder. Some were given the verdict stillborn, and many were likely illegitimate. As Dickens's experiences as an inquest juror testifies, a guilty verdict against the mother of a stillborn baby could result in the death penalty, so it is not surprising that some took the extreme action of hiding their baby's corpses.

In summary, this section has underlined how during the early to mid-nineteenth century, the language used by Southwark juries, and the diverse purposes to which inquests were put, reveal several different aspects to how sudden or unexpected death was acted upon, but also how this changed over time. Certain categories of death, such as accidents, remained the most likely to warrant investigation, but other causes, such as disease, began to make claims on the public forum of the inquest as well. This was particularly the case for deaths from cholera, perhaps unsurprising given the aggressive outbreaks of the disease in during the early 1830s and again in 1849. Male deaths remained a much greater priority for investigation than those of women and children, and social and economic issues undoubtedly played a part in what kinds of deaths were investigated. Nonetheless, the all-male juries selected by Payne were not inured to the context and circumstances of some sudden deaths and did on occasion use their platform to criticise negligence, poor housing or unethical employment practices. Their verdicts, albeit circumscribed, give a voice, a description and occasionally an analysis that are not found elsewhere in primary sources about Borough deaths from this period. Paradoxically therefore, their verdicts give life to these deaths, and bear witness to the fact that the cases they investigated were individuals who often lost their lives due to the broader forces of material, social and economic circumstances in which they lived.

## Conclusion

The preceding analysis of Southwark inquests and verdicts is an original assessment of 5110 coroner's records from 1 January 1830 to 31 December 1860. The continuous service of Southwark's coroner, William Payne, who served from 1829 until his death in 1872, make these an unusually complete set of records for the period, particularly as Payne was fastidious about recording the outcomes of his

inquests. The records constitute a relatively unexplored and rich source of information about how causes of death were understood in the context of several factors, including contemporary medical knowledge, various local issues such as housing and infrastructure problems, and changing relationships to notions of risk, particularly from disease. Moreover, as verdicts were written by jurors in their own words rather than following a legal formula, they sometimes used the opportunity this presented to offer a critique of economic, social and environmental factors that they believed had contributed to a sudden or unexpected death.

Despite these contemporary and local aspects, inquests were still rooted in their medieval precedents. They were often vague in terms of remit, powers, and where, when and how such events should take place, which left much discretion in the hands of the coroner. However, the rather ill-defined nature of these procedures made Southwark inquests, this chapter has argued, rather responsive and flexible to local needs, through the ability to adapt according to context. The lack of structure, particularly in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, was precisely what gave jurors and coroner the opportunity to go beyond a narrow remit of simply identifying cause of death. Payne and his juries regularly commented on and criticised the contributory circumstances to sudden death, and on occasion made recommendations for things that needed addressing by various negligent authorities. In these ways, Southwark verdicts may be seen not just as an analysis of the causes of sudden or otherwise unexplained death but an active response to the conditions which caused it.

Payne's jury selection was limited to male ratepayers, but this does not seem to have prevented them from criticising their professional contemporaries, such as neglectful doctors or employers when circumstances required. Solidarities of gender or class do not appear to have overridden condemning verdicts or expressions of disapproval when warranted. In this sense, the chapter argues that verdicts, as well as the contributions from witnesses and experts, can be interpreted as a dynamic response to death in the Borough. Whilst deaths from accidents remained the most important category of inquest finding throughout the whole period of 1830 to 1860, the number of inquests into deaths caused by disease,

particularly cholera, also increased. This was due several factors, some external and some local to the Borough. The Registration of Births, Marriages and Deaths Act of 1836 required certification of all deaths, which required if possible, a medical cause. The growing prominence of medical experts in inquests probably provided a more extensive vocabulary for describing disease. The severe outbreaks of cholera in Southwark, particularly in 1832 and 1849, also intensified the focus of some residents on the dangers of fever-nest housing, poor water quality, stinking drains and other such economic and environmental factors that encouraged epidemic outbreaks. These in turn prompted greater interest in holding inquests to investigate and register such causes. Finally, inquests and verdicts were also a space where views about death could be articulated from different witness perspectives, regardless of gender or social and economic circumstance. They offered a platform where labouring-class individuals could articulate relatively unmediated views about dying and death. These records, where they have survived, show something of how death 'in its most awful shapes' was understood and defined by contemporaries, expert or otherwise, or by those who lost friends, workmates or loved ones to accidents, diseases, violence or causes otherwise unexplained.

## Chapter 5: Burial and dispute at Cross Bones Cemetery

[O]ur dear brother here departed, to a hemmed-in churchyard, pestiferous and obscene, whence malignant diseases are communicated to the bodies of our dear brothers and sisters who have not departed...With houses looking on, on every side, save where a reeking little tunnel of a court gives access to an iron gate...here they lower our dear brother a foot or two, sow him in corruption, to be raised in corruption: an avenging ghost at many a sick-bedside: a shameful testimony to future ages, how civilisation and barbarism walked this boastful island together.

Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*<sup>1</sup>

This chapter examines the actions of some Southwark residents in a long-running dispute over a local cemetery, known as the Cross Bones. Several urban communities experienced local tensions over burial sites during the 1830s to 1850s, before changes in the law began to move intramural burial out of city and town centres from 1852 onwards.<sup>2</sup> The actions taken in order to close the Cross Bones underlines some of the tensions that surrounded the dying and dead during this period, as the assumption that bodies should be buried in the centre of communities was increasingly being challenged by a range of interest groups.<sup>3</sup> This shift is usually attributed to the public health campaigns of doctors and social reformers, such as Edwin Chadwick, George Albert Walker and Thomas Southwood Smith, or the vested interests of the new joint-stock cemetery owners. Edwin Chadwick's *Supplementary Report into the Practice of Interment in Towns* was a detailed investigation into the public health dangers of continuing to bury bodies in urban areas. His work was considerably influenced by his friend, Dr Thomas Southwood Smith, who believed that the foul emanations from burial grounds spread disease.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* [1853] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) p. 165. The description is based on Southwark's Cross Bones Cemetery.

<sup>2</sup> In the first year of the Municipal Burial Act (1852), Home Secretary Lord Palmerston closed 200 burial sites in London.

<sup>3</sup> Prior to the early 1800s there was very little debate about where burial grounds should be sited, and little controversy about intramural interment. A rare example of complaint came from John Evelyn, who believed the plague of 1665 warranted a re-think about siting burial grounds outside the city. In Emily Cockayne's study of smells and nuisances c.1600-1770, the dead barely warrant a mention. Emily Cockayne, *Hubbub: Filth, Noise and Stench in England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Edwin Chadwick, *Supplementary Report into the Practice of Interment in Towns* (London: Clowes & Sons, 1843). George Walker nicknamed 'Graveyard Walker', produced a series of articles and observations in *Gatherings from Grave Yards* (London: Longman, 1839). Walker gave evidence several times to Select Committees about his findings; generally lurid descriptions of the state of

Concerns about the infectious potential of miasma, were made worse by the overcrowded state of urban burial sites, as described in the Charles Dickens quotation above. Furthermore, pressure on valuable inner-city development land, which prevented the expansion of such cemeteries, underpinned contentions that burial should be moved away from populous areas altogether. Thomas Laqueur argues that the developers of joint-stock cemeteries were also instrumental in pushing for burial to be removed from town and city centres.<sup>5</sup> Their new suburban cemeteries offered instead the possibilities of respectable private funerals at affordable prices, and they could also service vestry requirements for pauper burials. The political and physical restrictions on urban graveyard expansion was a business opportunity as well as a response to public health or community concerns.<sup>6</sup>



Illustration 4: Fragment of a map, c.1830, of Cross Bones Cemetery, © Southwark Council. The image shows the cemetery surrounded by houses.

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burial sites, open graves, body parts protruding from the ground and the sudden deaths of grave diggers on inhaling the foul air of burial sites. His evidence was fundamental in establishing the inquiries that eventually resulted in the Burial Acts of the 1850s.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 288-294.

<sup>6</sup> Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*, pp. 222-224.

This chapter argues that in Southwark, however, the actions taken by some residents were just as important as public health campaigners and joint-stock entrepreneurs in determining the fate of local burial policy. The Cross Bones dispute demonstrates complexities and contradictions that were inherent to different aspects of Southwark's communities, and which could hinder or support capacities to organise, act collectively, or operate beyond narrowly defined sets of self-interest. The interaction between vestries, residents, ratepayers, churchwardens, and medical experts reveal competing priorities and shifting allegiances. Their various, sometimes contradictory, contributions to, and understanding of, debates about health, social 'nuisances', and respect for the dead, was both an active response to the rapidly changing circumstances of urban living, and an articulation about the needs of their community and its quality of life. Local actions in response to the growing numbers of the dead adopted different forms and purposes. Individuals wore many identities: churchwardens were also ratepayers, residents objecting to intramural burial could also want their own relatives to be buried locally and not the suburbs. The vestry operated as a community body, insofar as it was constituted by voluntary locals, just as much as disparate groups of residents who cooperated to campaign against overcrowded cemeteries. Social and economic solidarities also played an important role in the ability of local communities to articulate their views about burial.<sup>7</sup>

Much death historiography has argued that the nineteenth century produced a romanticised 'celebration' of death. The dead were given increasingly elaborate funerals, memorials and mourning rituals, actions widely practiced by all social and economic groups.<sup>8</sup> Such an analysis fails to address a much more ambivalent, but

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<sup>7</sup> For example, vestry minutes record the views of parish ratepayers, or at least those who were able or motivated enough to attend the weekly evening meetings. From 11 February 1830 St. Saviour's changed the time of their meetings from 9.00am to 6.00pm in order that more public members might attend. St Saviour's Parish Vestry Minutes, LMA/P92/SAV/2221.

<sup>8</sup> The Victorian 'celebration' of death is a powerful trope in death historiography. James Stevens Curl's still much-cited *The Victorian Celebration of Death* (Detroit: Partridge Press, 1972) explores the development of the Victorian cemetery as symptomatic of the nineteenth century's emotional engagement with issues of mortality. Curators Julian Litten's *The English Way of Death: The Common Funeral Since 1450* (London: Robert Hale, 1991) and John Morley's *Death, Heaven and the Victorians* (London: Studio Vista, 1971) focus on the material objects of Victorian death, from mourning costume to sculpture, stationary, art and porcelain, Morley arguing that it was 'Romanticism that largely determined the nature and form of early Victorian emotion' about death, p. 14. Philippe Ariès in *The Hour of Our Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), describes the

also prevalent attitude towards the dead, particularly during the first half of the century. Despite the sentimentalism of the art, crafts and epitaphs that evolved around dying, death and the dead, there were other often much more mutable, complex and contested aspects to the relationship between the living and the dead.<sup>9</sup> By the 1840s, the urban dead in particular were perceived by some residents to represent a very real danger to public health, as overflowing graveyards threatened to poison air quality and water supplies. Inadequately shallow interment undermined decency and respectability through the exposure of half-rotted limbs and scattered bones. This produced tensions between the eschatological ideals of heavenly rest and reunion, with the bodily realities of decay and stench.<sup>10</sup>

This chapter is based on surviving primary records, including vestry minutes, correspondence from residents, reports from public health officials, and Parliamentary investigations. These records provide insights into competing community concerns about public health and hygiene, the rights of property owners, tensions between local and national governance, and the ongoing debate about what constituted respectful treatment of the dead. Unfortunately, no documentation survives outlining the views of those who used the cemetery to bury family or friends. The Cross Bones was predominantly but not exclusively a space for poorer communities, and so-called 'outcast' burials such as suicides, prostitutes and

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nineteenth century as 'the age of beautiful death', pp.451-468; and Geoffrey Gorer, who was very influential on Ariès, describes the nineteenth century as having a more wholesome relationship to 'beautiful corpses' when compared to his own twentieth century generation: *Death, Grief and Mourning in Contemporary Britain* (London: Cresset Press, 1965), p. 171.

