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A bloody offal nuisance: the persistence of private slaughter-houses in nineteenth-century London

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ABSTRACT: British slaughter-house reformers campaigned to abolish private urban slaughter-houses and establish public abattoirs in the nineteenth century. Abolition of London's private slaughter-houses was motivated by the congestion created by livestock in city streets, the nuisance of slaughter-house refuse in residential neighbourhoods and public health concerns about diseased meat in the food supply. The butchers successfully defended their private slaughter-houses, illustrating the persistence of the craftsman's workshop and the importance of laissez-faire sentiments in opposition to municipalization in Victorian London.

From 1828 until 1899, the slaughter-house reform movement campaigned vigorously to abolish private slaughter-houses in London in favour of public abattoirs. Private slaughter-houses were typically small facilities that were owned and operated by independent butchers and located behind or beneath a retail meat shop.¹ Public abattoirs were large municipally owned facilities that included a slaughter hall, a lairage to house animals prior to slaughter, facilities for processing livestock by-products and, by the turn of the century, refrigerated storage for fresh meat.² The public abattoir was a standard feature in many Western

* This article was researched and written while I was on study leave granted by the University of Lethbridge and a visitor at the Centre of Canadian Studies, University of Edinburgh. Mr Frederick Mallion and The Worshipful Company of Butchers of the City of London kindly provided access to the Gunnar-Mallion Library at Butcher's Hall, London. Rachel Edwards and the many staff at the National Library of Scotland were unfailingly helpful, while Rosemary Howard and Maxine Tedesco of the University of Lethbridge Library assisted with UK sources. Diane Clark contributed helpful comments and two anonymous reviewers made a number of useful suggestions.

¹ F.J.T. Chater and H.F. Lester, *Public and Private Slaughterhouses*, report addressed to the Society for Providing Sanitary and Humane Methods of Killing Animals for Food (London, 1882); T. Orme Dudfield, 'Private slaughter-houses considered with reference to the report of the Parliamentary Select Committee, 1873 on "noxious businesses"', *Society of Medical Officers of Health* (London, 1874), 4–5.

² G.R. Leighton and L.M. Douglas, *The Meat Industry and Meat Inspection*, vol. II (London, 1910), ch. 3; G. Leighton, *Principles and Practice of Meat Inspection* (Edinburgh, 1927);

European cities and British slaughter-house reformers aspired to emulate the continental model.

The goal of this article is to understand the persistence of private slaughter-houses in nineteenth-century London, to assess the outcomes of the slaughter-house reform movement and to explain why its opponents were so successful. Two themes flow through the article: the tension between the laissez-faire economic values of the nineteenth century and public ownership of meat processing facilities and the challenge of regulating meat production in urban economies where inspection procedures could be easily avoided.

London is the focus of the article because in no other British city were public abattoirs advocated from such a diversity of sources and in no other city of any size were they so decisively defeated. As a sprawling metropolis and the world's largest urban area, metropolitan London grew rapidly in the nineteenth century, doubling in population between 1801 and 1841 to reach 2.3 million by 1850.³ Annual meat consumption in London increased from 70 pounds per capita in 1750 to 122–53 pounds per capita by 1850.⁴ In 1842, only three years after the arrival of the first railway, London's Smithfield Market had sales of 175,000 cattle and 1.4 million sheep, virtually all for slaughter and consumption in the metropolitan region. Considering that there was no direct rail service to the city's single central cattle market and that all livestock had to be driven through city streets, the animal congestion on market days defies the imagination. George Dodd described Smithfield as 'savagely picturesque' and as domestic animals encroached on pedestrian space, 'the caldron of steaming animalness overflowed from very fullness'.⁵ Cattle sales reached their peak at Smithfield in 1853 with 277,000 head of cattle sold while Chicago received only 177,000 head in 1861 after 13 railroad lines converged to make it the gateway to the American west.⁶ Writing in 1847, a liveryman butcher claimed that London's Smithfield was not only the largest cattle market in Great Britain or any other country⁷ but a public nuisance of such proportion that it was a sign of London's retrogression and underdevelopment compared with contemporary cities. 'Notwithstanding our national aptitude for improving upon the institutions of other

P.A. Koolmees, J.R. Fisher and R. Perren, 'The traditional responsibility of veterinarians in meat production and meat inspection', in F.J.M. Smulders (ed.), *Veterinary Aspects of Meat Production, Processing and Inspection* (European Consortium for Continuing Education in Advanced Meat Science and Technology, 1999), 18–19.

³ T. Chandler and G. Fox, *3000 Years of Urban Growth* (New York, 1974), 328.

⁴ G. Dodd, *The Food of London* (London, 1856), 249–50. According to a more recent estimate, British meat consumption per annum increased from an estimated 86.8 pounds per capita in 1831–40 to 126 pounds per capita between 1910 and 1914, R. Perren *The Meat Trade in Britain 1840–1914* (London, 1978), 3.

⁵ Dodd, *Food of London*, 233, 244.

⁶ H.C. Hill, 'The development of Chicago as a center of the meat packing industry', *Mississippi Historical Review*, 10 (1923), 261.

⁷ Liveryman of London, *A Letter to the Right Honorable Viscount Morpeth, M.P.* (London 1847), 5.

countries, London is now infinitely more behind the rest of the world in this particular than she is before it in any other.⁸ In the early years of the railway age and prior to the advent of mechanical refrigeration, London was coping with the greatest volume of food animals and carcase meat of any city in history. No other urban area had ever handled such large volumes of livestock in the heart of the city yet slaughtered them at such a broadly dispersed spatial scale.⁹

In addressing the urban focus to public health concerns, Anne Hardy points out that London had Britain's first extensive public health organization while the great provincial towns lagged behind in the appointment of medical officers and the creation of public health institutions.¹⁰ Yet in many of Britain's provincial cities and towns private sector slaughter had been banned in favour of public abattoirs owned and operated by local government: Edinburgh's municipal slaughter-house was built in 1852, Manchester opened its public abattoir in 1872, Birmingham's dated from 1895 while Leeds had a public abattoir by 1898.¹¹ In the case of London, livestock slaughter was identified as a nuisance in the mid-eighteenth century and a system of public abattoirs was advocated as early as 1828. Yet private slaughter persisted well into the twentieth century in London, dispersed through the metropolis in hundreds of small private establishments.

Calls for slaughter-house reform originated from humanitarians, public health advocates and residents suffering from the nuisance created by livestock and slaughter activities. Slaughter-house reformers excoriated butchers for cruelty to livestock and negligent refuse disposal which added to the teeming filth of the city.¹² They advocated a system of inspected

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹ The next five largest cities in the world in 1850 after London were Peking, Paris, Canton, Constantinople and Hangchow, see Chandler and Fox, *3000 Years*, 328. Of those five, only Paris had appreciable beef consumption and in that case markets were decentralized around the suburban margin. London's first ranked position as a cattle market would be short-lived as Chicago's cattle handling capacity increased substantially with the completion of the Union Stockyard in 1865 and the market for western cattle increased very rapidly during the Civil War years, see W. Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1991).

¹⁰ A. Hardy, 'Pioneers in the Victorian provinces: veterinarians, public health and the urban animal economy', *Urban History*, 29 (2002), 372–3.

¹¹ I. MacLachlan, 'The greatest and most offensive nuisance that ever disgraced the capital of a kingdom': the slaughterhouses and shambles of modern Edinburgh', *Review of Scottish Culture*, 17 (2004/05), 57–71; R. Scola, *Feeding the Victorian City: The Food Supply of Manchester, 1770–1870* (Manchester, 1992), 186–7; K. Grady, 'The cattle and meat trades in Leeds, 1780–1900', *Northern History*, 37 (2000), 155; R.S. Ayling, *Public Abattoirs: Their Planning, Design, and Equipment* (London, 1908), 58, 60.

¹² For a selection of the slaughter-house reform pamphleteers see John Bull, *An Enquiry into the Present State of Smithfield Cattle Market and the Dead Meat Markets of the Metropolis*, 2nd edn (London, 1848); T. Dunhill, 'Sanitary evils from slaughter-houses in towns', in *Health of Towns: A Selection from Papers on Sanitary Reform Published in the Journal of Public Health and Other Periodicals* (London, 1848); R.B. Grantham, *A Treatise on Public Slaughter-Houses Considered in Connection with the Sanitary Question* (London, 1848); H.F. Lester, *Behind the Scenes in Slaughter-Houses*, Humanitarian League's Publications No. 5 (London, 1892);

public abattoirs to meliorate and regulate a noxious urban land use and prevent the spread of disease. Five separate reform initiatives can be identified in nineteenth-century London: relocation of the Smithfield cattle market (1828–55), public health and urban sanitation (1834–55), exclusion of noxious land uses from metropolitan London (1844–74) and compulsory meat inspection in the London County Council (LCC) region (1895–99).

