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'Labyrinthine London': writers, social reformers and the need for more 'ordered' streets in the mid-Victorian metropolis.

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ABSTRACT

The labyrinthine topography of many areas of London was a matter of growing concern throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. This dissertation focuses on the 1830s and 1840s, and on the significance of the labyrinth comparisons to be found within both literary sources and official reports about mid-century London. Considered together, this evidence both reflected and helped to shape the 'metropolitan improvements' that were to change the physical and social fabric of the capital in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Chapter One examines how London came to have the shape that it did by the middle of the nineteenth century. This survey includes the rebuilding after the Great Fire; the seventeenth-century overspill from the City; the eighteenth-century estate developments, and the slums that were the by-product of this Georgian building boom.

Chapter Two examines literary depictions of London which make extended use of the labyrinth metaphor in order to explore the mystery and complexity of urban life. The writers under discussion are Thomas De Quincey, Charles Dickens and George Reynolds. There is also a brief discussion of the Cretan Minotaur myth – the most influential of literary labyrinths. In addition, there is a review of Freud's essay 'The Uncanny', which touches upon the subject of labyrinths, and contains useful pointers in reading De Quincey, Dickens and Reynolds.

Chapter Three focuses on the reports of sanitary reformers, architects, parliamentary committees and journalists. The growing anxiety about slums, and what evils may lie at their centre, triggered a rash of social exploration. The comparison of the slums with mazes is a feature of these eyewitness accounts. This chapter covers the three areas of greatest concern in the mid-century: sanitation; crime; and the sheer difficulty of moving goods and people in the capital.

Chapter Four shows how the concerns highlighted in the 1840s led to an increase in the number and nature of 'metropolitan improvements', with broad streets being driven through the old and labyrinthine districts. ●

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INTRODUCTION

The map of London for the year 1900 was very different to its counterpart of 1800. By the end of the nineteenth century, a large number of broad, straight thoroughfares had been driven through districts which had been characterised by narrow, sinuous streets; many of these convoluted areas had deteriorated into slums by the middle of the nineteenth century.

Those who were unfamiliar with a certain district of London often referred to such a place as having the characteristics of a maze, or labyrinth (the two words have the same meaning and are interchangeable). This metaphor recurs repeatedly in descriptions of the city in the nineteenth century. This dissertation examines why the labyrinth was considered an appropriate image for London in the 1830s and 1840s, both in literary depictions of the city and in the reports of doctors, architects, civil engineers, journalists and parliamentary committees. I shall also examine the effect that this vision of London had on those who were to change the physical fabric of the metropolis over the course of the nineteenth century.

Many commentators summed up their feelings about London's vastness and complexity by comparing it to an unknown, unexplored land; others presented the city as a place of extreme contrasts. However, neither of these tropes ultimately sheds much light on the effect of London on the individual – on how the city is experienced. I would argue that the comparison of moving through little-known London with traversing a maze gives a greater structure to explorations of the city, and a more concrete way of expressing the sense of mystery that London evoked.

A maze has a tightly organised structure, which can ultimately be discovered by the successful initiates who reach its centre and trace their way back out again. Like a maze, the London of the post-Industrial

Revolution era confused and disorientated both strangers and Londoners who strayed from their familiar territory. That London's seemingly random and unplanned topography had some sort of central organising principle was a notion explored by each of the three writers discussed in Chapter Two. Thomas De Quincey wrote of his fascination with the intricate nature of London streets – both the old and decaying warrens of the seventeenth century and the seemingly self-replicating Georgian estates in the West End. London supplied De Quincey with some of his most potent imagery; in turn, De Quincey's vision of London provides early evidence of the alienating and uncanny effect that the city can have upon an individual. His observations of certain aspects of London – the confusion it causes, the apparently automatic behaviour of its citizens, the bizarre nature of crowds – were to be picked up by many later writers. Chapter Two also recaps the Cretan labyrinth myth and Freud's essay 'The Uncanny', both of which have a bearing on labyrinthine imagery and its application to Victorian London.

Neither the West End streets that De Quincey wandered, nor the Todgers's labyrinth in Martin Chuzzlewit – also discussed in Chapter Two – were slums. However, slums were most likely to form in old, and hence convoluted, districts. The slum areas described in Oliver Twist and George Reynolds' The Mysteries of London were characterised as intricate, maze-like and terrifying to the outsider. The innocent individual wanders in peril of the dangers emanating from the centre.

As Chapter Three shows, the middle-class professionals also reflected this attitude; for them, the centres of the slum areas that they explored were believed to harbour the minotaurs of cholera, typhoid, revolution, crime, and values that were in direct opposition to bourgeois notions of respectability. That the very poorest districts of London were

like labyrinths recurs over and over again in these eyewitness accounts, reflecting the increasing physical segregation of the classes and the anxiety that this phenomenon caused to the middle classes.