<sup>9</sup> Morley, in *Death, Heaven and the Victorians* describes the 'snobbery, triviality and lack of taste' to be found in much Victorian mourning and epitaph paraphernalia, p. 44. Such lack of decorum was attacked by the High Church movement in the mid-nineteenth century. In an article in *The Ecclesiologist* in September 1844, the 'paganism' of epitaphs was denounced, recommending instead that 'Jesu mercy!' was all that was required on a headstone.

<sup>10</sup> The Victorian notion of eschatology is an immense topic in its own right; but a common theme identified by historiography is the notion of familial/domestic reunion. This may reflect a way of coping with the large number of bereavements that many people experienced, or indeed a longing to be reunited with those who had migrated far away during life. Analyses of this matter include, Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death*, Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians*, Douglas J. Davies, *Belief, Ritual and Death* (London: Cassell, 1997), Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, Colleen McDannall and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), Geoffrey Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), Michael Wheeler, *Heaven, Hell and the Victorians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).



criminals. It was also used during times of disease outbreaks, such as cholera. These individuals remain mostly nameless, as often not even their burial records survive.<sup>11</sup> Despite this very important missing viewpoint, the Cross Bones dispute demonstrates a heterogeneous and mutable range of opinions and actions involving local politics, economics, social structures, and how these might relate to death and disposal of the dead. The rapid growth of urban communities like Southwark meant not only negotiating life, but also dying and death, amongst 'distant strangers'.<sup>12</sup> Understanding death, and the role that the dead played in communities, had to be debated and accommodated in a socially shifting context. Creating tensions as well as empathies, communities who articulated or acted on their concerns were sometimes contradictory in their views. Attitudes towards disposal of the dead had to be restructured and reimagined, defamiliarizing and fragmenting historiographical ideas of any nineteenth century 'celebration' of death into something more complex and negotiable.

### Cross Bones: 'The pestiferous exhalations of the dead'<sup>13</sup>

Some Southwark residents argued for over twenty-two years to have the Cross Bones cemetery closed. During that period, their objections to intramural burial were articulated from different perspectives, including financial, social, health and respectability. The emphases placed on these objections changed over time, as local priorities shifted, sometimes responding to national debates about health and burial, but also reflecting quite local concerns. The relationship between St Saviour's Vestry, which was responsible for the Cross Bones, and ratepayers, was also important. Vestrymen wore many identities, as both residents and self-selecting representatives of local authority. The tensions between these roles were

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<sup>11</sup> Archaeologists from the Museum of London undertook extensive analyses of the Cross Bones, when the cemetery was relocated as part of the Jubilee Extension works in the 1990s. Of the 148 inhumations they recorded (from c.15,000 burials on the site), believed to date from c.1800-1853, 60.1 per cent exhibited signs of non-specific infection, 48.8 per cent of the adults had osteoarthritis and very high rates of intervertebral disease (96.35 per cent for women and 83.3 per cent for men). The findings of the report indicate that this was an area with a 'very poor socio-economic environment.' Megan Brickley, Adrian Miles and Hilary Stainer, *The Cross Bones Burial Ground, Redcross Way, Southwark, London: Archaeological Excavations (1991-1998) for the London Underground Limited Jubilee Line Extension Project* (London: MoLAS, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> James Vernon, *Distant Strangers: How Britain Became Modern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> George Albert Walker, *Gatherings from Grave Yards* (London: Longman, 1839), p. vii.

sometimes apparent in their attempts to navigate competing financial and social pressures for managing local burials. This was particularly sensitive in the case of Cross Bones, which was predominantly used for modest private and pauper interments. In this context disposal of the dead had economic as well as practical implications. Throughout the 1830s, the residents of St Saviour's also continually resisted increases in rates, forcing vestries to leverage as much as they could out of local burial space and other money-raising and saving amenities.<sup>14</sup> But by the 1840s, there had been a marked shift in residents' attitudes. Concerns about public health and the spread of disease, especially cholera, were much more prevalent than financial matters in framing the argument for closing Cross Bones. When the site was finally closed during the 1850s, some residents had even resorted to petitioning the Home Secretary, using dramatic language about protecting family, home and hearth from the poisonous and chaotic effects of the decaying urban dead.<sup>15</sup>

In the early to mid-nineteenth century, the density and complexity of urban living and dying created new challenges. Urban population growth inevitably produced increasing numbers of dead requiring disposal. Local burial sites, originally established to service small or medium-sized villages and parishes, were being swamped, or 'surcharged' with corpses. Such sites were generally located in the populous, and poorer districts of urban areas, where overcrowding was at its most intense. Such graveyards were denounced by sanitary reformers as being a public health danger due to foul smells, miasma and the poisoning of water courses, a nuisance to the active flow of city life, and a corrupt money-making venture for local officials, undertakers and clergymen. Burial grounds seemed almost to exemplify the horrors, corruptions and dangers of modern urban life.<sup>16</sup> In addition, there were what Mr Wild, a Southwark undertaker, noted as practical inconveniences. The most popular time for funerals, 3 o'clock, was 'unhelpful to persons of business who wished to attend as mourners' as it interrupted the working day and was a time

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<sup>14</sup> Vestries could charge fees for those burial sites under their control, they could also use sites such as Cross Bones, for economical burials on the parish.

<sup>15</sup> In a letter to the then Home Secretary Spencer Walpole, on 2 December 1852, residents who lived near Cross Bones begged for intervention to close the site 'for the safety of our families and the comfort of our homes.' Letter, dated 2 December 1852, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

<sup>16</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, and Walker, *Gatherings from Grave Yards*, both mention various scandals pertaining to the public health risks of urban interment.

when 'the streets are very much crowded', creating a disrespectful atmosphere for the burial party.<sup>17</sup>

Debates about the desirability or otherwise of intramural burial were not a new phenomenon in the early nineteenth century. After the Great Fire of 1666, John Evelyn and Sir Christopher Wren both campaigned for the development of cemeteries outside London, although this was motivated by aesthetics rather than hygiene.<sup>18</sup> By the 1830s narratives about an urban burial crisis were being widely documented in public health reports, journals, newspapers and literature.<sup>19</sup> It is difficult to establish the actual extent of the problem of overcrowded burial grounds, as accounts of the dangers of over-populated urban interment were usually produced by individuals or committees with strong vested interests on either side of the debate. Public health campaigners, social reformers, joint-stock cemetery investors, and developers, all had an impetus for claiming that inner-city burial sites were miasmatic dangers to health and better located on a beautifully developed, privately owned, suburban 'God's Acre'. On the other side of the debate, urban vestries, churches, chapels, churchwardens, undertakers and clergy also had a powerful financial motivation to maintain control of 'their' burial sites. Accounts for the St Saviour's vestry burial fees are not available; however, Chadwick did note the fees in the neighbouring Southwark parish of St Olave, which with a population of 18,427, had roughly half the number of residents as St Saviour's. Clergy fees averaged £40 4s 8d during 1838-1840, with an average cost of £1 17s 7d per funeral.<sup>20</sup> This is a reasonable income from only one strand of work if compared to, for example, a bank clerk's annual starting salary of £75.<sup>21</sup> Beyond financial considerations, there was also a politically symbolic element to the Cross Bones struggle. In arguing to maintain their control over local burial grounds St Saviour's

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<sup>17</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 80.

<sup>18</sup> Sir Christopher Wren proposed cemeteries outside cities, where beautiful monuments could be erected, supervised by architects rather than left to the whim of masons, see Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death*, p. 35.

<sup>19</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, Walker, *Gatherings from Grave Yards*. Charles Dickens also wrote about the dangers of overcrowded graveyards, in both his fiction and journalism, such as Nemo's burial in *Bleak House*.

<sup>20</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 273. However other fees to consider included the vestry, clerk, sexton, beadle and bell, leading Wilkie Collins to write 'I should wish that the church could do without so many small fees for burying poor people', *Household Words*, 26 July 1856.

<sup>21</sup> James Grant, *The Great Metropolis* (London: 1837).

vestrymen were also resisting the increasing interference and encroachments of Westminster government on their local authority. Such tensions between central and local authority were common during this period.<sup>22</sup> Control of burial policy can be at least partially interpreted in this context, a theme explored in greater detail later in this chapter.

Controversies over burial sites were occurring in the context of other major social and economic shifts. In Southwark, the absorption of large numbers of migrants had been adding pressure on the rates since the early nineteenth century. Concerns that the newcomers would impoverish the Borough and be a burden on parish ratepayers were expressed regularly at vestry meetings.<sup>23</sup> As a transit point between southern counties and London, vestries noted their 'unfortunate position [as a] rendezvous for all tramps and beggars from Kent, Surrey and Sussex.'<sup>24</sup> Recent arrivals presented a possible threat to community stability not just by overcrowding the streets and houses, but by perceptions about their dirty, licentious, tenement and rookery lives. Reporting to the Statistical Society of London in 1840, Reverend George Weight described the more abject parts of the Borough as, 'exceedingly filthy and wretched, and inhabited by an indigent and profligate population...thieves, low prostitutes, and bad characters of all descriptions.'<sup>25</sup> In other words, the kinds of people who ended up interred in the Cross Bones.

During the years of dispute over Cross Bones, Southwark experienced several severe outbreaks of cholera. The London Fever Hospital described Southwark as one of the city's permanent centres of disease.<sup>26</sup> As the causes of cholera were unknown until the 1880s, miasma was believed to be a likely source of infection. It is perhaps pertinent that the most vociferous moments of active protest about Cross Bones occurred just before, or during, cholera outbreaks, in 1849 and 1854, but not

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<sup>22</sup> Vernon, *Distant Strangers*, p. 15. See also James Vernon *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture 1815-1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> There are several references in Southwark Board of Guardian minutes to the 'frequent destitution of the Irish poor' St George The Martyr Minutes of the Board of Guardians, 8 November 1839, LMA/SOBG-3.

<sup>24</sup> St. George the Martyr Minutes of the Board of Guardians, 2 December 1839, LMA/SOBG-3.

<sup>25</sup> *Statistics of the Parish of St. George the Martyr, Southwark*, Rev. George Weight, F.R.A.S., F.S.S., Statistical Society of London, 20 January 1840, pp. 56-57. Southwark Archives 942.16433.