Private slaughter-houses persisted in London because the butchers of the metropolis were able to mobilize an alliance of urban meat and cattle traders and rural agricultural interests in support of small-scale independent meat shops. They staunchly defended the butcher's private property interests and his 'right to slaughter his cattle upon his own premises'.¹³ Butchers abhorred interference from humanitarian dilettantes who besmirched the integrity of their craft. They saw themselves as honest victims of a reform fad, heroic small traders whose dogged determination and craft organization would prevail over a growing agro-industrial monopoly and officious interference from municipal bureaucrats and public health authorities.¹⁴

It seems paradoxical that butchers, emblematic of Victorian London's growing middle class of shopkeepers and petty capitalists, were embracing liberalism's commitment to property rights and laissez-faire economic policy at the very same time that the need for urban reform and government regulation was becoming increasingly apparent in the nineteenth-century city. Yet public health legislation to deal with sanitary problems such as livestock slaughter was generally permissive, reflecting Victorian laissez-faire values about the role of local government vis-à-vis private property.¹⁵ Such a sceptical view of intervention by the state was the prevailing sentiment of most members of the Poor Law Commission of 1832.¹⁶ But as the century advanced and public health reformers observed and measured the sanitary conditions of British cities, a justification for the welfare state began to emerge in the context of local government.

Without sanitary legislation and local nuisance inspectors to enforce it, butchers and the other offensive trades¹⁷ had no incentive to pursue anything other than self-interest. 'It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from

J. Oldfield, *The Evils of Butchery*, Humanitarian League's Publications No. 17 (London, 1895).

¹³ Parliamentary Papers (PP) 1847 VIII Select Committee on Smithfield Market, Appendix 19, 398.

¹⁴ Perren, *Meat Trade in Britain*, 155.

¹⁵ P. Lawless and F. Brown, *Urban Growth and Change in Britain* (London, 1986), 30.

¹⁶ J. Moore and R. Rodger, 'Municipal knowledge and policy networks in British local government, 1832–1914', *Yearbook of European Administrative Theory* (2003), 33.

¹⁷ Offensive trades included occupations such as blood boiler, bone boiler, fellmonger, slaughterer of livestock, soap boiler, tallow melter and tripe boiler, Statutes of the United Kingdom, An Act for Promoting the Public Health, vol. 40, ch. 63 (London, 1849), section 64.

their regard to their own interest.¹⁸ It was urban society that paid the butcher's bill through the negative externalities of private enterprises such as the slaughter-house; the offensive nuisance and illness caused by contaminated meat were the extra-market costs of operating a slaughter-house which were paid by society as whole. Preventing these public nuisances and health risks would be a 'great good', conforming to John Stuart Mill's dictum that 'every departure from laissez-faire, unless required by some great good, is a certain evil'.¹⁹ The tension between the public abattoir question and the persistence of private slaughter-houses spans the whole period in which Victorian cities were addressing the question of government regulation by the local state and reflects its gradual acceptance over the strident objections of the butcher trades.

Removal of Smithfield Market

London's Smithfield cattle market was established c. 950 outside the square mile City of London. It was granted to the City by Charles I as a suburban market site in 1638. By the mid-eighteenth century, Smithfield Market was no longer suburban as it had been enveloped by built-up urban land uses as the city expanded.²⁰ In 1766, John Gwynn complained that the sale of live cattle at the centre of the metropolis was intolerable; Smithfield had become 'a nuisance at once extremely dangerous as well as inelegant and inconvenient'. With remarkable prescience, Gwynn went on to propose the relocation of the cattle market to Islington, some two miles to the north.²¹ Between 1800 and 1810, the City of London attempted to enlarge Smithfield Market to make it more functional and later to relocate the facility to a more suitable site but the market's opponents and supporters stymied all efforts to resolve the problem.²²

Britain's inner city cattle markets and their closely associated slaughter-house districts (or shambles) were widely deplored in the nineteenth century²³ but none was as large as Smithfield, none attained Smithfield's level of notoriety and none was the subject of so many inquiries on its continued existence. Four separate parliamentary committees in 1828, 1847, 1849 and 1851 demonstrated a political division that would persist to the twentieth century and prevent a definitive decision for many years. Smithfield and London's slaughter-house districts became contested

¹⁸ A. Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R.H. Campbell and W.B. Todd (Oxford, 1976), 26–7.

¹⁹ J.S. Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, ed. W.J. Ashley (London, 1921), 950.

²⁰ PP 1851 X Report from the Select Committee on Smithfield Market Removal Bill, vi; Liveryman of London, *A Letter*, 5; Grantham *A Treatise*, 70–1; Perren, *Meat Trade in Britain*, 32.

²¹ J. Gwynn, *London and Westminster Improved, Illustrated by Plans* (London, 1766), 18.

²² PP 1851 X Report from the Select Committee on Smithfield Market Removal Bill, evidence of E. Cardwell, 4; Dodd, *Food of London*, 250–1.

²³ See for example, Scola, *Feeding the Victorian City*, 185; Grady, 'Cattle and meat trades', 146; J.M. Eyler, *Sir Arthur Newsholme and State Medicine, 1885–1935* (Cambridge, 1997), 64.



III. 1: A mature cow, likely from one of London's many dairies, sniffs at a dead calf in Smithfield Market, appealing to the sentimentality of the Victorian age and causing us to wonder if it is hers. The butcher in his two wheeled cart appears to be negotiating with a drover for two older bull calves. The sewer grate is evidence of improved sanitation in the market by mid-century.

Source: Illustrated London News, 15 (381), 21 Jul. 1849, 46. Reproduced by kind permission of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland.

terrain. The commercial interests in favour of retaining the market in place included the butchers, cattle dealers, meat traders and large-scale cattle graziers as well as the 'money-takers', as Smithfield's commercial bankers were known.²⁴

In opposition to Smithfield and private slaughter-houses was a diverse group of professionals such as engineers and physicians with public health interests, local residents and reformers who wanted to see the market removed for humanitarian or sanitary reasons.²⁵ Market opponents complained of the market's filth, congestion and the hazard posed to pedestrians by driving cattle through the streets, cruelty in the driving and handling of livestock and the sale of spoiled and diseased meat. Supported by lurid articles such as 'The Smithfield nuisance', which described how people were trampled to death and gored by cattle herded through city streets,²⁶ the market's opponents argued that a market for live cattle in

²⁴ Liveryman of London, *A Letter*, 4; Perren, *Meat Trade in Britain*, 36.

²⁵ Hon. F. Byng, *Smithfield and Newgate Markets* (London, 1851).

²⁶ 'The Smithfield nuisance', *Illustrated London News*, 10 (245) (1847), 23.

the heart of a populous city was a dangerous nuisance and demanded its abolition.²⁷

Butchers and traders acknowledged that the market was congested and conceded that this led to some cruelty.²⁸ But in their view, the best solution was to enlarge the market *in situ* and reorient traffic arteries, maintaining the essential market function in its established location. In 1828, a petition from the Committee of Butchers of the Cities of London and Westminster requesting market expansion was signed by 1,527 master butchers.²⁹ As an indication of their influence, Smithfield was enlarged and improved between 1835 and 1838 and again in 1846.

In 1828, two innovative proposals were made for the replacement of Smithfield Market by a suburban belt of cattle markets reminiscent of the suburban abattoir plan developed on the periphery of Paris between 1810 and 1816.³⁰ Providing evidence to the first House of Commons Committee struck to look into the Smithfield Market problem, James Mills, an engineer, advocated a system of four suburban public abattoirs arranged in an oval six miles by four miles in extent. In the same year an architect, James Hakewell, proposed to replace the one large market at Smithfield with four smaller ones located in Kilburn, Hackney, Wimbledon and Blackheath, all with road access to the north and south. And imitating the spatial division of the marketing function from the slaughter and processing functions found in Paris, he proposed ten separate abattoirs on metropolitan London's periphery to avoid driving livestock through city streets.³¹ These plans anticipated Dr Shirley Murphy's 1898 plan for a suburban ring of public slaughter facilities but found little support.

In an age before refrigeration, London relied on local butchers to store meat on the hoof at their private slaughter-houses. This was especially important in summer months when fresh meat would spoil quickly if had to be transported over any distance. In June, fresh beef or mutton could not

²⁷ A.B. Robertson, 'The Smithfield cattle market', *East London Papers*, 4 (2) (1961), 81–2; J. Lawrence, *A Philosophical and Practical Treatise on Horses and the Moral Duties of Man towards the Brute Creation* (London, 1796), 155.

²⁸ C.F. Green, *A Few Plain Words on the Relative Merits of Smithfield and Islington Markets* (London, 1897), 8.

²⁹ Though dated 1828, the petition was not reported until 1847, PP 1847 VIII Select Committee on Smithfield Market, Appendix 17, 396–7.

³⁰ PP 1828 VIII Select Committee on the State of Smithfield Market, evidence of J. Mills, 134–8; further evidence on the abattoirs of Paris, 186, 252. For details of the Napoleonic abattoir system of Paris see Ayling, *Public Abattoirs*, 69; J. Hakewell, *Plan Sections, and Elevations of the Abattoirs of Paris, with Considerations for their Adoption in London* (London, 1828), 6–11.