Those who actually inhabited labyrinthine areas would not have found the arrangement of the streets confusing. The labyrinth comparison is very much the view of an outsider, and the voice of the slum-dweller is tantalisingly absent from the accounts featured in Chapter Three. Few of the social explorers thought to ask the poor what they thought of the places they inhabited; and while the parliamentary committees investigating proposed 'metropolitan street improvements' did consult local residents, these were mainly shop-keepers and traders, whose businesses were likely to be affected by redevelopment. Those residents with least stake in society remain largely silent.

Redevelopment was necessary in order to convert the London of the seventeenth century into a city in which people and goods could move swiftly and comfortably to their destinations. Chapter Four shows how the discoveries made by writers and reformers in the 1830s and 1840s were acted upon by the Metropolitan Board of Works, London's first centralised body, which was formed in 1855. The activities of the Board radically reshaped central London, reflecting the ideals of the Victorian age through the topography of the city.

This dissertation is focused on the changes within the street plan of London. The immense impact that the railways had on the city in the 1830s and 1840s are discussed too; but I feel this is contiguous to the story of 'street improvements', and that deeper exploration of railway development belongs in another essay. In a similar way, architectural concerns are touched upon; but rather than an evaluation of nineteenth-century aesthetics, my focus is on vernacular buildings and street-

planning.

Firstly, though, in Chapter One, I shall establish how various different parts of London achieved their labyrinthine form following the Great Fire and the rejection of Christopher Wren's plans for a new city.

CHAPTER ONE The formation of a labyrinthine topography

By the middle of the nineteenth century, London's various districts had achieved their shape and character in a number of different ways, reflecting the capital's lack of centralisation. London was to have no overall municipal authority until 1888 and the formation of the London County Council. In the middle years of the century, the period on which this dissertation is focused, around 300 different bodies were responsible for the capital's administration. These various vestries, commissions and boards were implementing an estimated 250 different byelaws and parliamentary acts, with varying degrees of stringency,[1] while water, sewage and gas were in the hands of private companies.

The capital had been excluded from two important pieces of legislation before the mid-point of the century, which ensured that the administration of the city remained piecemeal. The Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 streamlined and centralised the running of provincial cities; but London vestries had been left largely unreformed, partly because the Government was anxious not to lose the support of the City Corporation (whose centuries old council of aldermen, sheriffs and guilds avoided significant reform until 1888).[2] The subsequent exclusion, in 1848, of London from the Public Health Act prompted Charles Dickens to make the comparison with 'the

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1 SE Finer, The Life and Times of Edwin Chadwick (London, 1970), pp306-7.

2 David Owen, The Government of Victorian London, 1855-1889 (Harvard, 1982), pp23-24. The City were even allowed to retain their own police force, rather than the Metropolitan squad formed by Robert Peel in 1829.

representation of "Hamlet" with nothing in it but the gravedigger'.[3]

London was also one of the last places in Britain to be charted by the Ordnance Survey, which had been mapping British towns and countryside since 1716. A wrangle over financing delayed completion of the full Ordnance Survey of London until 1871.[4]

This chapter will show how certain parts of London had acquired their topography by the middle of the century, with special reference to the labyrinthine nature of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century street plans; as the nineteenth century progressed, these streets would increasingly be seen as in need of reconstruction, to reflect the aspirations of a new era.

After the Fire: the City rebuilt

In September 1666, the Great Fire destroyed four-fifths of the City – a loss of 13,000 buildings and 436 acres of narrow, medieval streets. Extensive plans were made to take advantage of the disaster and rebuild the City in a manner appropriately splendid for the Restoration period. Christopher Wren proposed broad boulevards with grand vistas; Richard Newcourt drew up a severe grid pattern to replace the narrow, crooked lanes and alleys.[5] None of these schemes was ever realised, however, since local byelaws and individual commercial interests stood in the way of all attempts to remodel the streets. The supremacy of property rights dictated that many City lanes continued to have a sinuous character, since straighter streets would have

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3 KJ Fielding (ed), The Speeches of Charles Dickens (Oxford, 1960), p106. Dickens was speaking at the first public meeting of the Metropolitan Sanitary Association on 6 February, 1850.

4 Ralph Hyde, Printed Maps of Victorian London: 1851-1900 (London, 1975), pp2-8.

5 Felix Barker and Peter Jackson, The History of London In Maps (London, 1990), pp33-37.

meant large-scale commandeering of property for the common good. 'The city was patched up, repaired, improved,' TF Reddaway has written in The Rebuilding of London. 'The attractions of an entirely new ground-plan had faded... Even one dissenting inhabitant could block a development.'[6] Moreover, it was thought that the Thames, and not London's streets, would continue to be an important route for cargo and passengers, and so there was felt to be no urgent need to broaden streets for traffic-flow purposes.