<sup>26</sup> Parliamentary Papers 1837-38, XXVIII, 84.

the first outbreak of 1832. The influence of public health ideas about miasma as a dangerous propagator of disease was not widespread in the early 1830s but had become so by the 1840s. Such health concerns converged with population growth, as well as an increase in those seeking parish relief, a sign of growing poverty in the Borough. The poor or pauper 'quality' of bodies buried in the Cross Bones was cited in correspondence from some residents to the Board of Health and to the Home Secretary.<sup>27</sup> A letter from those living in 'Union Street, High Street and Red Cross Street' of 2 December 1849 mentions 'bodies taken from the poor dwellings' to the Cross Bones, underlining this aspect of their concerns about the burials near their homes.<sup>28</sup>

It is hard to offer a robust analysis of the economic status of the residents who complained about the Cross Bones, as there is often little detail about the individuals involved. The main thoroughfares surrounding the cemetery, Union Street and Red Cross Street, reflect a social diversity that characterised the Borough during this period, but that would change gradually, particularly during the second half of the century, as the area became increasingly economically deprived. The community in the 1830s and 1840s included small businesses such as victuallers and publicans, and the Borough's main Quaker meeting house.<sup>29</sup> As argued in chapter one of this thesis, this complex social ecology is often overlooked in Southwark's historiography, which has tended to describe the nineteenth-century Borough as constituted purely by destitution and poverty. Where there is biographical detail available for the letter-writers, they appear to be predominantly tradespeople and professionals, sometimes from families who had been established in the Borough for many generations.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> St Saviour's Vestry Minutes, 2 December 1852, LMA/P92/SAV/460.

<sup>28</sup> St Saviour's Vestry Minutes, 2 December 1852, LMA/P92/SAV/460.

<sup>29</sup> Some villas and larger properties had been built as residences in the eighteenth century, and were subsequently used as workshops, schools or multiple occupancy blocks. In 1848 Rev. John F. Bullock coordinated a group of local landlords to improve the area, but the plan did not come to fruition. This part of Southwark became economically poorer during the 1850s and 1860s, as older, middle-class families moved out to the suburbs, expedited by better transport links.

<sup>30</sup> Families such as the Gwilts, who moved to Southwark in the eighteenth century and established an architectural practice there. LMA/P75/CAM/27/25-3.

The Cross Bones cemetery had been a repository of local anxieties before the disputes of the 1830s, as its use for pauper and other outcast interments meant that body snatching was rife. An anonymous diary of a resurrectionist dating from 1811-1812 recounted the activities of the Southwark 'Borough Boys' gang, who undertook several raids on local burial sites, including Cross Bones, for sale to anatomists. The nearby presence of two large teaching hospitals, Guy's and St Thomas's, and a private anatomy school on Webb Street, added to the utility of the site for grave robbers. In 1819 the vestry had tried to address the problem by erecting five-foot iron palisades around it. As many of those involved in stealing bodies were gravediggers, sextons or otherwise employed in managing burials, it is unlikely that such precautions had much effect.<sup>31</sup> The scandal of grave robbing largely dissipated after the 1832 Anatomy Act licensed the use of unclaimed pauper bodies for the purposes of medical training.<sup>32</sup> By the later 1830s, local concerns about Cross Bones were shifting away from the misfortunes of the corpses that might suffer dissection, and were instead focused on the threat that the decaying dead potentially posed to the healthy living. Nuisances associated with bad smells, dirty streets and sewers, and filthy work such as animal slaughter and tanneries had long been subject to complaint in Southwark, and attempts were sometimes made to address their stenches and messes. It was not just the unpleasantness of the smells; they were also regarded as a threat to health. Inhaling miasma, or noxious bad air, was widely believed to be one of the major causes of disease and other afflictions in the nineteenth century and held to be responsible for everything from typhus to obesity.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> The *Diary of a Resurrectionist 1811-1812*, was not published until 1896, after editing by James Blake Bailey of the Royal College of Surgeons. The resurrectionist was revealed to be John Naples. See James Moores Ball, *The Body Snatchers* (New York: Dorset Press, 1989), p. 139. Body snatching was also confirmed by evidence given to the Parliamentary Select Committee on Anatomy, 1828, which recommended on the Anatomy Act of 1832. The evidence of Richard Dugard Grainger of the Southwark Webb Street Anatomy School, who had also inspected Cross Bones cemetery for the Committee suggested the relationship between robbers and cemetery staff. Parliamentary Papers 1828, VII, 81-82.

<sup>32</sup> Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (London: Routledge, 1987).

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Halliday, 'Death and Miasma in Victorian London: An Obstinate Belief', *British Medical Journal*, 323, (200), 1469-1471. There was debate about this though; many doctors believed in contagion as an alternative theory of disease-spread.

In a Government-initiated investigation into intramural burial, published in 1843, Edwin Chadwick mentions the stinking 'exhalations' of the dead 312 times, imputing dangerous powers to corpses that might destroy the living.<sup>34</sup> The stench from crowded graveyards and cemeteries might not only be unpleasant to smell, they also constituted a serious threat to public health.<sup>35</sup> Although miasma theory had been around for centuries, during the nineteenth century the terrible air quality and high mortality rates of urban centres converged to bolster the thesis that bad smells produced disease. Giving evidence to the Royal Commission Enquiring into the State of Large Towns and Populous Districts in 1844, physician Neil Arnott expressed a commonly-held medical view that, 'the immediate and chief cause of many of the diseases which impair the bodily and mental health of the people, and bring a proportion prematurely to the grave is the *poison of atmospheric impurity* arising from...impurities given out from their own bodies.'<sup>36</sup> Such 'atmospheric impurity' was believed to emanate from dead bodies as well as living ones. One of the many reasons that grave digging was considered an undesirable job was the high volume of sudden, unexpected deaths reported in this trade. These dramatic deaths were linked to the accidental inhalation of putrid air from decaying bodies, sometimes sufficient to fell a strong and healthy man instantly.<sup>37</sup> The same threatened demise was reported to be rife in anatomists, who might inadvertently become infected by the foul stench of a corpse during dissection. There were attempts to limit this risk by keeping the anatomy training season to the autumn and winter months, but clearly the same precautions could not be applied for grave diggers.<sup>38</sup>

Prior to the early nineteenth century, there is little evidence that burial grounds, even when pungent open pits were used, caused much popular concern. In her study of complaints about filth and stench during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Emily Cockayne only mentions the nuisance of corpses or the dead, once.<sup>39</sup> In the eighteenth century new burial sites were still developed in the centre

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<sup>34</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*.

<sup>35</sup> Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*, p. 220.

<sup>36</sup> Halliday, 'Death and Miasma', p. 1469.

<sup>37</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, pp. 5-18.

<sup>38</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 19.

<sup>39</sup> Emily Cockayne, *Hubbub: Filth, Noise and Stench in England 1600-1770* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 212.

of communities, and existing sites expanded intramurally to accommodate growing numbers of dead. Southwark residents do not appear to have been much exercised about the health threat presented by Cross Bones in the months before the first local outbreak of cholera in 1832, even though cholera, in its later epidemics, particularly captured the miasmatic imagination, and by the 1840s fear of the disease was regularly cited in relation to burial grounds.<sup>40</sup>

During the first outbreak of cholera in Southwark in 1831-32, St Saviour's vestry appeared at first determined to respond proactively to the threat of the disease, engaging in a preventative programme of street and drain cleaning. Nonetheless, cemeteries were not mentioned as part of their plans to tackle Borough nuisances, they were simply assessed for space should mass-burials be required.<sup>41</sup> An item on the St Saviour's vestry agenda for 15 November 1831 was a discussion about 'improving' the Cross Bones burial ground, in case it was needed for this purpose. The subtext of this discussion was that the parish's poor would be those most afflicted by the disease, as it is unlikely that middle-class residents would have agreed to family members being interred there. An unnamed delegation was sent to inspect the site, and reported back on 24 November that it was 'nearly full of coffins, and but little, if any, room can be found for further burials in consequence of the irregular manner of burial heretofore.'<sup>42</sup> They were charged with submitting a fuller report on the site in the New Year.

By 13 January 1832, no deaths from cholera had yet been reported in St Saviour's, but three unidentified burial sites had been assessed as ready to take the dead if an outbreak required them.<sup>43</sup> When cholera was finally reported in the Borough, a

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<sup>40</sup> The vestries planned to use local burial sites and three were chosen during the first 1832 cholera outbreak as having enough space to accommodate more bodies. Minutes of the Board of Health for the Parish of St Saviour's, 13 January 1832, LMA/P92/SAV/2221. By the 1849 cholera outbreak, a motion was passed by St Saviour's vestry to the effect that continuing burials in the St Saviour's graveyard endangered public health and should be discontinued. St Saviour's Vestry Minutes, 7 September 1849, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

<sup>41</sup> St Saviour's Parish Vestry Minutes, 15 November 1831 LMA/P92/SAV/2221.

<sup>42</sup> St Saviour's Parish Vestry Minutes, 10 December 1831, LMA/P92/SAV/2220. Frustratingly the minutes do not list the members of the group, but it seems likely given other delegations in the parish to inspect drains, for example, usually combined vestrymen and those with technical expertise in the issue under scrutiny.

<sup>43</sup> St Saviour's Parish Vestry Minutes, 13 January 1832, LMA/P92/SAV/2221.



'numerous and respectable meeting of the inhabitants' on 15 February 1832, agreed to defray the costs of the outbreak with a special subscription for coals and provisions for the poor, but none of this was directly allocated to burial costs. On 17 March, the Cross Bones investigation committee finally reported back to the vestry. Their draft recommendation was to clear an area of the cemetery 'and make a depth of 12 feet at the least and place the old coffins therein and by that means create more burial ground.'<sup>44</sup>

This recommendation was considerably watered down in the final report on Cross Bones published by the vestry, who noted instead that 'it would be desirable' to make the graves not less than 12 feet.<sup>45</sup> The record of the politicking that occurred to weaken the original view of the delegation is not noted, but it does expose some of the competing interests between the different groups involved in deciding the future of the burial site. The delegation, although selected by the vestry, clearly did not think that the site was suitable for continued use. Some of the pressures on the vestry are probably explained by ongoing tensions with ratepaying residents, who, by April 1832, were yet again protesting a rise in rates, describing them as 'contrary to the law...against the decision of parishioners...unprecedented, extravagant and exorbitant.'<sup>46</sup> So exercised were meeting attendees that the vestry Chair, the Reverend James Mapleton, was asked to step down, and there were no further recorded vestry meetings until August that year. Thus, all through the worst cholera months, the vestry appears to have had no central or coordinated response to the disease outbreak, or the issue of Cross Bones.<sup>47</sup>

To compound these ongoing community tensions, the Cross Bones inspection delegation again wrote to the vestry in April expressing their concern that the burial site was by now 'so very full of coffins that it is necessary to bury within two feet of the surface, which we consider, especially under the alarming disease now raging,

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<sup>44</sup> Megan Brickley, Adrian Miles and Hilary Stainer, *The Cross Bones Burial Ground, Redcross Way, Southwark, London: Report of the Archaeological Excavations (1991-1998) for the London Underground Limited Jubilee Line Extension Project* (London: Museum of London Archaeology Service, 1999).