³¹ Ten public slaughter-houses were proposed: four on the north side of London: Edgeware Road, Tavistock Square on the edge of the New Road, Haberdasher's Alms Houses near the Great North Road and Bethnal Green; two in the north-east at Stepney between the Mile End and Commercial Road and at Chelsea between the King's and Putney Roads; and four on the south side of London, between Westminster and Waterloo Bridges, in the open square near the Obelisk, Bermondsey near the Kent Road, and between Rotherhithe and Deptford, Hakewell, *Plan Sections*, 6.



III. 2: While it could be typical of any market morning in the first half of the nineteenth century, this scene actually represents Smithfield Market's last day of operation before it was relocated to Islington in June 1855.

Source: *Illustrated London News*, 26 (748), 16 Jun. 1855, 600. Reproduced by kind permission of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland.

be transported more than 25 miles by road before spoilage set in.³² Thus most meat entered London on the hoof. In 1828, the supply of livestock at Smithfield Market was estimated at ten times the equivalent volume of meat that came in dead. Cattle throughput at Smithfield increased by 34 per cent between 1828 and 1844 and congestion became especially problematic in the autumn and early winter when livestock sales reached their annual peak.³³ Much of the growth in livestock throughput was accommodated by the railways that began to penetrate the metropolis in the late 1830s. Euston station became one of the largest cattle handling terminals yet was some two miles from Smithfield by road. By 1849, 56 per cent of the 223,000 cattle arriving at Smithfield were shipped by rail and herded through busy streets.³⁴

In finally opting for removal in 1855, London's continuing rapid growth and the growing role played by railway transportation technology were critical factors in the selection of a new central cattle market to replace Smithfield. The solution to the Smithfield Market problem was a

³² PP 1828 VIII Select Committee on the State of Smithfield Market, evidence of B. Stubbing, 112.

³³ PP 1849 XIX Select Committee on Smithfield Market, 51, evidence of T. Evans, q. 2326.

³⁴ Dodd, *Food of London*, 242; F. Sheppard *London: A History* (Oxford, 1998), 265–7.



III. 3: The Metropolitan Cattle Market, Islington, was opened in 1855 by the Prince Consort to replace Smithfield. Despite a location adjacent to the Great Northern Railway, drovers were still driving flocks and herds through city streets.

Source: *Illustrated London News*, 26 (748), 16 Jun. 1855, 601. Reproduced by kind permission of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland.

transport-oriented suburban location to minimize the distance that cattle had to be driven through city streets to reach the market that kept large concentrations of livestock well away from congested inner city residential areas. Over two miles north of Smithfield, the Metropolitan Cattle Market, Islington, was immediately adjacent to both the North London Railway cattle station and Great Northern Railway depot.³⁵ Thus the removal and relocation of the Smithfield cattle market in 1855 was consistent with the new model of urban livestock marketing that would be followed in Chicago's Union Stock Yards just ten years later on the 'open prairie' of the town of Lake, south of Chicago's city limits.³⁶

The removal of Smithfield Market was a reflection of the changing structure of London's meat supply.³⁷ First, the proportion of meat supplied on the hoof compared with the amount of meat from livestock that had been killed elsewhere (country-killed) declined precipitously through the century as retail butchers gradually came to depend on dead meat and

³⁵ Dodd, *Food of London*, 261.

³⁶ Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, 69.

³⁷ The site of Smithfield Market lay vacant for 13 years after its closure in 1855. In 1868, the London Central Markets facilities were built in its place and began to function as a dead meat market, replacing the old Newgate Shambles. London Central Markets are still in operation and referred to colloquially as Smithfield; Robertson, 'Smithfield', 87.

slaughtered less livestock in their own slaughter-houses.³⁸ By 1849, 75 per cent of the meat sold at Newgate Market (the largest dead meat market in the United Kingdom) was country-killed and only a quarter was derived from livestock slaughtered in London and processed through Smithfield.³⁹ This shift reflected the advent of the railway; by 1855, sides and quarters of beef were being shipped from as far away as Aberdeen.⁴⁰ However, the eighty-year delay in the relocation of Smithfield after John Gwynn had first elucidated its shortcomings was at least in part a measure of the political influence and foot-dragging by the butchers.

Smithfield and the butchers

London's Worshipful Company of Butchers is among London's oldest livery companies with origins in the tenth century. As a guild, the Butchers' Company was the traditional representative and defender of meat processing crafts in the City. But by the sixteenth century, the City's cattle and meat markets were being infiltrated by non-freemen (butchers who had not formally apprenticed and had not been admitted as members of the Company).⁴¹ Suburban butchers more than one mile from the City were outside the guild's jurisdiction and could safely ignore the Company.⁴² By 1674, butchers were opening shops all over the City and it was becoming more difficult to maintain recognized markets and shambles as exclusive localities under the guild's jurisdiction.⁴³ In 1726 and again in 1758, the Butchers' Company petitioned unsuccessfully for its freemen to have exclusive access to the market at certain times of the week.⁴⁴

By the late eighteenth century, the traditional division of London's butchers into freemen of the Company and non-freemen was restructured along functional lines into carcase butchers (slaughterers and wholesalers) and cutting butchers (cutters and retailers).⁴⁵ Carcase butchers were typically freemen of the Company and viewed as a powerful force in the Smithfield cattle market. They bought large quantities of livestock on the hoof, slaughtered cattle and sold carcasses by the quarter or side to

³⁸ PP 1828 VIII Select Committee on the State of Smithfield Market, 112; evidence of B. Stubbing, 113; Dodd, *Food of London*, 242, 265; Perren, *Meat Trade in Britain*, 105.

³⁹ Dodd, *Food of London*, 268, 275.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 271; Robert Herbert 'Arrangements for the supply of meat for the metropolis', *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society*, 2nd ser. 2 (1866), 200–1; D. Rixson, *The History of Meat Trading* (Nottingham, 2000), 314.

⁴¹ P.E. Jones, *The Butchers of London* (London, 1976), 89–90.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 95, 97.

⁴⁴ Robertson, 'Smithfield', 82; Jones, *Butchers of London*, 96–7.

⁴⁵ The wholesale–retail segmentation of London's nineteenth-century meat markets was unique in Britain. In the provincial cities, the 'do-all', retail butcher appears to have been dominant in all aspects of the trade from occasional cattle fattening, slaughter, carcase-breaking and retailing to consumers. See J.B. Jefferys, *Retail Trading in Britain, 1850–1950* (Cambridge, 1954), 181; Scola, *Feeding the Victorian City*, 183–4.

the cutting butchers. In some cases the carcase butchers had land of their own thus they could purchase cattle direct from graziers and depending on market conditions, could add value and fatten the beasts or slaughter them for sale immediately. In 1680 for instance, Richard Hodgins, a former Master of the Butchers' Company, owned 77 cattle and 575 sheep, rented a considerable area of marshland as pasture, sold livestock on commission and employed agricultural labourers, drovers and domestic staff. Thus had a butcher become a fat stock merchant of considerable means and influence over meat prices.⁴⁶ Indeed, the carcase butchers were widely accused of forestalling and regrating: buying up cattle en route to the market and, in league with large-scale graziers and salesmen, using their market position to inflate meat prices.⁴⁷

However, the power of the Butchers' Company ebbed away during the 1840s and 1850s. Trade liberalization admitted large volumes of foreign cattle over which the Company had little control, the metropolis was expanding and its trade area for fresh meat extended far beyond the City-based Butchers' Company. The cutting or retail butchers operated shops dispersed throughout the city and beyond and few were freemen of the Company. While the cutting butchers bought most of their meat at wholesale from carcase butchers, they did purchase some livestock through livestock dealers for slaughter on their own account. The cutting butchers were alleged to cause the greatest nuisance as they had to drive their livestock through city streets to reach shops which were dispersed all over the metropolis, their slaughter-house activities interfered with the flow of traffic and they were known for dumping the 'pudding' or entrails of slaughtered livestock in the streets and drainage channels.⁴⁸

Just one year after the relocation of Smithfield Market the City's common council passed an act removing the obligation to be 'free' in order to trade meat in London in 1856.⁴⁹ Shorn of its formal authority even in the City, the Butchers' Company exercised little influence over the public health and sanitation issues that were to affect London's meat industry in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The relocation of Smithfield Market resolved the congestion problem and shifted much of the public nuisance created by the cattle market to a decentralized and less frequented venue; the cutting butchers were spreading further afield, guarding their flexibility to slaughter animals in their own private slaughter-houses and exposing larger numbers to slaughter-house wastes in the growing metropolis.

⁴⁶ Jones, *Butchers of London*, 101.

⁴⁷ Philanthropic Butcher, *Monopoly. The Cutting Butchers Appeal to the Legislature, upon the High Price of Meat* (London, 1795), 10–12; Jones, *Butchers of London*, 103.

⁴⁸ Dodd, *Food of London*, 229–31; Robertson, 'Smithfield', 81–2; Gentleman of the Temple *Public Nuisance [sic] Considered: Under the Several Heads of Bad Pavements, Butchers Infesting the Streets, . . .* (London, 1754), 13, 14, 22, 25.