Although planning regulations in force at the end of the seventeenth century stipulated that City lanes had to be at least fourteen feet wide, there was little effective legislation to deal with pillars, buttresses, bulging walls, overhanging upper storeys and gables, bollards and pumps,[7] all of which restricted pedestrian and vehicular movement.

So, just as before the Fire, the City streets were densely packed with tall, narrow (but long) houses that stretched backwards to a courtyard which was enclosed by the backs of other houses in neighbouring lanes. These enclosed courtyards, entered by alleys often measuring only a shoulders' width, formed an 'inscrutable, topographical jigsaw'[8] to anyone who was not involved in the life of that particular locality.

In 1827, James Elmes, author of Metropolitan Improvements, a review of Regency developments, expressed his disappointment that Wren's plans for London had not been adopted: 'The city became one whose streets are lanes, and whose lanes are alleys. The sooner the Corporation... emancipate

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6 TF Reddaway, The Rebuilding of London (London, 1940), p111.

7 ibid, pp288-290.

8 John Summerson, Georgian London (London, 1988), pp36-7; Summerson briefly compares Restoration and Georgian architecture.

their fine cathedral from its monstrous thraldom, the sooner will their city be able to hold its due rank in the splendid metropolis of the empire.'[9] As will be discussed later, this image of London's (and therefore England's) greatness being shackled by small-scale, mean, vernacular buildings would be repeated throughout the Victorian period.

Outside the City: the seventeenth-century 'suburbs'

Following the Fire, many former City-dwellers built elegant town houses to the east. Whitechapel High Street, a late Stuart/early Georgian development, had a complex of lanes and alleys behind it, which soon became a hide-out for those fleeing the City authorities; many of the small yards, particularly those behind inns, contained little-known exits to the fields that surrounded the roads leading eastwards.[10] Gradually, however, the wealthier citizens drifted west, as East London became home to an increasing number of noxious trades and impoverished immigrants.[11]

Over the 100 years preceding the Fire, the fields between the City of London and the City of Westminster had been built upon as far as St Martin's Lane; Soho and St James's were developed in the 1670s. These streets were not as convoluted as those in the City, but were still relatively small-scale, reflecting the needs of seventeenth-century residential quarters.[12]

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9 James Elmes, Metropolitan Improvements, or London In the Nineteenth Century (London, 1827; reissued in 1847), p6. This passage was written sixteen years before Dickens' description of a City backwater in Martin Chuzzlewit.

10 Millicent Rose, The East End of London (London, 1951), p38.

11 Most notably the Protestant Huguenots, who fled religious persecution in France after the Edict of Nantes was revoked in 1685.

12 Although aristocrats' houses were set on broader thoroughfares, such as Somerset, Exeter and Northumberland Houses on the Strand; The History of London in Maps, pp30-31.

The high price of land was another contributory factor in the density of seventeenth-century streets.

Some Tudor buildings west of the City had survived the Fire (including several galleried coaching inns). The most notable examples, which survived, still inhabited, to the end of the nineteenth century, included those in Wych Street/Holywell Street in the Aldwych; Cloth Fair in Smithfield; and the Oxford Arms in Warwick Lane, near St Paul's.

Among the seventeenth-century speculative developments was the Seven Dials in St Giles. This was laid out in 1693 and completed in 1710, and centred on a seven-faced clock on top of a Doric pillar, with seven streets radiating out from this point. The area was built to attract wealthy City merchants seeking a home away from their business premises; but by then, the rich had leap-frogged St Giles to more westerly regions. John Gay's satirical poem Trivia: or the Art of Walking London Streets, written in 1716, satirised this wilfully whimsical street plan, describing 'the narrow alley's doubtful maze'.[13] By 1750, one in four houses in St Giles was a gin shop; and Hogarth's famous engraving 'Gin Lane' has the church of St Giles in the background.

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13 'Where famed St Giles' ancient limits spread;
An inrailed column rears its lofty head...
Here, oft the peasant with enquiring face
Bewildered trudges on from place to place;
He dwells on every sign with stupid gaze,
Enters the narrow alley's doubtful maze,
Tries every winding court and street in vain,
And doubles o'er his weary steps again.
Thus hardy Theseus, with intrepid feet,
Travers'd the dang'rous labyrinth of Crete;
But still the wand'ring passes forc'd his way,
Till Ariadne's clue unwinds the way.'
From the 1795 reprint of Trivia (London), p11.