<sup>45</sup> St Saviour's Parish Vestry Minutes, 17 March 1832, LMA/P92/SAV/2221.

<sup>46</sup> St Saviour's Parish Vestry Minutes, 7 April 1832, LMA/P92/SAV/2221.

<sup>47</sup> St Saviour's Parish Vestry Minutes, 7 April 1832, LMA/P92/SAV/2221.

very improper.<sup>48</sup> The effluvium emanating from the site was 'so very offensive' that it was feared 'the consequences may be very injurious to the surrounding neighbourhood' and that the site 'ought to be immediately closed.'<sup>49</sup> The churchwardens planned to pile fresh soil on the site, and to leave it until it might be suitable for re-use, but the continued pressure on local revenue meant that limited available resources could not cover the cost of this option. Thus, Cross Bones was temporarily chained up, with the publicly expressed intention of leaving it to rot down until there was more space for burial to recommence at an unspecified date in the future.

Despite its supposed closure, Cross Bones appears to have been in regular use during the 1830s, because overall pressure on burial sites in the Borough was so intense.<sup>50</sup> The proximity of the site to St Saviour's (Mint Street) workhouse means that Cross Bones would have been by far the most convenient site for burial of parish paupers, who constituted roughly a sixth of the parish's overall population of 31,711 by the late 1830s.<sup>51</sup> Discussion about whether to close Cross Bones occurred yet again in the vestry minutes of 1833. It was finally agreed to shut the cemetery gates on 8 March that year, but once again this proved to be only a temporary measure.<sup>52</sup> There are no surviving records of how Southwark communities responded to this decision. The decline of cholera cases may have removed some of the immediate concerns about the site during this period.

One section of the ground, the so-called 'Irish Corner', was certainly left disused, which allowed that area to be cleared in 1839 with space for 1,000 further burials. St Saviour's churchwardens held a meeting in February 1839 with ratepayers to explore how they might get the site back to full use. A record of the meeting was noted by George Walker, a doctor, and the author of a compendium of burial horrors, *Gatherings from Grave Yards*. Like Edwin Chadwick, Walker was a campaigner against intramural burial, and he had already spent several years documenting the

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<sup>48</sup> St Saviour's Parish Vestry Minutes, 10 December 1831, LMA/P92/SAV/2221.

<sup>49</sup> St Saviour's Parish Vestry Minutes, 10 December 1831, LMA/P92/SAV/2221.

<sup>50</sup> Burial records unfortunately don't survive for this site; this extrapolation is made from general comments on the minutes and the findings of the Cross Bones delegation. LMA/P92/SAV/2221.

<sup>51</sup> Population of St Saviour's in 1838 was 31,711 and its registered paupers 1,856.

<sup>52</sup> St Saviour's Parish Vestry Minutes, 8 March 1833, LMA/P92/SAV/2221.

dreadful state of London's graveyards, earning him the nickname 'Graveyard Walker.'<sup>53</sup> Walker did not confine his campaigning to books. He wrote regularly to the *Morning Herald* about his findings and lectured about them at various Mechanics' Institutes in London.

Such local investigations into the state of graveyards were undoubtedly more powerful when armed with a language about the dangers of intramural interment.<sup>54</sup> The influence of medical expertise can be seen in the way that it is cited in Southwark residents' correspondence about the Cross Bones site.<sup>55</sup> Walker's writings helped to frame a popular discourse, with a blend of Gothic horror, scientific observation, and social campaign. His heightened language reflects the idea of the urban graveyard, and the dead therein, as fundamentally disruptive. He opens by appealing to the 'good Christian' that they help to secure 'the peaceful repose of the departed; and, at the same time, to remove as far as possible from the living, THE PESTIFEROUS EXHALATIONS OF THE DEAD.'<sup>56</sup> This exposes a tension that is never quite reconciled in his inspections of burial sites: the deceased are revered, but also the cause of a stinking danger to the living. The energy of Walker's protest derives from his perception of this disordered relationship between the dead and the living. This thread runs through the *Gatherings from Grave Yards*, as Walker describes in grisly detail squelching through numerous sites of unearthed remains, with limbs and skulls poking through the soil, as he breathes in their hideous smells. Whilst France and the United States had embraced burial away from population centres, Walker noted that 'England looks on, a silent and unmoved spectatress of some of the most offensive and dangerous encroachments upon the security and sanctity of the 'resting places' of her dead.'<sup>57</sup> Even the Ancient Jews, Romans and Greeks were more civilized, and conducted clean and swift bodily disposal, whereas London 'the seat of science, the arena of inventions, the amphitheatre where all that is great, good and noble' still practiced this dreadful

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<sup>53</sup> Walker, *Gatherings from Grave Yards*. The subtitle of his book gives a clear idea of his views, being 'a detail of dangerous and fatal results produced by the unwise and revolting custom of inhuming the dead in the midst of the living.'

<sup>54</sup> Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*, p. 220.

<sup>55</sup> Mrs Gwilt's letter makes explicit reference to the advice of her unnamed 'medical attendant' about the danger of foul air. St Saviour's Vestry Minutes, 7 September 1849, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

<sup>56</sup> Walker, *Gatherings from Grave Yards*, p. vii.

<sup>57</sup> Walker, *Gatherings from Grave Yard*, p. vi

'violation' upon the dead.<sup>58</sup> Walker's view reflects a perceived lack of control, the urban environment in a supposedly rational and scientific age cannot protect its vulnerable dead *or* living. The state of burial grounds transgresses both individual and collective ideas of propriety, a literal disruption 'from below' of decaying matter that threatened to overwhelm the civilization above it.

Walker spent a considerable time wandering through Southwark's burial sites, and visited St Saviour's, Cross Bones, Ewer Street Chapel ground, Deadman's Place, St Olave's, St. John's, Bermondsey, New Bunhill and a Catholic Chapel at the Docks. He was particularly shocked at the state of Cross Bones, describing the site as giving off the 'most offensive smell.'<sup>59</sup> His interest in Southwark's burial sites probably inspired his attendance at the churchwarden's meeting in February 1839 to discuss the future of the Cross Bones. Walker expressed shock that the vestry opted to reopen the ground, archly observing that 'the *funds* of the vestry and the *health* of the living were here placed in opposite scales - the former had its preponderance.'<sup>60</sup>

Walker's observations are full of filth and foulness, obtrusive smells and rotten vaults. His writings reek of disgust for dead bodies, there is no sentiment for the dead here, they are merely a disease-ridden, miasmatic, public health problem. The accuracy of his reportage is impossible to verify, particularly as his agenda against intramural burial is so overtly stated at the beginning of his text. But it is notable that Walker did not visit any of the burial sites in the wealthier parts of London, focusing on the East End, Southwark, St Giles and other predominantly labouring-class districts. Although it is never explicitly stated, the problem for Walker may not have been the dead *per se*, but the dead poor and pauper classes. This class-based interpretation runs through nearly all the campaigning literature aimed at closing urban cemeteries during this period. The idea of the pestiferous stench of the poor invading the more salubrious districts of the metropolis, with an attendant spread of disease and degeneration, is never far from the surface.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Walker, *Gatherings from Grave Yards*, p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> Walker, *Gatherings from Grave Yards*, p. 179.

<sup>60</sup> Walker, *Gatherings from Grave Yards*, p. 178.

<sup>61</sup> See Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, Walker, *Gatherings from Grave Yards*.

Whilst Walker was appalled by the vestry's financial reasons for keeping the Cross Bones open, their decision was probably a pragmatic one. Underlining the thesis's argument that the intense conditions of urbanisation could cause tension as well as cooperation, throughout the 1830s many residents continually protested about increasing rates, particularly the cost of maintaining the poor, including the cost of parish burial.<sup>62</sup> In April 1830, the vestry had to compel six hundred parishioners to pay their rates, even though many of them were described as in reduced and 'distressed' circumstances themselves.<sup>63</sup> These intra and inter-community financial tensions placed the vestry in a very difficult position. Vestrymen were ratepayers and neighbours, as well as being required to raise money for local services, and they were aware of the pressures that their communities were under. In April 1830 they reduced the salaries of all parish officers by twenty-five per cent, to reduce costs.<sup>64</sup> The financial situation also meant raising funds and managing expenses from those sites in the parish the vestry could control, such as the burial grounds. Cross Bones was a cheap option for the local workhouse, whose burials were paid for by the parish, but it was also used by labouring and poorer people for economical, private interments. As the thesis argues, one of the active responses of Southwark residents towards managing death was to save and plan for their own, and family, funerals. On several occasions, vestry minutes noted the inconvenience to these poorer members of the parish if the site were to be closed, which suggests that money was not the only motive for keeping the site open.<sup>65</sup> The vestry was thus in an intractable situation. Local infrastructure was inadequate for dealing with the growing numbers of dead, there was no money to develop or buy new land for burial, but the numbers of dead kept increasing.

Except for Kensal Green (1832) and West Norwood (1836), the large, suburban London cemeteries, with which the Victorian 'celebration' of death are often associated, were still under development during this period.<sup>66</sup> In addition, the cost

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<sup>62</sup> St Saviour's Parish Vestry Minutes, 25 February 1830, 13 April 1830, 16 September 1830. LMA/P92/SAV/2221.

<sup>63</sup> St Saviour's Parish Vestry Minutes, 13 April 1830, LMA/P92/SAV/2221.

<sup>64</sup> St Saviour's Parish Vestry Minutes, 13 April 1830, LMA/P92/SAV/2221.

<sup>65</sup> St Saviour's Parish Vestry Minutes, 11 September 1849, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

<sup>66</sup> The 1832 Parliament passed a Bill to encourage the establishment of private cemeteries in the outskirts of London. The 'magnificent seven' cemeteries were mostly completed in the 1840s. Kensal

and practicality of burying the parish poor in the new cemeteries, was initially prohibitive, particularly at a time when the technology and infrastructure for moving bodies was limited and expensive.<sup>67</sup> Even if Cross Bones and other sites were as disgraceful as Walker described, they may have only presented a major offence to those living near to them, rather than being perceived as a Borough-wide problem. Surviving accounts from residents about the state of the site are always from those who lived close by. The national campaign against intramural burial was not yet high-profile enough to galvanise any broader local activism, that would come later, in the 1840s. Without funds to make necessary clearances to the site to free up more burial space, but in desperate need of the extra room for burials at no extra cost, it is unsurprising that burial sites like Cross Bones were kept open, whether 'surcharged with corpses' or not.