⁴⁹ Jones, *Butchers of London*, 105.

Public health reform and the nuisance question

Just as the Smithfield Market question was coming to a resolution, the public health movement posed a new challenge to the private slaughter-house. In 1840, the Select Committee on the Health of Towns advocated the relocation of animal slaughter to outlying suburban areas. Physicians such as George S. Jenks recommended the construction of large-scale abattoirs outside the urban area to promote good health and remove the slaughter-houses with their 'putrefying exhalations' from densely built-up areas.⁵⁰ According to a butcher liveryman:

The filth, garbage, and impurities of every description generally to be found in slaughter-houses, in almost every stage of decomposition, contribute their *quantum* of deadly exhalations to the atmosphere of the slaughter-house, and then, after having impregnated the neighbourhood with offensive and unwholesome effluvia, are consigned to the sewers, by which they are ultimately conveyed to the Thames, to increase the noxious exhalations from its banks, or, detained in their progress through those notoriously defective channels, to breathe forth at every loophole putrescence and disease!⁵¹

In the view of adherents of the miasma theory of disease, the decomposition of slaughter-house waste posed a public health hazard. Abolition of private slaughter in urban areas and the establishment of suburban public abattoirs was justified to reduce exposure to the miasma.

Yet epidemiological observations did not always provide the support required to justify abolition. In reporting on the causes of sickness and mortality affecting the poor of London's east end in 1838, Dr Southwood Smith noted that the south side of Whitechapel High Street in the City was occupied by butcher shops with slaughter-houses behind the street. Typhoid fever had been mitigated when the Corporation provided a common sewer to drain the slaughter-houses and surrounding dwellings. Blood and effluvium from the slaughter-houses were still 'odoriferous' but fever was 'comparatively absent' after the opening of the drains.

Dwellings thickly crowded with inhabitants stand all around the slaughter-houses, yet here, where the materials for the production of the worst forms of fever are most abundant, scarcely a case has occurred, even during the present epidemic. On the other hand, in the passages, courts, and alleys, on the very opposite side of the street from the houses of which there are no drains into the common sewer, fever of a fatal character has been exceedingly prevalent.⁵²

While accumulations of animal waste in poorly drained areas were 'odoriferous', and according to the prevailing miasmatic theory of pathogenesis embraced by Smith should have been sufficient cause for

⁵⁰ PP 1840 XI Select Committee on The Health of Towns, 165; evidence of George S. Jenks, qq. 2792-3.

⁵¹ Liveryman of London, *A Letter*, 13.

⁵² PP 1838 XXVIII Fourth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales Supplement No. 2, Appendix A, 85-6.

heightened morbidity,⁵³ his own observations suggested that miasma arising from animal slaughter was not an intrinsic health hazard.

Seventeen years later, John Snow, testifying as an opponent of the miasmatic theory, would be at pains to argue that the foul odours emanating from London's offensive trades were not responsible for the spread of epidemic diseases such as cholera. Snow argued: 'a bad smell cannot, simply because it is a bad smell, give rise to a specific disease, so an offensive business conducted in a place where it ought not to be, should be proceeded against by ordinary law as a nuisance, without applying to it the word pestiferous, or otherwise dragging in and distorting the science of medicine'.⁵⁴ Some of the most influential physicians of the day, including both proponents and opponents of the miasmatic paradigm, were unable to present any evidence that slaughter-houses posed a hazard to human health. The unseemly sights, sounds and smells of slaughter may well have been obnoxious but they were neither noxious nor implicit health hazards.

Chadwick's 1842 *Sanitary Report* focused mainly on insanitary drainage, water supply and over-crowded housing, but it also observed that slaughter-houses were found in the most populous areas and that they constituted a 'decided nuisance' when they contributed offal and manure to adjacent 'dunghills' which also included street sweepings and privy excrement.⁵⁵ Chadwick applied the nuisance concept at three different conceptual scales: public, common and private nuisances.⁵⁶ A public nuisance affected the whole realm, a common nuisance affected all those passing by while a private nuisance affected particular individuals. A nuisance was an offence caused by an act, or a neglect to act, which the common good requires. A private nuisance, unlike a public nuisance, was not an innately illegal act or condition but acquired its obnoxious character by virtue of its location relative to a dwelling or place of business. The remedy to a private nuisance was civil action under common law while a common or public nuisance was an indictable offence.⁵⁷

The intentment of the nuisance concept was something harmful, annoying or offensive for which there was a legal remedy. In the eighteenth century the 'punishment and removal of nuisance' was viewed as 'one of the greatest marks of liberty... and is so guarded by laws, that all

⁵³ Southwood Smith along with Edwin Chadwick and all the other mid-nineteenth-century sanitarians were committed to the miasmatic theory of pathogenesis, S. Snow, 'Sutherland, Snow and water: the transmission of cholera in the nineteenth century', *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 31 (2002), 909; A.S. Wohl, *Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain* (London, 1983), 87.

⁵⁴ J. Snow quoted in D.E. Lillienfeld, 'John Snow: the first hired gun?', *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 152 (1) (2000), 8.

⁵⁵ E. Chadwick, *The Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population*, ed. M.W. Flinn (Edinburgh, 1965), 82.

⁵⁶ M.W. Flinn, 'Introduction', in A.P. Stewart and E. Jenkins, *The Medical and Legal Aspects of Sanitary Reform*, 2nd edn (1867; New York, 1969), 14; Chadwick, *Sanitary Condition*, 349.

⁵⁷ Chadwick, *Sanitary Condition*, 349.

the King's authority cannot pardon a nuisance; it must be removed'.⁵⁸ The nuisance posed by butchery was associated with offensive smells, disagreeable carcase by-products in the streets, obstruction of the public way by meat displayed for sale and the pedestrian hazard created by driving cattle through the streets.⁵⁹ But it was not until sanitarians such as Edwin Chadwick became influential in the mid-nineteenth century that a nuisance came to be viewed as a hazard to health. When Chadwick used the term 'nuisance', he was typically referring to an accumulation of decomposing refuse which was believed to be the 'direct cause of disease'⁶⁰ due to the miasma it created. In Chadwick's words: 'all smell is disease'.⁶¹

Chadwick's *Sanitary Report* led to the State of Large Towns Commission which found that common law was not very effective in dealing with nuisances, providing the justification for public health legislation. Under common law, it was difficult to establish the cause and effect relationship required to show that a slaughter-house was a common nuisance. For example, Dr Lyon Playfair's report on the sanitary conditions in towns of Lancashire observed large accumulations of animal waste that constituted a nuisance yet there were no powers in the Police Acts for their removal. To support an indictment as a public nuisance, members of the public had to testify that the stench of rotting offal and manure was a public annoyance. Since the court leet⁶² met only twice a year, it was difficult to arrange for those who complained of the nuisance to attend court and cases were often dismissed for lack of evidence.

Hence if these slaughter-houses be in private courts, they are permitted to remain, however injurious to the inhabitants, and in whatever state of filth they may be kept . . . [T]he state of the law prevents any interference with the manner in which slaughter-houses are conducted. True it is, that aggrieved parties may indict the occupiers of the premises, but, being of the poorer class, they can neither afford the time nor the money to pursue such indictment; nor indeed are they aware of the pernicious effects arising from the presence of decomposing refuse.⁶³

The State of Large Towns Commission recommended that many of the strictly private nuisances which had prevailed in towns be declared as public nuisances and subject to summary abatement. This would also empower local administrative bodies to direct that legal proceedings be taken for their suppression.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Gentleman of the Temple, *Public Nuisance*, 19–20.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 21–3.

⁶⁰ Chadwick, *Sanitary Condition*, 43.

⁶¹ PP 1846 X Metropolitan Sewage Committee Report, 651.

⁶² The court leet was an ancient institution that tried minor offences such as public nuisances and was lowest in the hierarchy of English courts. Courts leet were abolished by the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835; however London was exempted from the legislation. R. Porter, *London: A Social History* (Cambridge, MA, 1994), 246.

⁶³ PP 1845 XVII Second Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Large Towns and Populous Districts, Appendix Part II, 17, s. 43.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

Accordingly, John Simon, medical officer of health for the City of London, argued that state action which interfered with private liberty could be justified when a nuisance had a public impact. 'The factory chimney that eclipses the light of Heaven with unbroken clouds of smoke, the melting house that nauseates an entire parish and the slaughter-house that forms round itself a circle of dangerous disease – these surely are not private, but public affairs.'⁶⁵ Recognition of public nuisances and proposals for statutory redress mark the beginning of a new role for the state in civil society, acknowledging that government regulation of urban nuisances was warranted, and endorsing restrictions on the offensive trades in London.