Several new challenges had reshaped the actions of Southwark residents towards the Cross Bones cemetery by the end of the 1830s. Lack of local finance was a major issue, and as the population of the Borough grew, so did the need for better infrastructure and increased poor relief. The 1832 cholera outbreak, which was particularly aggressive in Southwark, was perhaps not the galvanizing event it might have been in terms of encouraging the vestries to address problems with water supplies, drainage, street filth, and inadequate housing. The vestries remained reactive to issues such as disease outbreaks at least in part because their abilities to act were so fiscally constrained. The less they were able to address the Borough's social and economic problems the more entrenched those problems became.<sup>68</sup>

### Cross Bones in the 1840s: 'The dangerous remains of mortality'<sup>69</sup>

There are few surviving records of the use of Cross Bones during the later 1830s, but as the financial and infrastructural pressures on burial space did not diminish

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Green (1832), West Norwood (1836) and Highgate (1839) were developed first, followed by Abney Park, Nunhead and Brompton (all 1840). Tower Hamlets was completed in 1841.

<sup>67</sup> The Burial Act (1852) allowed the conveyance of bodies by train to burial grounds such as Brookwood, thus opening up the suburban sites to inner-city parishes. Clause XXI, Burial Act 1852.

<sup>68</sup> Whilst they had the right to levy a shilling rate to raise funds for the building of sewers, there is no evidence that the local communities in Southwark would have been willing to pay this.

<sup>69</sup> From a letter from Mrs Gwilt, St Saviour's Vestry Parish Minutes, 7 September 1849, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

during this period, it is likely that the site was regularly used, at least for parish-funded and cheap, private interments. As analysed in chapters two and three of this thesis access to economical private funeral was important for poorer and labouring families on constrained budgets. This placed the future of the cemetery at the heart of some of the tensions that managing the dead could create during this period. It also exposed ways in which the dead could generate different kinds of response from Southwark residents, between those using and/or recognising the need for local, affordable burial and its revenue and those motivated by other issues, such as public health. Growing concerns about public health can be seen in a shift in the language used to describe the Cross Bones during this time, as anxieties about the threat of miasma and disease become increasingly intertwined with ideas of morality and respect, with fears that the dangers of the dead threatened the sanctity of domestic life.<sup>70</sup> Beyond Southwark, the national political and public health context for urban burial was also changing, and this would further impact on local debates and influence some residents to intervene in the future of the cemetery. As noted in the introduction to this thesis, sometimes 'top down' policy impacted on treatment of the dying and dead, even if this might be interpreted in quite local ways.

The language used by campaigners to close urban burial sites began during this period to increasingly blend the concerns of health with Christian sensibilities, giving a moral dimension to the need to clean up burial sites. Smells and miasma began to take on a deeper significance, they were symptomatic of degeneration, played out through the bodies of the dead, and largely the dead poor. Debate about

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<sup>70</sup> There is an extensive literature on Victorian notion of cleanliness, Godliness, morality and respect. See for example Anthony S. Wohl, *Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain* (London: Methuen, 1983), which describes the 'moral crusade' aspect of sanitary reform, see also Mary Poovey, 'Domesticity and Class Formation: Chadwick's 1842 *Sanitary Report*' in *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation 1830-1864* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Victoria Kelley's *Soap and Water: Dirt and the Working Classes in Victorian and Edwardian Britain* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010) explores the production of meanings associated with cleanliness and dirt from working-class perspectives, arguing that values were complex and bound up with gender ideologies as well as community status. Michelle Allen 'From Cesspool to Sewer: Sanitary Reform and the Rhetoric of Resistance 1848-1880' in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 30 (2002), 383-402 explores the other side of sanitary reform, arguing that, for example, the development of sewerage systems destabilised bourgeois subjectivity by connecting rich and poor through subterranean pipes, challenging boundaries of public and domestic spheres. Nineteenth century commentators were also eager to make such links. See, for example C. Girdlestone, 'On the Scientific Investigation of Sanitary Questions', *Journal of Public Health and Sanitary Review* 1 (1855), 29-31, or Elizabeth Blackwell, *How to Keep a Household in Health*, (London: 1871).

the state of urban graveyards and cemeteries was also gaining a national profile. A series of committees during the 1840s were convened to examine the state of urban health, and the provision of burial sites was an important part of their investigations. George Walker contributed evidence to Robert Slaney's 1840 Health of Towns committee, which he later published as *The Graveyards of London* (1841), a continuation of his grim musings in *Gatherings*. William Mackinnon, MP for Lymington, who had heard Walker's evidence, petitioned successfully for a Parliamentary Select Committee to investigate these claims further. In a speech to the House of Commons in April 1845, that could almost have been written by Walker, MacKinnon noted that the early Christians had not seen fit to bury in towns, and that 'the shocking practices prevalent in grave yards of the metropolis have appeared in various forms before the public, and excited equal indignation and disgust.' Not only did interments in towns spread disease, there was an intrinsic, perhaps even subversive, 'unhealthiness of the practice of putting the dead amongst the living.'<sup>71</sup> MacKinnon proposed an end to all interment in populous areas, his rationale that, it was 'injurious to health, and exposes places of sepulchre to desecration, and the remains of the dead to acts revolting to moral and religious feelings.'<sup>72</sup>

The closure of the Cross Bones site was discussed in 1849, during the second major cholera outbreak to occur in Southwark. The cemetery was again reported to be at crisis point, and the vestry announced that 'public health is alarmingly endangered by the continuing practice of interring the dead'.<sup>73</sup> A meeting was convened on 8 March to consider a communication from the Board of Health 'prohibiting burials in the Cross Bones Burial Ground,' suggesting that the site had probably been in regular use since the 1830s. The vestry proposed to purchase land at the north side of the church around Borough Market, to increase burial capacity. This was valuable land, however, and equally attractive to the market's developers, and for the possible further expansion of London Bridge station.<sup>74</sup> The vestry did not have the resources to compete with these kinds of commercial concerns.

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<sup>71</sup> Speech by William MacKinnon, MP, HC Deb 8 April 1845, vol. 79, cc328-58.

<sup>72</sup> HC Deb 8 April 1845, vol. 79, cc335.

<sup>73</sup> St Saviour's Vestry Minutes, 7 September 1849, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

<sup>74</sup> St Saviour's Vestry Minutes, 8 March 1833, LMA/P92/SAV/2221.



On 13 August 1849, the central government General Board of Health, asked St Saviour's vestry and churchwardens to respond to a letter they had received from Mrs Mariane Gwilt about Cross Bones. The Board noted that if Mrs Gwilt's complaints were correct, and actions not taken, the Board would be 'compelled to interfere under the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Sections of the Amended Nuisances Removal and Diseases Prevention Act.'<sup>75</sup> As Mrs Gwilt's letter was an individual initiative, it cannot be claimed to necessarily demonstrate a broad cross-section of interest. Furthermore, she was middle-class, articulate and literate, which gave her a voice not enjoyed by more economically or socially deprived individuals. Although she refers to 'we' in her letter, it is not clear whether this means her own domestic circumstance or a wider group of neighbours and interested parties. Addressing her concerns to the national Board of Health, rather than her local community in the vestry, implies that she felt no confidence that her local representatives would deal with her concerns, although there is no documented record of her having any prior contact with the vestry on these matters.

Mrs Gwilt's undated letter complained about the 'dangerous state of the burial ground known by the name of the Cross Bones', which adjoined her residence. Mrs Gwilt continued, in Gothically detailed fashion:

[W]e have all this sickly summer almost daily witnessed the most distressing sights; our remonstrances are in vain – in the bone house with its open grating which is not more than eight or ten yards from five of our windows we have during these last fatal six weeks had sometimes as many as from three to nine bodies lying in their shells at a time for days (as many as ten days) in the aforesaid bone house, close, under our windows. One of these shells contained the body of a woman who was brought here supposed dead, but actually broke a blood vessel trying to get out, whilst being carried along she not being dead then – the sawdust and shavings covered with blood which washed out the shell when the body was transferred to the permanent coffin was spread under our windows and is there now although this occurred three weeks ago.<sup>76</sup>

Mrs Gwilt then described various outrages, including,

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<sup>75</sup> St Saviour's Vestry Minutes, 11 September 1849, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

<sup>76</sup> St Saviour's Vestry Minutes, 11 September 1849, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

The body of a man who had drowned himself at Blackfriars Bridge [and] allowed to be in its shell for ten days then the body was washed with a mop and pailsful of water and the shell again washed out and all the filthy liquid and shavings and grass thrown under our windows – his clothes lie there at this time I am writing and whilst he lay'd there the bodies of two children who had died of the cholera was left in this dead house the chief of the time.<sup>77</sup>

As her letter proceeded, Mrs Gwilt changed tone from sensational horror story to campaigning public health pamphlet, as she continued,

Now surely if buried at all in London ought not these dangerous remains of mortality to be put out of sight as soon as brought to these overcrowded graveyards. The horrid practice of Metropolitan Burial Grounds ought to be abolished – several medical gentlemen have averred to me that this place is dangerous to the health of this densely populated neighbourhood and the air of our city must be fatally deteriorated by allowing intermural interments.<sup>78</sup>

Mrs Gwilt's letter is a *mélange* of the narratives of sensationalism, pathos, horror *and* public health that often featured in the burial debates during this period.<sup>79</sup> The fear of premature burial, suicide, dead children, infringement of property rights, disrespect – all lead to her conclusion that this local situation was part of a broader national, or at least Metropolitan, crisis. It also underlines tensions in the community, between the interests of those residents, who, like Mr and Mrs Gwilt, lived near to the cemetery, and their 'representatives' on the vestry.<sup>80</sup> Both groups were dealing with a complex range of issues, mostly driven by the deep changes that intensifying urbanisation was bringing to Southwark. The vestry's financial situation has already been alluded to, and their resources continued to be under pressure. The Gwilts represented a more established strand of Southwark residency, struggling to cope with the social changes occurring in the Borough.

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<sup>77</sup> St Saviour's Vestry Minutes, 11 September 1849, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

<sup>78</sup> St Saviour's Vestry Minutes, 11 September 1849, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

<sup>79</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, Walker, *Gatherings from Grave Yards*.

<sup>80</sup> It must be noted that there was no formal election for vestries, they were self-selecting and largely drawn from the local business and church communities.

Ideas about what might constitute a respectful treatment of the dead are confused in Mrs Gwilt's letter. The bodies lying in the dead house or under her windows were an unknown 'other', parish or outcast burials, nameless strangers. This both confused Christian proprieties, whereby the dead were due respect within the framework of religious belief, but at the same time created a practical and health inconvenience, or possible threat, for her family. Southwark's economic and social transitions, exemplified by its mobile poor, who re-located regularly for work, rent flight, or other reasons, created a different kind of challenge when they became the immobile dead. The (literal) bodily waste of the impoverished were infiltrating the once salubrious spaces of middle-class families like the Gwilts. This threatened to bring kinds of subversion, such as the smells and diseases of the poor, to the very doorstep of local householders.