Restricting noxious businesses in the metropolis

The Towns Improvement Clauses Act of 1847 gave Britain's local authorities the power to make sanitary improvements and authorized by-laws for licensing, registration and inspection of slaughter-houses. However, the act did not apply inside the London metropolis.⁶⁶ It was not until 1855 that the Nuisances Removal Act gave local authorities the power to order the removal of unhealthy or unsafe accumulations of excrement, refuse and waste from slaughter-houses among other business premises and dwellings.⁶⁷ Both of these acts were legislated policy responses to the public health movement and the miasmatic conviction that slaughter-houses were not merely an offensive nuisance, their exhalations constituted a health hazard.

But the most powerful legislative strike against London's slaughter-house nuisance came from another quarter. Slaughter-houses, and all the other offensive trades, had been effectively banished from the London metropolis four years previously.⁶⁸ The Buildings Act of 1844 banned slaughter-houses and many other noxious businesses within 50 feet of any dwelling house and 40 feet of a public way. The effect of this legislation would have been to eliminate virtually all private slaughter-houses from the London metropolis,⁶⁹ a more draconian measure than

⁶⁵ J. Simon, 'Report of the medical officer of health', *Times* (London), 10 Dec. 1851, 3.

⁶⁶ PP 1904 XXIV Report of the Committee Appointed by the Admiralty to Consider the Humane Slaughtering of Animals, 21; Porter, *London*, 246.

⁶⁷ Wohl, *Endangered Lives*, 153; B. Watkin *Documents on Health and Social Services, 1834 to the Present Day* (London, 1975), 45.

⁶⁸ The London metropolis was defined broadly to include all places within the exterior boundaries of the parishes of Fulham, Hammersmith, Kensington, Paddington, Hampstead, Hornsey, Tottenham, St Pancras, Islington, Stoke Newington, Hackney, Stratford-le-Bow, Bromley, Poplar, Shadwell and the north part of Chelsea on the north side of the Thames and Woolwich, Charlton, Greenwich, Deptford, Lee, Lewisham, Camberwell, Lambeth, Streatham, Toting and Wandsworth on the south bank. United Kingdom, 'An act for regulating the construction and the use of buildings in the metropolis and its neighbourhood', *Statutes at Large*, 7th and 8th Victoria, vol. 17 (1844), c. 84, s. 3.

⁶⁹ PP 1873 X House of Commons Select Committee on Noxious Businesses, evidence of J.W. Crouch, solicitor, 14. In 1902, it was determined that only 19 of the 381 slaughter-houses

was possible under any previous public health legislation. By effectively banning livestock slaughter within the metropolis, the act would have enforced the suburbanization of a significant food processing industry. The butchers argued that this measure would destroy their businesses and they received a 30 year grace period; the slaughter-house ban was not to take effect until 1874.⁷⁰ 30 years' notice provided ample opportunity for cutting butchers to plan a gradual phase-out of their intra-urban slaughter facilities.

However, the law was ostensibly forgotten for the next 29 years until, in May 1873, less than a year before it was due to take effect, the law was rediscovered to the apparent consternation of the butchers. A House of Commons Select Committee on Noxious Businesses was struck as a matter of some urgency to consider the clauses of the Buildings Act which would have effectively banned all of the offensive trades from the metropolis, most notably, slaughter-houses.⁷¹ Had the committee supported the original legislation, the only alternative for London would have been to build one or more public abattoirs in suburban locales. La Villette, the grand new central abattoir in Paris, had been completed in 1867, only seven years previously, and was the European paradigm for the sale and slaughter of livestock. 'It became *the* abattoir, a prototype for the rest of the century, just as the boulevards and public parks of Haussman's Paris became models from which every growing metropolis of the continent took pattern.'⁷² If the Buildings Act were not repealed, London's private slaughter-houses would be closed and a large suburban abattoir (or abattoirs) would be urgently required.⁷³

The butchers had lost their struggle to maintain Smithfield as a live cattle market when it was closed in 1855. The City had required that its slaughter-houses be registered and subject to inspection by city commissioners of sewers in 1848,⁷⁴ while the Smithfield Market Removal Act of 1851

in the metropolis (5.0%) were situated further than 50 feet from a dwelling house. LCC Public Health Committee', report, *London County Council Minutes of Proceedings* (Jan.-Apr.), 18 Mar. 1902, 454.

⁷⁰ PP 1873 X House of Commons Select Committee on Noxious Businesses, iii; C. Otter, 'Cleansing and clarifying: technology and perception in nineteenth-century London', *Journal of British Studies*, 43 (2004), 51.

⁷¹ The term 'noxious business' included slaughter-houses among all the other offensive trades specified as blood-boilers, bone-boilers, fellmongers, soap-boilers, tallow-melters and tripe-boilers. However, slaughter-houses were the noxious business commonly found in London. See PP 1873 X House of Commons Select Committee on Noxious Businesses, evidence of James W. Crouch, q. 82.

⁷² S. Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History* (Oxford, 1948), 210.

⁷³ Large integrated Chicago-style meat-packing plants, owned and operated by limited liability corporations, was an alternative model but this was scarcely considered in nineteenth-century London.

⁷⁴ City of London, *Rules and Regulations for Slaughterhouses*, Commissioners of Sewers (London, 1852).

required the licensing of slaughter-houses within the metropolis,⁷⁵ thus the momentum seemed to lie with the slaughter-house reformers.⁷⁶ However, the retail butchers rallied to their cause and argued persuasively for private slaughter-houses on technical, economic and sanitary grounds. Chilled storage and transportation facilities were not yet technically feasible so supplying meat from peripheral localities was risky. According to the London Butchers' Trade Society, 'there would be in London, many days in the hot weather when, if a butcher had not got his live animals, and his private slaughter-house, there would be practically no meat in London'.⁷⁷ The slaughter-house functioned as both the butcher craftsman's workshop and as a live meat warehouse. Cattle could be held in a slaughter-house stable for up to five days, to be killed and cut up as required by consumers, protected from spoilage by their vitality. According to one butcher, 'if I buy live meat I can manage it just as I like, and introduce it to my shops just as the trade requires'.⁷⁸

Small private slaughter-houses were therefore a prerequisite to maintain competition and keep the large-scale meat-packing monopolists at bay. Large public abattoirs would drive private butchers out of the market, permitting wholesalers and dealers to increase their share of meat sales and creating the risk of an oligopoly in London's meat market. The malnourished working classes tended to purchase their offal and organ meats from nearby butcher shops. Indeed customers actually waited for fresh warm offal while slaughter was in progress in local neighbourhood slaughter-houses.⁷⁹

A central public abattoir would concentrate the 'evils of slaughter' and animal cruelty in one dense area, posing a monolithic health and sanitation hazard instead of small-scale livestock slaughter dispersed throughout the metropolitan area.⁸⁰ In any case, the butchers argued that 'the improvements effected under the licensing system had rendered slaughter-houses innocuous', evincing some pride in maintaining their shops in a clean and sanitary condition and denying claims that their slaughter-houses were unsanitary nuisances.⁸¹ Thus the Committee on Noxious Businesses recommended repeal of the offending clauses in the Buildings Act, giving London's private slaughter-houses a reprieve and eliminating any pressing reason for London to build public abattoirs following the Parisian model.

⁷⁵ J.B. Sanderson, *Report of Metropolitan Association London Society of Medical Officers of Health* (London, 1856).

⁷⁶ Dodd, *Food of London*, 257, 259.

⁷⁷ PP 1873 X House of Commons Select Committee on Noxious Businesses, evidence of James W. Crouch, q. 108.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, evidence of Mr Short, q. 339; similarly the butchers of Leeds kept a few cattle on hand to be killed when the meat supply in their shops ran low, see Grady, 'Cattle and meat trades', 148.

⁷⁹ PP 1873 X House of Commons Select Committee on Noxious Businesses, 25.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 41; evidence of T.W. Keates, q. 639.

⁸¹ Dudfield, 'Private slaughter-houses', 3.



III. 4: A butcher and his three assistants surround a poleaxed steer just before making the first cut to bleed the animal. London's private slaughter-houses were typically small, dark and had limited carcase-handling equipment, in contrast to La Villette. The heads of two small boys are just visible peeking in the doorway, a practice abhorred by British humanitarians who believed that slaughter had a brutalizing influence on women and children.

Source: C. Cash, *Our Slaughter-House System: A Plea for Reform* (London, 1907), 19. Reproduced by kind permission of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland.

While the butchers were given a reprieve, it came at a price. The Slaughterhouses &c. (Metropolis) Act, 1874, gave the LCC power to make by-laws regulating the slaughter process, the structure of slaughter-houses and the procedures to be followed for the approval of new slaughter-houses. This enforced the improvement of the most poorly equipped slaughter-houses, specified procedures to contain slaughter-house waste, and required it to be removed within 24 hours of slaughter.⁸²

Tuberculosis, meat inspection and the public abattoir movement in the LCC

Unlike many other contagious animal diseases which posed a threat to British livestock producers, TB was a zoonosis that could spread from

⁸² LCC, 'Bye-laws for slaughterhouses in the County of London' (1874), excerpted in A.W. Blyth, *A Manual of Public Health* (London, 1890), 265–8.

animals to humans by several different paths of infection.⁸³ Preventing the transmission of TB by meat became the principal justification for meat inspection. By the time of the first royal commission on TB in 1895, it was believed that bovine TB posed a threat to humans. But the level of risk and the procedures to follow when TB was detected were controversial.⁸⁴

Prompted by the lack of uniformity in the degree of TB that inspectors would tolerate before carcasses were seized and condemned, the second royal commission investigated inspection procedures and slaughter-house administration.⁸⁵ The variation in the diligence and stringency of meat inspection led to a 'regulatory paradox' i.e. when there are two inspection standards, the more rigorously one plant (or jurisdiction) is regulated, the lower will be the overall meat quality.⁸⁶ Confronted by a strictly inspected abattoir, livestock producers would simply divert poorer quality animals to less scrupulous slaughter-houses in proportion to the rigour applied at more stringently inspected plants. Belfast's public abattoir provides a case in point. The city was growing but the volume of meat handled in the abattoir was declining. To avoid inspection and the risk that their carcasses would be condemned, cattle showing any signs of emaciation were diverted to country slaughter-houses. With all the tell-tale organs and obviously tubercular tissues removed, the carcasses were then brought into the city for sale with no indication that the meat might have come from a diseased animal. 'Butchers will seek relief from inspection which they consider is unduly strict by using private slaughter-houses where inspection is more lenient, or, as in most cases, wanting altogether.'⁸⁷

Municipalized meat inspection was inconsistent and often ineffective. In the 1890s, the Deptford abattoir was slaughtering some 2,700 cattle each week but staff shortages meant there was no effective inspection until the meat arrived at London Central Markets, but with all organs removed, there was no *prima facie* evidence of disease. Meat consigned to other markets was practically uninspected.⁸⁸ In any case, there was no consensus about the degree of bovine TB that could be tolerated by simply excising the affected tissues and when the infection was so generalized that it was necessary to condemn the entire carcass. Given the risk and judgement

⁸³ A. Hardy, 'Animals, disease and man', *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 46 (2003), 202.

⁸⁴ K. Waddington, "'Unfit for human consumption": tuberculosis and the problem of infected meat in late Victorian Britain', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 77 (2003), 650–8; K. Waddington, 'The science of cows: tuberculosis, research and the state in the United Kingdom, 1890–1914', *History of Science*, 39 (2001), 362–3.

⁸⁵ Perren, *Meat Trade in Britain*, 134.

⁸⁶ I. MacLachlan, *Kill and Chill: Restructuring Canada's Beef Commodity Chain* (Toronto, 2001), 130–1.

⁸⁷ PP 1898 XLIX Report of the Royal Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Administrative Procedures for Controlling Danger to Man through the Use as Food of the Meat and Milk of Tuberculous Animals, 8. For examples of the evasive tactics used by butchers see Eyler, *Sir Arthur Newsholme*, 67–8, and Perren, *Meat Trade in Britain*, 55.

⁸⁸ PP 1898 XLIX Report of the Royal Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Administrative Procedures for Controlling Danger to Man through the Use as Food of the Meat and Milk of Tuberculous Animals, 8.

involved, the qualifications and training required of meat inspectors was also an issue. According to *The Meat Trades Journal*, 'As long as the Sanitary Institute turns tram conductors and plumbers into meat inspectors at so much per head, the administration of the law will be weak, incompetent and harassing.'⁸⁹

Inspection standards varied considerably from one local authority to another. For example, Scottish inspectors in the public abattoirs of Glasgow, Edinburgh, Paisley and Greenock tended to condemn the entire carcase while the same level of tubercular infection would be handled by condemning only the affected parts in the English public abattoirs of Leeds, Liverpool or Birmingham.⁹⁰ The commissioners concluded, 'Chaos is the only word to express the absence of system in the inspection and seizure of tuberculous meat, and it has, in our opinion, become necessary that regulations should be formulated for the guidance of those who are concerned in dealing with this subject.'⁹¹

The royal commission advocated compulsory meat inspection on a uniform basis in a system of public slaughter-houses, recognizing that if private slaughter was allowed to persist, the sickest animals would be diverted away from inspected public facilities.

Believing, as we do, that the use of public slaughter-houses in populous places to the exclusion of private ones, is a necessary preliminary to a uniform and equitable system of meat inspection, we desire to point out that we consider that power should be given to every local authority expending money in providing a public slaughter-house, to close, if they think fit, all or any of the registered slaughter-houses in the district.⁹²

These recommendations provided reformers with authoritative support for the cause of public abattoirs. But they also appeared unjustified, for by then it had been acknowledged that the risk of meat from tuberculous carcasses had been over-estimated and the hazard to human consumers was low. The commission correctly believed that the danger from raw milk was much greater than meat and that this was the chief source of

⁸⁹ Editorial, *The Meat Trades Journal*, 592 (31 Aug. 1899), 416; in Hackney parish, for example, meat inspection duties were performed by two plumbers, one carpenter, one compositor, one bricklayer, one florist, one builder, one surveyor and one stonemason, PP 1898 XLIX Report of the Royal Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Administrative Procedures for Controlling Danger to Man through the Use as Food of the Meat and Milk of Tuberculous Animals in Reports from Commissioners, Inspectors, and Others, 7; for a list of meat inspectors showing their prior vocation, see 'Inspectors of Meat!', *The Meat Trades Journal*, 414 (2 Apr. 1896), 972. One half of the meat inspectors in metropolitan London were drawn from construction trades (chiefly carpenters and plumbers) and clerical occupations while only one was a butcher. In the City of London all four meat inspectors were former butchers suggesting some residual influence of the Butchers' Company.

⁹⁰ Perren, *Meat Trade in Britain*, 89; Waddington, "'Unfit for human consumption'", 649.

⁹¹ PP 1898 XLIX Report of the Royal Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Administrative Procedures for Controlling Danger to Man through the Use as Food of the Meat and Milk of Tuberculous Animals, 8.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 10.

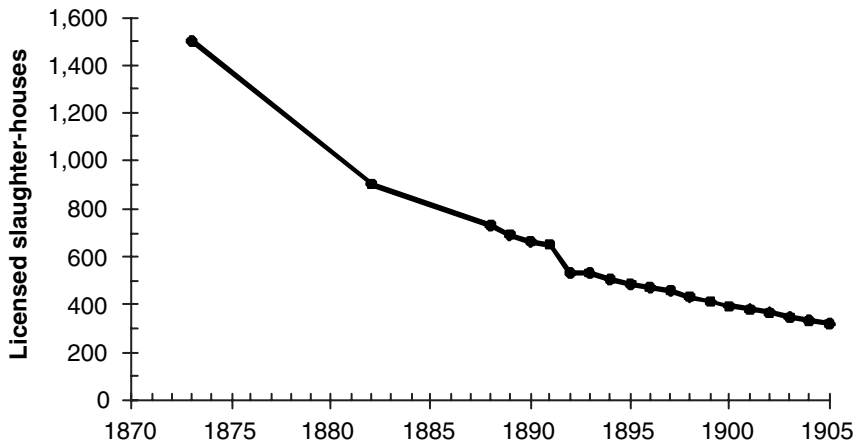


Figure 1: Licensed slaughter-houses in metropolitan London

Source: LCC Sanitary and Special Purposes Committee, report, *London County Council Minutes of Proceedings* (various years).

human infection by bovine TB.⁹³ The validity and growing acceptance of this concession made it difficult to overcome the objections by private butchers.

Before there was time for the commission's recommendations to be digested, an unexpected assertion by Robert Koch in 1901 challenged the new orthodoxy that human and bovine TB were the same and questioned the effectiveness of taking any measures against bovine TB. This stunning claim set back meat inspection and milk pasteurization reforms for over a decade and triggered a third royal commission on TB which dragged on into the twentieth century, deflecting attention away from the public abattoir question.⁹⁴

With the TB question on hold, public abattoir advocacy shifted from parliament to the public health department of the LCC. There had been vast changes in the urban meat market since the House of Commons Select Committee on Noxious Businesses had done its work in 1873. The number of private slaughter-houses had declined from 1,500 in 1873 to 455 by 1897 (Figure 1). The decline in small-scale slaughter was driven by two factors. First animal disease regulations to curb the spread of pleuropneumonia in the British herd had required the diversion of all imported cattle to foreign animal wharves for slaughter within ten days of debarkation. In the case of London, virtually all foreign cattle had to be intercepted at the Deptford abattoir. Second, imports of chilled and frozen beef grew rapidly from 1875 to 1895 which substituted for the

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 12; Waddington, "Unfit for human consumption", 638.

⁹⁴ Waddington, "The science of cows", 362–3.

slaughter of imported cattle. And third, an increasing proportion of the domestic beef consumed in London was country-killed and shipped direct to London Central Markets.⁹⁵ Notwithstanding local sources of aged cows from London's dairies,⁹⁶ town-killed beef dropped from 47 per cent of the meat supply in 1875 to 19 per cent in 1895.⁹⁷ This transformation in London's meat supply led George Dodd to comment, 'the question of public versus private slaughter-houses, which is at present the subject of heated discussion in London, may perhaps be virtually solved by losing most of its practical importance'.⁹⁸ By 1898, each of London's 450 slaughter-houses were killing an average of only two cattle per week.⁹⁹ While the stakes may have seemed small by the turn of the century, the principle of private slaughter-houses in the LCC region remained contentious.