Local disputes, such as burial, might be interpreted as a broader anxiety about a community that no longer felt knowable, as it mutated through demographic and topographic instabilities. The Gwilts were an old, established family in Southwark, they owned an architectural firm that had been based there since the eighteenth century.<sup>81</sup> Their locale was changing around them, and they had little formal means of reacting to, or effecting, those changes. The inability to even expel the stench of the dead from her own home, must have reinforced Mrs Gwilt's sense of powerlessness. The difficulty of achieving an isolation from the increasing poverty in the Borough was made manifest through bad smells and bloody sawdust. Whilst Mrs Gwilt expressed her wish to move away from the Borough to the suburbs, as many middle-class families were doing during this time, but her husband apparently insisted that they stay. Indeed, so located did he feel, that despite Mrs Gwilt's campaigning against burial in Cross Bones, her husband George would be buried by her special petition in the vaults of St Saviour's in 1856, after almost all interments in the Borough had ceased.

Mrs Gwilt's complaints were strenuously denied by the vestry Wardens, who wrote back to the Board of Health on 16 August, claiming that she had failed to contact

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<sup>81</sup> George Gwilt (1746-1807) was an architect who founded his firm in Southwark. His son, also called George (1775-1856) was married to Mariane.

them directly with her concerns, and had made many 'erroneous statements' in her letter. They noted that the reason for her proximity to the bone house was the illegal extension of her property over a common sewer, and moreover, that burial was always swiftly handled at the site. They provided identities for her nameless bodies:

Elizabeth Frances Lock aged four years died 23 July removed same day to the dead house and buried the next day at 3 o'clock, Harriet Horton and Mary Ann Priest taken to the dead house 24 July and buried the next day at 3 o'clock, Michael Leary 8 years died 2 August taken to the dead house same day and buried next morning at half-past 10 o'clock, Walter Cook, 14 years, drowned taken out of the river on Friday morning 10 August, inquest held the next afternoon Saturday and buried the same evening.<sup>82</sup>

The 'drowned man', Charles Shooter, had been taken to the dead house on 22 July; his inquest on 24 July was adjourned until 26 July as the Coroner refused to give his Certificate for Burial, for reasons unknown. According to the Wardens, 'the body became so offensive' that the Warden requested the family remove it for burial immediately without the Coroner's Warrant, and it was buried on 25 July 'the clergyman rendering himself liable to a fine for so doing.'<sup>83</sup>

Many different communities could utilise the discourses of public health. Like Mrs Gwilt, the wardens did so in defence of their procedures for burial. They argued that intramural burial was hygienic, because it meant that interments could be processed at speed. As Cross Bones was for those 'being buried at parish expence [sic]' the efficiency of their burial system prevented the corpses of paupers, who had lived with numerous family and other members in single rooms, from lying around putrefying for too long. 'The officers have thought it most dangerous to let the bodies remain among the living occasioning the spread of disease.'<sup>84</sup>

The wardens further undermined Mrs Gwilt's case, by noting that her claims about the sawdust and straw were incorrect, as they were only used for shoulder padding the coffin carriers, not lining shells. Furthermore, the Beadle only used a mop for cleaning the bone house, not bodies. Finally, the authorities were obliged to hold on

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<sup>82</sup> St Saviour's Vestry Minutes, 11 September 1849, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

<sup>83</sup> St Saviour's Vestry Minutes, 11 September 1849, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

<sup>84</sup> St Saviour's Vestry Minutes, 11 September 1849, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

to the clothes of drowned persons in case their families wanted them returned. If interments continued to be allowed in the city, 'the burial ground in question is as well situated, as little offensive to Health and Public Morals and as open as almost any ground in the Metropolis.'<sup>85</sup>

Unsurprisingly, given Chadwick's influence on the General Board of Health, their response to St Saviour's was uncompromising. Unconvinced by the wardens, they ordered the immediate closure of the Cross Bones, under the Nuisances Removal and Diseases Prevention Act 1848. As well as Mrs Gwilt's complaints, they cited the opinion of a Dr John Lever, who described the graveyard as 'emitting the most foul exhalations' and linking the smell to the spread of disease: 'cholera has prevailed in this vicinity to a dreadful extent.' Lever went as far as to accuse vested interests in this matter, noting that 'Parochial Officers have been told of the danger incurred by their continuing to inter in the ground still they being lay rectors will not discontinue as they are afraid of **losing their fees**.'<sup>86</sup>

The vestry again asked the wardens to respond, and this time they changed their approach, by using statistics. They reported that, far from being dangerously overcrowded, there had been a decline in burials both in Cross Bones and St Saviour's churchyard. From 1825-1836 5076 burials took place, whereas from 1836-1845 there were only 2967. The numbers of vault burials in the church, another cause for concern from residents, had also declined from 177 to 89. No reason was offered for this decline in numbers. Significantly, the wardens also claimed that the death rate in the streets around the burial sites, thus those theoretically most at risk from miasmatic infections, Wellington Street, St Montague Close, Church Street, York Street and Green Dragon Court, was lower than the local average, although they provided no statistics to support this claim. Their final appeal was a social and economic one and shows that the wardens could on occasion help to mediate the views of the Borough's poorer residents who relied on cheap, but privately funded burials. There was often an important distinction for poorer communities between parish and private interment. Funerals that were paid for,

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<sup>85</sup> St Saviour's Vestry Minutes, 11 September 1849, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

<sup>86</sup> St Saviour's Vestry Minutes, 11 September 1849, LMA/P92/SAV/461 (original emphasis).

even if they were of the most basic kind, meant that families retained control of the grave, whereas pauper or parish burial sites could be re-used much more quickly.<sup>87</sup> The wardens therefore argued that the closure of the Cross Bones ‘would entail a serious inconvenience and great additional expence [sic] on the poorer inhabitants’ who must either find more money to pay for burial outside the parish, or more likely fall into reliance on the parish to fund their interments for them.<sup>88</sup>

The exchanges between the Board of Health, wardens, and vestry expose a further, important aspect of the competing tensions around Cross Bones: that between local and national authority. James Vernon argues that the growth of centralised, Government bureaucracy (exemplified by bodies such as the Board of Health) revitalised local models of governance, like vestries. Rather than being anachronistic vestiges of the past, or evidence of ‘the survival of tradition’, vestries and other community structures were reinventing and re-negotiating themselves in the new contexts of an emerging and rapidly changing urban realm. This was not necessarily a linear process; rather a ‘dialectic of abstraction and reembedding’ which ‘occurred simultaneously and was mutually constitutive’.<sup>89</sup> Interpreted in this context, the warden’s use of public health, local economics and social statistics to defend their right to maintaining local burial, is not a resistance to change, but a subtle deployment of highly contemporary bureaucratic rationale.

When the General Board of Health issued a summons to the Wardens for their failure to close the Cross Bones, Southwark magistrates rejected their interference, arguing that the Board had no authority to decide such matters on behalf of a local area.<sup>90</sup> The Board of Health responded by publishing, on the front page of the *London Gazette*, an official warning to the churchwardens of St Saviour’s on 14 September 1849. It reminded them of the power invested in the Board to act on any burial sites it found to be dangerous. The Board’s inspector decreed Cross Bones hazardous to

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<sup>87</sup> Julie Rugg, ‘Constructing the grave: competing burial ideals in nineteenth-century England’, *Social History*, 38 (2013), 328-345.

<sup>88</sup> St Saviour’s Vestry Minutes, 11 September 1849, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

<sup>89</sup> Vernon, *Distant Strangers*, p.15. See also E.P. Hennock, *Fit and Proper Persons: Ideal and Reality in Nineteenth Century Government* (London: Edward Arnold, 1973). Although dealing predominantly with Leeds and Birmingham, Hennock is nuanced in his discussion of how vestrymen balanced the competing needs of communities and expenditure, and Southwark supports this case.

<sup>90</sup> St Saviour’s Vestry Minutes, 29 September 1849, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

the health of nearby residents, and St Saviour's was ordered to stop burying people there immediately.<sup>91</sup> St Saviour's again refused to close Cross Bones, but by mid-October 1849 various concessions had been made to improve the burial ground. New footpaths were laid and, in an interesting development that shows how attitudes towards treatment of corpses had evolved from the 1830s, quicklime was to be used with a uniform thickness of three inches across the ground.<sup>92</sup> This suggests that the practices of public health were much more acceptable by the late 1840s compared to the 1830s, when the use of quicklime for cholera burials was controversial as it was associated with the burial of criminals, and that notions of eschatology may have broadened to accept that the physical remains of the deceased were not violated by swift decomposition.<sup>93</sup>

The new approach at Cross Bones also precluded multiple use of graves, a practice that was already technically forbidden but in practice rife in the nineteenth century, especially in urban areas, and nearly always for parish burials. Graves were to be dug a minimum of five feet deep. No more vault burials were to be permitted unless the coffin was lead-lined and completely airtight, an innovation that would have been beyond the financial reach of those communities using Cross Bones, thus by default ending vault burials on the site. The vestry was satisfied with the wardens' efforts and noted that the ground 'would afford ample accommodation for the wants of the poorer inhabitants for a long time to come.'<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> *London Gazette*, 14 September 1849, p. 1.

<sup>92</sup> Quick lime burials were proposed by the Board of Health during the first cholera outbreak of 1831-32 and were extremely controversial because they were associated with the disposal of criminal corpses.

<sup>93</sup> Nineteenth century eschatology is a complex matter, and notions of afterlife varied considerably between faith groups and probably individuals themselves. Theology and beliefs also evolved over the course of the century, influenced by science, and other cultural and social shifts. For example, for some dissenting groups (Baptists, Methodists) there appears to be less emphasis on the preservation of mortal remains after death. Morley argues that the Victorian Romanticism of death, which emphasised 'heart' and imagination over reason (a feature also of Evangelical Revival) found no contradiction with the 'corporeal nature' of Victorian Heaven, replete with angels, for example. Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians*, pp. 103-104. Nonetheless there were already debates about cremation as a hygienic and rational response to the burial crisis, suggesting again that preservation of the body was not necessarily the primary requirement of a good death (and corpse). See also Michael Wheeler, *Heaven, Hell and the Victorians*, and Colleen McDannell and Bernard Lang, *Heaven: A History*.

<sup>94</sup> St Saviour's Vestry Minutes, 16 October and 22 October 1849, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

In spring 1850 Parliament introduced the Metropolitan Interments Bill. A major concern about the Bill, which was protested by many vestries, including St Saviour's, was the potential loss of revenue if interments were banned in urban parishes. Whilst the draft Bill proposed compensation for the clergy, clerks and sextons, who would lose income once intramural burial was forbidden, none was to be provided for public bodies or private individuals who also relied on this source of funds.<sup>95</sup> The matter of burial fees was extremely complicated and varied considerably from vestry to vestry. Before the Metropolitan Burial Act of 1852, burial sites were 'owned' variously by the church, vestries, or even private individuals. Clergymen and undertakers regularly speculated in burial grounds. A scandalous abuse of this was exposed in St John's, Southwark, when a local undertaker bought a cellar running under four terraced houses. Not only did he flout the regulations by lining his 'vault' with wood, rather than the legally required lead, he employed an accomplice to pretend to be an ordained clergyman to conduct his interments on the cheap.<sup>96</sup> The 1842 Select Committee established to investigate burials in the metropolis had also received evidence from an undertaker who claimed that dissenting ministers were particularly keen speculators in burial sites. The undertaker noted that 'they [dissenting ministers] get more money from the dead than the living.'<sup>97</sup> Vestry officers also benefitted from keeping burials within their parishes. Chadwick observed that the various rents, fees and disbursements received were not always very thoroughly audited, so it is hard to estimate exactly how much income a parish like St Saviour's would have received from burials, but the amount was probably quite significant.<sup>98</sup> An additional consideration for vestrymen was the extra cost of pauper burial, for which local ratepayers were responsible, if interments were moved out of parishes to the suburbs.

In December 1852, a group of St Saviour's residents, including George Gwilt, wrote to the Home Secretary, Spencer Walpole. In a long and detailed letter, they reported that they had been complaining for years about the 'outrageous nuisance' of Cross Bones, and had lost faith in the local vestry and churchwardens to tackle the

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<sup>95</sup> St Saviour's Vestry Minutes, 28 May 1850, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

<sup>96</sup> Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians*, p. 38.

<sup>97</sup> Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians*, p. 38.

<sup>98</sup> Chadwick, *Supplementary Report*, p. 101.



problem for them.<sup>99</sup> Observing that the Cross Bones was packed to overflowing, the residents noted that ‘the Grave Digger is daily seen with a long steel pointed iron rod, sticking the ground here and there spearing the top coffins’ and causing the contents to spill out.<sup>100</sup> The contents would lie above ground for several days, ‘to the scandal of all Christian men’.<sup>101</sup> These remains would include ‘a number of skulls [sic] too numerous to mention lying like half-devoured turnips about a sheep fold and cared for as little.’<sup>102</sup> Not only had the ‘loud and long complaints’ of residents been ignored, they were afraid of the dreadful possibilities of disease, given the disgusting state of the site. They were also ambivalent about the quality of bodies being buried there, taken as they were from the ‘poor dwellings close to this rottenness’. This may refer either to putrefying bodies that had been retained by families for either waking or burial fee collection, or it may be a point about the social status of the corpses. Despite the intervention of the Board of Health, the local authorities had done nothing to help residents, or to prevent ‘these scandalous outrages upon the dead – nor the least abatement of the sickening and abominable effluvium emanating from this enormous heap of Putrescence.’<sup>103</sup> The letter ended with a fearful note of the advancing cholera, of which there was another outbreak in London in 1854. Walpole was finally exhorted to act for the ‘safety of our families and the comfort of our homes.’<sup>104</sup> The domestic sphere, shelter from the chaos and threats of urban life, was fundamentally subverted by this continued presence of the dead amongst the living.

Walpole responded by sending Dr John Sutherland, a friend of Florence Nightingale and active promoter of sanitary science, to conduct yet another survey of the Cross Bones.<sup>105</sup> As with the residents’ letter, the report he submitted underlines the socially-based prejudices that had always abounded about the site:

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<sup>99</sup> St Saviour’s Parish Vestry Minutes, 2 December 1852, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

<sup>100</sup> St Saviour’s Parish Vestry Minutes, 2 December 1852, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

<sup>101</sup> St Saviour’s Parish Vestry Minutes, 2 December 1852, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

<sup>102</sup> St Saviour’s Parish Vestry Minutes, 2 December 1852, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

<sup>103</sup> St Saviour’s Parish Vestry Minutes, 2 December 1852, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

<sup>104</sup> St Saviour’s Parish Vestry Minutes, 2 December 1852, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

<sup>105</sup> Dr John Sutherland (1808-1891) was engaged by the Home Office to investigate intramural burials and served on the General Board of Health. He always went to serve in the Crimean War as Head of a Sanitary Commission.

[Cross Bones] is evidently used for an inferior class of interments and can be considered only as a convenient place for getting rid of the dead. It bears no marks of ever having been set apart as a place of Christian Sepulchre. It is crowded with dead and many fragments of decayed bones, some even entire, are mixed up with the earth of the mounds over the graves.<sup>106</sup>

Sutherland calculated that 1180 bodies had been buried in a total area of 2089 square yards during the years 1845 to 1851, with the most intensive use of the plot during the cholera outbreak of 1849. He noted,

If proper regulations had been adopted for this ground and 39 superficial feet allowed for each interment, which is the average required to protect the public health from injury, the whole area would have accommodated only 482 coffins, [and] it would have been full in somewhat less than three years.<sup>107</sup>

As the only two sites available for burial in St Saviour's parish by 1850, Cross Bones and the churchyard around St Saviour's church, there were around 3583 square yards for a parish of 19,638 residents. As the parish was, according to Dr Sutherland, 'a very unhealthy one' with an annual mortality of over 29 in the 1000, these sites had to accommodate roughly 550 burials a year. Even if the two grounds were completely empty, the sites would be 'entirely filled in about 18 months.'<sup>108</sup> Dr Sutherland's report was, it turned out, the final nail for Cross Bones. On 29 March 1853, the local burial board, which had been established by requirement of the Metropolitan Interments Bill, began to negotiate for a piece of ground in Brookwood Cemetery near Woking. Bodies could be moved there via the new infrastructure provided by the London Necropolis Railway at Waterloo, the Burial Act of 1852 having allowed the removal of bodies by train for the first time.<sup>109</sup> The parish charged 14 shillings for an adult funeral and 10 shillings for a child or baby. This covered transport of the body and third class return tickets for two mourners, plus the fees for grave diggers and clergy. There was an extra shilling if the body was to

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<sup>106</sup> St Saviour's Parish Vestry Minutes, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

<sup>107</sup> St Saviour's Parish Vestry Minutes, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

<sup>108</sup> St Saviour's Parish Vestry Minutes, LMA/P92/SAV/461.

<sup>109</sup> The London Necropolis Railway opened in 1854, to take bodies from Waterloo Station to Brookwood Cemetery, Surrey. Catherine Arnold, *Necropolis: London and its Dead* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2006).

be buried in consecrated ground, and an extra two shillings per additional mourner. Pauper funerals would be paid for by the vestry.

The vestry thereafter leased the Cross Bones site to a Mr Stephens, who signed a twenty-six-and-a-half-year agreement in November 1854, and then sublet the cemetery to a local building firm. Burial sites in the Borough were thus given over to warehouses and workshops, the economic needs of the living overruling the spatial requirements of the dead. The shift in burial practices does not seem to have created protest in Southwark's labouring population, however, who accordingly amended their savings schemes and preparation for burial to include a trip to the suburbs. Active responses to managing the dead sometimes meant adaptation to the ever-changing realities of urban life.

## Conclusion

This chapter argues that analyses of early to mid-nineteenth century disputes over urban burial sites have failed to address the active roles played by communities, in negotiating where and how disposal of the dead should take place. Their debates were articulated through many changing priorities, illustrating multiple and complex responses that individuals and groups adopted according to their social, economic and geographical situations, as well as their public and private interests. It shows that responses towards understanding and managing the dead were not fixed into a simple trope of evangelically inspired celebration of death, but that other important influences, including public health, respectability, and security, also mattered. It also underlines the point that key voices are missing from this debate, their lack of records leaving a significant historiographical gap. The communities that had to use the Cross Bones: paupers, the diseased, prostitutes, and suicides, the frugally but privately buried, have not left first-hand sources about their views on these matters.

The geographical removal of the dead from urban centres by the late 1850s is usually attributed to the success of reformers, such as Edwin Chadwick and George Walker. Their public health concerns about miasma, disease and the inherent

dangers of putrefying bodies, undoubtedly helped to develop and popularise new discourses about disease, death, and the dead. In the case of Southwark, much of the language used by residents, wardens and vestrymen clearly draws on such influences. Nonetheless, as the case of Cross Bones demonstrates, active elements of the local community were also instrumental in developing their own ideas about burial policy, which connected to notions of propriety, safety and/or property.

The protracted tensions over the Cross Bones site in Southwark also reveal complex layers of interaction between and within different *kinds* of community. Unnamed 'experts' sent to assess the cemetery, doctors, vestrymen and churchwardens, residents and central government bureaucrats all had their own complex, and sometimes mutable, purposes. Mrs Gwilt found no apparent contradiction in protesting about intramural burial, only to petition the Home Secretary to allow her to bury her husband in St Saviour's vaults after interments had been suspended in the parish. Churchwardens, vestrymen and sextons, occupying roles of ancient title, used modern methods of statistical analysis and public health to lay their claim for intramural burial as a utilitarian and economical local service. Doctors interleaved their scientific objections to the stinking, unhealthy sites of urban interment with appeals to Christian Sepulchre and religious respect. Residents could at once hold notions of a need for decency for the departed, with a fear of the uncontrollable, chaotic, subversion that the smells and putrescence the dead leached into their homes.

Sustained population growth and increasing mobility engendered a society of urban, 'distant strangers', who had to renegotiate and transform existing economic, social and cultural structures to navigate the shifting landscape of their new contexts and realities. As this was not a fixedly linear or unabstracted process, issues such as the dispute over intramural burial can be located as part of a historically, and in Southwark's case, locally, specific set of circumstances in which death helped to intensify the experiences of urban expansion. Indeed, dead bodies played their part in the Borough's intense urbanisation through their own multiple meanings as both the victims *and* perpetrators of outrage strewn around with no Christian care and respect, at the same time a stinking, putrescent, and ever-present miasmatic danger

to the over-crowded living conditions of their kin and communities. The dead were at once suspended between the concerns of an emerging public health movement, and an environment in which Christianity and respectability were trying to nail their nebulous meanings in this complex, ever-shifting, environment.

Thus, the different kinds of language used, and actions taken over the Cross Bones during this period of dispute can be seen to reflect the changing concerns of communities. These concerns were actively informed by social and economic externalities, the developing idea of public health, and ultimately by technologies that would enable the economical removal of the dead from urban spaces, and to the new, suburban cemeteries. Doubtless all the 200 burial sites closed by Lord Palmerston in the first year of the Metropolitan Interments Bill had their own, locally specific, debates, tensions and disputes about whether they should remain open or be closed. No universal claims can or should be made for the disputes over the Cross Bones site. The ongoing negotiation and relationship between the communities of the living and the dead was not resolved in Cross Bones, St Saviour, but rather removed to the suburbs for 14 shillings with two mourners in attendance third class.

## Conclusion

Through an analysis of Southwark's diverse labouring-class communities this thesis examines the wide range of strategies adopted to manage high levels of mortality during the early to mid-nineteenth century. The research makes an original contribution through the assessment of the evolution of class and class politics, the politics of death and dying, the relationship between individuals and the state, the importance of place and space for understanding responses to precarious and uncertain times, and the significance of micro and local studies for understanding, and sometimes questioning, macro historical accounts.