Dr Shirley Murphy,¹⁰⁰ medical officer of health (MOH) for the LCC, argued that past objections to the closure of private slaughter-houses were no longer valid and that the conclusions of the second royal commission on bovine TB justified reconsideration of the meat inspection question. Retail meat vendors in the greater London region had only one source of inspected meat, the London Central Markets, which was inspected by city officers but of course, there could be no *ante-mortem* inspection. Three other sources of meat in the vicinity were not *systematically* inspected: Deptford public abattoir, the private slaughter-houses at the Islington Metropolitan Cattle Market, and other private slaughter-houses in the Administrative County of London. Retail butchers could also purchase dead meat direct from farmers or from private slaughter-houses outside the LCC area which were not subject to any inspection whatsoever.¹⁰¹

Murphy declared, 'there is no doubt that London now receives diseased meat sent up from all parts of the country', justifying the principle that no meat should be sold without first having been inspected. Inspection of dispersed retail meat shops was a practical impossibility thus nothing but centralized slaughter with inspection stations for all dead meat entering

⁹⁵ Dodd, *Food of London*, 480; Perren, *Meat Trade in Britain*, 104–5; Rixson, *History of Meat*, 318–21.

⁹⁶ As long as milk production remained an urban activity, spent dairy cows would provide an intra-urban source of slaughter cattle, Dodd, *Food of London*, 218–19.

⁹⁷ Agricultural returns of Great Britain reprinted in LCC, Public Health Department 'Slaughterhouses report by the medical officer of health', 12 Jul. 1897, in *Annual Report of the Medical Officer of Health as to the Provision of Public Slaughterhouses in the Administrative County of London* (1898), Appendix 2.

⁹⁸ Dodd, *Food of London*, 480.

⁹⁹ In 1897, 450 private slaughter-houses killed an average of 900 beasts in winter and 800 in summer hence an average of two cattle per week, LCC, *London County Council Minutes of Proceedings* (Jul.–Dec.), 11 Oct. 1898.

¹⁰⁰ Dr Shirley Murphy, medical officer of health for London County, was also a member of the second royal commission on TB, see PP 1898 XLIX, Report of the Royal Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Administrative Procedures for Controlling Danger to Man through the Use as Food of the Meat and Milk of Tuberculous Animals.

¹⁰¹ LCC, Public Health Department, 'Slaughterhouses report by the medical officer of health', 12 Jul. 1897, in *Annual Report of the Medical Officer of Health as to the Provision of Public Slaughterhouses in the Administrative County of London* (1898), Appendix 2, 3.

the city would safeguard public health. With these considerations in mind, Murphy proposed a system of six public abattoirs for the Administrative County of London, three to the south of the Thames and three to the north.¹⁰² The facilities would have railway connections to the major cattle markets outside of London, as well as to the existing Islington Metropolitan Cattle Market. The six abattoirs would be located in suburban areas near the urban margin to provide a source of inspected meat no further than six miles from any butcher shop in the metropolitan region. Once the public abattoirs were in full operation, there would no longer be any need for private slaughter-houses in the London region.¹⁰³ The MOH's report was submitted to the LCC on 14 July 1897 but consideration was repeatedly delayed, referred to various committees and postponed so that his resolution did not actually come before council until 31 January 1899:

As a first step towards ensuring the proper inspection of meat, private slaughter-houses should cease to exist in London, and that butchers should in substitution be afforded such facilities as are necessary for the killing of animals in public slaughter-houses to be erected by the council.¹⁰⁴

The lengthy filibuster gave the butchers ample time to prepare their defence. The resolution was promptly amended to not come into effect until after an efficient system to inspect milk had been devised and the council then resolved to carry on to the next item of business. Dr Shirley Murphy's innovative plan for six suburban public abattoirs found little support and powerful opposition. As Anne Hardy has argued, 'the urban meat trade and the wider national agricultural system were too powerful for any minority medical opinion to achieve effective influence'.¹⁰⁵

Butcher trades triumphant

The National Federation of Meat Traders' Associations (NFMTA) had been formed in 1888, just as the public abattoir was becoming a potent threat to butchers' interests.¹⁰⁶ It was often a reactive organization, throwing its considerable energies and political influence into defending the right of butchers to operate private slaughter-houses and opposing all initiatives to introduce meat inspection. The federation supported a pragmatic ethic of independent craftsmanship and took exception to meddling by local authorities and reformers.

¹⁰² These were to be located at Herne Hill, Greenwich and Wandsworth on the south side of the Thames and Willesden, Hackney Marshes and Islington to the north. See LCC, 'Map showing the suggested sites for proposed public slaughterhouses in London' (1896).

¹⁰³ LCC, Public Health Department, 'Slaughterhouses report by the medical officer of health', 12 Jul. 1897, in *Annual Report of the Medical Officer of Health as to the Provision of Public Slaughterhouses in the Administrative County of London* (1898), Appendix 2, 3.

¹⁰⁴ LCC, *London County Council Minutes of Proceedings* (Jul.–Dec. 1897), 1109.

¹⁰⁵ Hardy, 'Pioneers in the Victorian provinces', 377.

¹⁰⁶ J. Jackson, *Official History of the National Federation of Meat Traders' Associations* (Plymouth, 1956), 13.

The key to the federation's success in opposing public abattoir initiatives in the 1890s was its active role in political affairs. Members were encouraged to attend public meetings organized by humanitarians and vegetarians, to oppose reformers and to defend their craft from unflattering portrayals.¹⁰⁷ Butchers and meat traders were exhorted to run for municipal office and to secure appointments on the Sanitary or Markets Committees.¹⁰⁸ The federation provided tips to assist butcher politicians in monitoring efforts to create public abattoirs and to detect Trojan horse legislation in which clauses to close private slaughter-houses might be buried under vague rubrics such as 'Town Improvements' or 'Omnibus' bills.¹⁰⁹ The motives for such initiatives might have been 'sanitorily philanthropic' but their impact would have been 'absolutely murderous in their attacks upon private slaughter-houses'.¹¹⁰

Publication of the MOH's report in 1898 was a clear challenge to private slaughter-houses in the LCC area and had serious implications for the remainder of England. Thus a local issue confronting the London Butchers' Trade Association became a national issue for the NFMTA. As self-interested businessmen, the butchers were motivated to retain ownership of their private slaughter-houses and to control the entire carcase dressing and retail meat fabrication process. The butchers did not relish sending their staff across the city to a public abattoir to secure various cuts of meat whenever they were needed with the possibility that workers might dawdle or that valuable carcase material such as fat or offal might be pilfered along the way. Even the moribund Butchers' Company petitioned the LCC in favour of private slaughter, arguing that the highest quality English and 'Scotch' cattle could only maintain their premium market position if they were carefully tended, fattened and transported to small but efficient private slaughter-houses where the beef would be more carefully handled.¹¹¹ The NFMTA strategy was to build a coalition of support for private slaughter, thus its opposition to the MOH's initiative was calculated to gain support from both livestock producers and consumers.

From the producer's point of view, public abattoirs would encourage the consumption of foreign meat. The more inconvenient it became to slaughter British livestock, the more likely were butchers to turn to imported sources for meat. 'We shall quickly be depending on imported meat for more than half our supply; and day by day be more and more at the

¹⁰⁷ Editorial, *The Meat Trades Journal*, 351 (17 Jan. 1895), 634.

¹⁰⁸ Editorial, *The Meat Trades Journal*, 600 (26 Oct. 1899), 608; Editorial, *The Meat Trades Journal*, 602 (9 Nov. 1899), 656; Editorial, *The Meat Trades Journal*, 603 (16 Nov. 1899), 680.

¹⁰⁹ 'Annual conference at Liverpool', *The Meat Trades Journal*, 508 (20 Jan. 1898), 791; this argument is also made with respect to humane cattle slaughter in I. MacLachlan, 'Coup de grâce: humane cattle slaughter in nineteenth-century Britain', *Food and History*, 3 (2) (2006), 168–70.

¹¹⁰ Editorial, *The Meat Trades Journal*, 454 (7 Jan. 1897), 726.

¹¹¹ Jones, *Butchers of London*, 98.

mercy of the American monopolist.¹¹² From a consumer vantage point, it was argued that without private slaughter-houses as a check, monopolies would develop at home, both in the meat slaughtered in the abattoir and among the dealers selling country-killed livestock in dead meat markets. The experience of oligopoly control of meat and cattle markets in Paris and Chicago and the formation of 'rings' in New York to keep the price of meat artificially high exemplified what could occur in London. The butchers were fond of arguing that 'private slaughter-houses were a great boon to the poor' whose diet was especially rich in organ meats and private slaughter-houses could be relied upon to supply the cheapest, freshest and highest quality offal.¹¹³ A bullock provided sufficient offal to feed 40 people while a sheep could feed about eight with liver, heart, tripe, kidneys and other 'fancy meats'.¹¹⁴

The butchers were aided by the fact that the case for public abattoirs was not especially strong. With respect to sanitation and zoonoses, the MOH had no smoking gun; there was no direct evidence that a private slaughter-house had ever caused the spread of disease nor was there evidence of people having been injured or infected by living in the vicinity of a private slaughter-house. The 1898 royal commission on TB had recently concluded that unpasteurized milk posed a much greater hazard than meat from tubercular animals. The federation argued, 'one of the most extraordinary features of the present agitation is the fact that the evidence is piled up against the dairy, but the sentence is being passed on to the slaughter-house'.¹¹⁵

The federation gathered a number of influential interest groups to oppose the proposed abolition of the slaughter-houses. At a meeting of the LCC Public Health Committee, the butcher interests were represented by the Meat Trades Section of the London Chamber of Commerce, the Metropolitan Cattle and Sheep Trades Association, Central Meat and Poultry Markets' Association, the London Butchers' Trade Society and the umbrella NFMTA.¹¹⁶ Motivated by the belief that the public abattoir proposal would strengthen the position of imported meat to the detriment of domestic livestock producers, rural and agricultural interests aligned with the butchers and a number of regional agricultural organizations passed resolutions supporting private slaughter-houses.¹¹⁷

¹¹² 'Private slaughterhouses v. Public Abattoirs II', *The Meat Trades Journal*, 592 (31 Aug. 1899), 418.

¹¹³ 'Public opinion of slaughterhouses', *The Meat Trades Journal*, 96 (1 Mar. 1890), 6; 'Private slaughterhouses v. Public abattoirs II', *The Meat Trades Journal*, 592 (31 Aug. 1899), 418.

¹¹⁴ Corporation of London, *Opening of New Public Slaughterhouses and Chill Rooms* (London 1910), 10.

¹¹⁵ 'Private slaughterhouses v. public abattoirs', *The Meat Trades Journal*, 591 (24 Aug. 1899), 398.

¹¹⁶ 'Deputation to L.C.C. Public Health Committee', *The Meat Trades Journal*, 550 (10 Nov. 1898), 538.

¹¹⁷ Agricultural groups which passed resolutions in favour of the retention of private slaughter-houses included Taunton Farmers' Club, Lincolnshire Chamber of

The federation viewed this agro-industrial/rural-urban alliance of interests with satisfaction:

The London County Council have, however, more than the butcher to reckon with – they have the breeders and feeders of the United Kingdom yet to face. We have all along maintained that this was more than a mere slaughter-house closing question, and we are glad to note that the powerful influence of the agricultural press is now ranged side by side with us in the fight.¹¹⁸

To consolidate urban support for their cause, the London Butchers' Trade Society sent deputations throughout the LCC region and secured resolutions from 20 parish vestries supporting the retention of private slaughter-houses.¹¹⁹

Independent of the interest groups solicited by butchers was a strong representation by the residents of suburban Herne Hill, one of the six locations identified for a public abattoir. Residents complained that a public abattoir would be distasteful, lower the character of the district, depreciate the value of the houses and spoil a restful residential neighbourhood. A sarcastic response to a survey by the *South London Chronicle* gives a vivid impression about prevailing attitudes towards an industrial development proposed for a suburban area in 1899. 'Why not suggest Trafalgar-square for one grand central place of this sort? It would have several advantages: be near Spring-gardens, cause more injury to property, interfere more with traffic, the National Gallery and a few large hotels might be done away with to increase the site.'¹²⁰ This example of the NIMBY syndrome, in which a middle-class suburb opposes an adjacent development due to its negative externalities, shows that antagonistic neighbourhood-based responses to planned municipal initiatives has a long pedigree.¹²¹

Agriculture, Cleveland Chamber of Agriculture, Leicestershire Agricultural Society, Oxfordshire Agricultural Society, Worcestershire Agricultural Society, Leicestershire Chamber of Agriculture, Smithfield Club, Fareham and Hants Farmers' Club, Gloucestershire Agricultural Society, Warwickshire Agricultural Society and Herefordshire Agricultural Society. 'The L.C.C. and the abolition of private slaughterhouses', *The Meat Trades Journal*, 559 (12 Jan. 1899), 748. See also, 'Abolition of private slaughterhouses: what agriculturalists say', *The Meat Trades Journal*, 561 (26 Jan. 1899), 798.

¹¹⁸ Editorial, *The Meat Trades Journal*, 551 (17 Nov. 1899), 564.

¹¹⁹ London area vestries which passed resolutions in favour of the retention of private slaughter-houses included: St Pancras, St Marylebone, Camberwell, Wandsworth, Paddington, St Mary Abbot's, Kensington, Holborn, St George-the-Martyr, Southwark, Lee Board of Works, Stoke Newington, St Giles, Whitechapel, Lambeth, St Olave's Board of Works, St Luke, Middlesex, Lewisham District Board of Works and St George's-in-the-East. 'The L.C.C. and the abolition of private slaughterhouses', *The Meat Trades Journal*, 559 (12 Jan. 1899), 748.

¹²⁰ *South London Chronicle*, 24 Dec. 1897, reprinted in 'Private slaughterhouses v. public abattoirs III', *The Meat Trades Journal*, 593 (7 Sep. 1899), 442.

¹²¹ For another example of late nineteenth-century NIMBYism see L. Barrow, 'Victorian "pest-houses" amid London's march of bricks and mortar', *RANAM [Recherche anglaises et nord-américaines]*, 36 (2003), 129; for a more recent example see, 'Would YOU live next to a NIMBY', BBC News, 21 May 2002, retrieved 31 Dec. 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk/2000000.stm>.

Conclusion

For over 70 years slaughter-house reformers argued for the abolition of private slaughter-houses in favour of a centralized system of public abattoirs. Public abattoirs were advocated to solve urban congestion and pedestrian hazards in Smithfield Market and the public health movement put the slaughter-house nuisance on London's policy agenda. The Buildings Act served 30 years' notice that slaughter-houses would be abolished but at the last minute it was turned aside. The second royal commission on TB advocated public abattoirs as the only means to establish universal meat inspection. LCC's MOH was no less determined to prohibit private livestock slaughter within the London County region and introduce a system of six publicly inspected municipal abattoirs. But these reform initiatives were successfully opposed due to the determination, political organization and influence of the butcher trades.

Victorian laissez-faire sentiments were unsuited to an article of consumption which had to be bought in large quantities (livestock on the hoof), retailed in household-sized portions and, due to its perishability, both transactions had to take place within a matter of hours.¹²² This caveat to laissez-faire philosophy was a variant on the more general theme of John Stuart Mill's (1859) in *On Liberty* which conceded exceptions to the general principles of liberalism. Liberal reformers and pamphleteers favoured the regulation of market activities where there were health concerns giving rise to a mixed economy in which dirigiste government policies regulated sectors which were resolutely opposed to state intervention.

But the butchers rallied to maintain their status as free traders and they were as politically adept, as resentful of public authority and as obstinate in their opposition to public abattoirs in the provinces as they were in London.¹²³ Despite the abolition of private slaughter-houses in the City of London in 1927,¹²⁴ the De La Warr Commission counted no fewer than 16,000 small private slaughter-houses dispersed throughout England and Wales in 1933, showing the persistence of independent butchers and their desire to maintain control over slaughter. With an average slaughter-house kill of 12 head per week (2 cattle, 6.5 sheep and 3.5 pigs), thousands of small independent butchers preserved a remarkable level of craft control over the British meat supply. This came at a price: British livestock slaughtering practices fell far short of best foreign practice, full veterinary inspection was not achieved until 1966.¹²⁵ The persistence in Britain of small-scale slaughter-houses that were owned and controlled by individual retail

¹²² Grantham, *A Treatise*, 29–30.

¹²³ Eyler, *Sir Arthur Newsholme*, 64–72.

¹²⁴ Jones, *Butchers of London*, 98.

¹²⁵ Koolmees, Fisher and Perren, 'The traditional responsibility of veterinarians', 19.

butchers stood in marked contrast to the industrial model of large-scale meat packing that developed in North America.¹²⁶

Many of the proposals for public abattoirs originated with national initiatives such as the second royal commission on TB in 1898. But animal slaughter was never a candidate for nationalization. Slaughter-house reform was always couched in terms of a municipalized system of livestock slaughter under the jurisdiction of local government. And while some enabling legislation was parliamentary, the most bitter political battles were fought at the local authority level. However, the butchers and allied trades used their political organization and influence with such effect that private slaughter-houses persisted alongside municipal abattoirs in a mixed urban economy. Thus London entered the twentieth century as it had entered the nineteenth, with a meat supply that was only partially inspected and with hundreds of small-scale slaughter-houses dispersed throughout the metropolitan region.

¹²⁶ Economic Advisory Council, *Committee on the Slaughtering of Livestock*, Earl De La Warr, chairman (London, 1933), 12–14, 49.