The thesis argues that hitherto death historiography has tended to centre on the divergent experiences of either wealthy or pauper social groups, often neglecting altogether the experiences of a broad demographic referred to by nineteenth century contemporaries such as Edwin Chadwick and Charles Dickens as the 'labouring classes'.<sup>1</sup> It is these diverse 'labouring' groups, therefore, that are the focus of this study. The thesis engages critically with the idea of 'labouring class' as a categorisation, in order to demonstrate that notions of class during a period of intense migration, economic change and accelerated urban development could be fluid, nuanced and deployed for a variety of social, political and cultural ends. The tendency to conflate different domestic, economic and social circumstances under the description 'labouring class', particularly in the context of rapidly expanding and changing urban areas like Southwark, risks stripping such communities of complexity, agency and identity. In turn, this can essentialise and depoliticise diverse groups and their lives and deaths, eliding experiences which might otherwise reveal much about the formation of class and social solidarities amidst the contingencies of precarious living and working conditions.

By focusing on a detailed study of how this Southwark community coped with high levels of mortality, the thesis demonstrates how relationships to death are historically and politically located and shaped. Detailed analysis reveals not only the

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<sup>1</sup> Chadwick referred to the 'labouring classes' in his two investigative reports, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (London: Clowes & Sons, 1842) and the *Supplementary Report into the Practice of Interment in Towns* (London: Clowes & Sons, 1843). There is a fuller discussion about the use of the term 'labouring class' in the introduction to the thesis.

sheer diversity of strategies developed in response to high mortality levels, but also broader political questions about the challenges of living and dying in rapidly developing, economically and socially precarious urban environments. Furthermore, the thesis shows that during the early to mid-nineteenth century the relationships between social and economic circumstances, environment, class and mortality became increasingly visible. These relationships were exposed by 'top-down' state/government directives, such as the requirement from 1837 to register births, marriages and deaths including for the first time details about location and medical causes of death, or from the 1850s the banning of intramural burial. They were also revealed through a variety of local initiatives developed by individuals and groups in response to high mortality levels. In the context of Southwark, these included the establishment of a wide variety of savings, benefits and burial clubs, the rapid growth of the undertaking trade, and a significant reorientation of the priorities of coroner's inquests, which were increasingly deployed to examine deaths from 'new' disease threats, such as cholera. In a period prior to the support offered by more formally constituted labour and social organising, such as trade unions and later the Welfare State, these activities also offered forms of rudimentary mutual aid, albeit sometimes rooted in forms of exclusion, based on gender, trade, age or economic circumstances. In these ways, means of developing methods of local resilience could be responsive and/or reactive to different levers of local and state authority. Thus, individuals might see no contradiction in, for example, campaigning against intramural burial, whilst wishing to retain the right for local interment for their own families or developing highly exclusionary models of 'socialised' health insurance, for example.

Thomas Laqueur argues that the development of burial clubs and proliferation of professional undertakers is indicative of the dying and dead becoming part of the growing cash and consumer nexus of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> The availability and purchase of increasingly elaborate private funerals and the development of schemes to fund them created a symbiotic ostracisation of pauper burial as indicative of individual economic and social failure.<sup>3</sup> Further implicating death in the web of class

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Laqueur, 'Bodies, Death and Pauper Funerals', *Representations*, 1, (1983), 109-131.

<sup>3</sup> Laqueur, 'Bodies, Death and Pauper Funerals.'

and political formations, Ruth Richardson argues that the legalisation of anatomy on unclaimed pauper bodies via the 1832 Anatomy Act, and the institutionalisation of cheap, penny-pinching pauper burial through the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act embedded the marginalisation the (dead) poor in ways that continue to influence contemporary political debate.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, the study of Southwark challenges aspects of these arguments, by demonstrating that whilst there was clearly a growth of the 'consumer cultures' of death during this period, these developments might be interpreted in a variety of ways. The participation in burial clubs and widespread use of undertaking services were also rooted in specific experiences of displacement, migration, and the topological instabilities of rapid urbanisation. The shifting styles and employment practices of the funeral trade in many ways exemplifies this, embedded as it was in an extensive network of local trades, businesses and connections, and immersed in numerous and complex class and gender-based exchanges, as explored in chapter two of the thesis. Saving for a funeral could be an act of social solidarity and an expression of identity, as well as a transactional process of buying and selling.

As the study of Southwark demonstrates, communities and individuals are grounded in social, economic and cultural structures for which they may have some responsibility but over which they cannot necessarily exercise power. The synthesis of a range of disparate sources for this thesis underlines that what Southwark communities did in response to high mortality levels was clearly dependent on class, gender, and social and economic contexts, but that events and actions were also influenced by the specificities, limitations and possibilities of space and place. In this regard, the research is curtailed by the paucity of first-hand accounts from labouring-class individuals themselves addressing their views about dying and death and on managing its contingencies and risks. Furthermore, as a local, micro study, the extent to which findings from Southwark can be extrapolated to make broader points about other communities and geographical locations is debateable. The thesis argues that much of what happened in Southwark was determined by, for example, its particular social profile and economic structures, rooted in time and place. These contingencies demonstrably did have certain bearings on dying and

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<sup>4</sup> Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (London: Routledge, 1987), pp.261-284.



death, based on the preponderance of certain kinds of disease, the high levels of child mortality, or the kinds of work and housing available with their associated accident or health risks.

The thesis also demonstrates how death could play an ambivalent role in the formation of the urban environment in the early to mid-nineteenth century. As a potential source of infection and ill-health, the miasmatic presence of the dead in urban cemeteries were interpreted by some groups as destabilising and threatening to the living. By mid-century Southwark sources show that disputes about intramural burial were also sometimes a proxy for broader political anxieties such as ambivalence about seemingly uncontrolled population growth, migration and increasing levels of poverty, destitution and epidemic disease. These issues, mediated through the politics of burial, exposed deep tensions between state and local authorities, and residents, and were significantly most evident in Southwark during times of stress, such as cholera epidemics.

As already noted, the detailed study of Southwark makes this thesis a contribution to micro history.<sup>5</sup> The early to mid-nineteenth century residents of Southwark lived in a changing world. Rapid population growth in the Borough brought diverse people together, and wrought physical changes to streets and courtyards, as did the arrival of new infrastructure, like the railways, larger roads and new London Bridge. The social, economic and cultural landscape of their communities transformed over a thirty-year period. Lives were still bounded by dying and death, however, and mortality rates remained high. The actions taken to respond to the dying and dead reveal ways in which individuals and groups understood their place in their transforming environment, and the thesis argues that, in this sense, there *was* a 'Southwark way of death.' Whilst extrapolating findings from a temporally and geographically defined analysis to make universal claims is clearly problematic, nonetheless, the thesis demonstrates that micro analyses can contribute in valuable

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<sup>5</sup> Micro history asks 'large questions in small places', according to historian Charles Joyner, *Shared traditions: Southern history and folk culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), p.1. In the detailed study of Southwark, this thesis is a contribution to the tradition of detailed, local study, as exemplified by, for example Seth Koven, *The matchgirl and the heiress* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), as well as the approach of the History Workshop Series. See, for example, Jerry White, *Rothschild Buildings: Life in an East End tenement block 1887-1920* (London: Routledge, 1980) and Raphael Samuel (ed.), *Miners, quarrymen and saltworkers* (London: Routledge, 1977).

ways to broader, macro historical assessments. Politically, socially and culturally, individuals, groups and communities do not necessarily conform to the grand narratives of history, and in-depth studies can reveal issues that can be defamiliarizing. Furthermore, as Martin Daunton has underlined, given that high mortality levels have over the course of centuries been central to important personal and collective decisions about how to *live*, there is still relatively little research about the specificities of dying and death during different periods and across diverse social groups.<sup>6</sup> Comparative experiences of dying and death in rural and urban contexts, the burial practices of different religious groups, the role of wakes and other rituals and how these have changed over time, the perception of when death ‘occurs’ and how this is culturally and socially located, and the responses of communities that, unlike Southwark, were focused on a single industry such as mining or textiles are all gaps in the current research landscape.

Furthermore, research into dying and death has a contemporary political relevance. As noted in the introduction to the thesis, interest in the histories of death have emerged at various points in recent decades, French historian Michel Vovelle observing that death was ‘rediscovered’ by academic research during the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> At a time when, at least in the US and Western Europe, people were living longer, post-war societies were adjusting to ‘new’ kinds of death that were for the first time most likely to occur in a hospital or institution. Causes of death were increasingly age and consumer-related: dementia, diet and lifestyle-related cancers, traffic accidents. Death could be re-evaluated in the context of shifts in economic, social and cultural structures, reinforced by data that explicitly linked class with life expectancy. In the European context it was anticipated that some of these differences might be at least ameliorated through welfare and other socialised support programmes.

British death historiography of the 1960s and 1970s tended to focus on the physical objects and geographical spaces of death, inspiring cemetery heritage groups, and the museum preservation of material objects of mourning.<sup>8</sup> This is perhaps not

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Daunton, *Progress and poverty: An Economic and social history of Britain 1700-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Michel Vovelle, ‘Rediscovery of death since 1960’, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 447 (1980), 89-99.

<sup>8</sup> British social historians of the 1960s and 1970s tended to focus on the physical objects and geographical spaces of death, through cemetery heritage groups and the preservation of Victorian

surprising in the context of sometimes fraught and contested post-war urban development. Since the 1980s, at least in the UK and US contexts, it is significant that interest in the *social* histories of death have been reinvigorated at an historical juncture whereby the principles and desirability of welfare systems have been increasingly under assault as part of a wider ideological re-framing about the relationship between the state and the individual.<sup>9</sup> As medical technologies for keeping people alive for longer has improved, so have the costs.<sup>10</sup> The issue of funeral poverty and inability of growing numbers of people to bear the costs of interment in the UK remains politically and socially charged.<sup>11</sup> It is unclear how these and other issues relating to the costs of dying and death will be resolved in the context of a broadly individualistic economic order that wants to socialise the cost of medical and social assistance whilst paying as little as possible into the collective pot. Thus, the contemporary resurgence in 'death history', of which this thesis is a contribution, is also an attempt to situate these questions of the politics of dying and death in the context of longer temporal trajectories. To this end, the study of the many and diverse histories of death can continue to support the development of meaningful personal and transpersonal representations of death's relationship to life from both historical and contemporary perspectives, to incorporate imagining how we might manage mortality in more politically and socially equitable ways. Or to paraphrase Virginia Woolf, perhaps, in the end, there really should be no ordinary deaths.

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material cultures of mourning. See for example, James Stevens Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1972).

<sup>9</sup> Chris Renwick, *Bread for all: The Origins of the Welfare State* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2018), p.267.

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Boseley, 'NHS faces staggering increase in cost of elderly care, academics warn', *Guardian*, 24 May 2017. The article suggests that 2.5 million people over 65 will require care after 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/may/24/nhs-faces-staggering-increase-in-cost-of-elderly-care-academics-warn-dementia> [accessed 19 January 2020].

<sup>11</sup> The Fair Funerals Campaign to end funeral poverty: [fairfuneralscampaign.org.uk/content/what-funeral-poverty](http://fairfuneralscampaign.org.uk/content/what-funeral-poverty) is one of several initiatives to raise awareness about this issue. Insurer SunLife produce an annual 'Cost of Dying' report, which noted the average interment in 2019 was £4,417. <https://www.sunlife.co.uk/how-much-does-a-funeral-cost-in-the-uk-today/> [accessed 19 January 2020].

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