Georgian developments

Throughout the eighteenth century, cramped and convoluted regions continued to form, this time as a by-product of the Georgian speculative building boom, which was to collapse in 1825. Poor estate supervision and ineffectual legislation combined to allow slums to form remarkably quickly adjacent to the magnificent new streets of Bloomsbury, Fitzrovia, Mayfair and Marylebone.

Regency developments brought about the destruction of some parts of seventeenth-century London. 'Among the glories of this age, the historian will have to record the conversion of dirty alleys, dingy courts and squalid dens of misery and crime... into stately streets,' wrote James Elmes in 1827.[14] Nash, Elmes boasted, 'changed Swallow Street and its filthy labyrinthine environs into the most picturesque and splendid street in the metropolis.' This confidence in Regency taste, however, can only have been sustained by deciding not to look too far behind the stately streets. In fact, Nash's Regent Street was designed with very few east-side access routes, precisely so that Soho low-life was kept both out of sight and away from exclusive Mayfair, on the west side of the street.[15]

The owners of the great estates in the west (Bedford, Southampton, Portland, Portman, Grosvenor, Westminster, Berkeley) leased their land to builders for periods of (usually) 99 years. The land was developed at the builder's own cost, which he recouped in rents from the completed houses' tenants. Building agreements (or covenants) with the landowner usually

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14 Metropolitan Improvements, p2.

15 Francis Sheppard, London 1808-1870: The Infernal Wen (London, 1971), p113. Sheppard goes on to note that Nash's wife was a former mistress of the Prince Regent, and that mid-Victorian critics of Regency municipal 'improvements' cited this as a typical example of corrupt aristocratic patronage of architecture.

stipulated precise dimensions for houses, in order to preserve visual uniformity throughout the estate.

The Building Act of 1774 set out safety measures for the construction of four different types of house, from 'First Rate' down to 'Fourth Rate' dwellings. It also strictly limited decorative flourishes on the exteriors. As John Summerson points out in Georgian London, the exacting requirements of this Act brought about the standardisation of eighteenth-century London town houses.[16] This extraordinary uniformity is perhaps best seen today in Gower Street, which consisted originally of almost a mile of same-height, same-colour houses; this street was loathed by early and mid-Victorians, who attempted to make it more flamboyant by adding decorative porches and sills.[17] Such streets were typical of Georgian London's 'disgusting insipidity and tiresome monotony', according to Sir John Soane, speaking at the beginning of Victoria's reign.[18] Fourteen years later, in Bleak House, Dickens expressed a similar view of the seemingly endless proliferation of aridly respectable West End town houses. The Dedlocks' London home is in 'a dull street... where the two long rows of houses stare at each other with that severity, that half a dozen of its greatest mansions seem to have been slowly stared into stone... a street of such dismal grandeur... determined not to condescend to liveliness'.[19]

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16 pp106-7.

17 They went even further in Russell Square by adding terracotta facings.

18 Sir John Soane, 'Lectures on Architecture', quoted in Donald Olsen's Town Planning In London (Yale, 1964), p18.

19 Charles Dickens, Bleak House (1853), the Pan Classic paperback edition, unabridged (London, 1976), Chapter 48, pp653-654.

The West End estates were planned to be autonomous units: the grand homes of the rich being neighboured by the humbler homes of their employees and tradesmen. Dickens also commented on these gradations of Georgian housing, noting the 'great streets of melancholy stateliness, and the little streets that try to be as stately and succeed in being more melancholy, of which there is a labyrinth near Park Lane.'[20] However, estates did not always turn out as planned. Too few of the wealthy considered Bloomsbury sufficiently fashionable, for example, so many of the large houses there were almost immediately let out as single-floor lodgings, thereby consolidating its reputation as a less than salubrious area. Such residents would not have a horse and carriage, and so the redundant mews dwellings that had been built behind the houses were let out as cheap lodgings to the very poor, and became slums.[21] In the 1850s, George Augustus Sala revealed typical mid-Victorian disdain for all things Regency when describing a dilapidated fourth-rate Georgian development off Gray's Inn Road: 'New, swept, garnished... the regularity of Tattyboys Rents must have been distressing. The houses must all have been as like each other as the beaux in wigs and cocked hats, who lived when Tattyboys Rents were built; but age, poverty and dirt have given as much variety of expression to these houses now, as hair, whiskers, wrinkles and scars give to the human race.'[22]

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20 Little Dorrit (1857), Penguin English Library Edition, ed John Holloway (London, 1985), Book I, Chapter 27, p373. This scathing attack on the architecture of Georgian estates goes on to note the 'horrors that came into existence under some wrong-headed person in some wrong-headed time, still demanding the blind admiration of all ensuing generations.'

21 Details of the formation of slums on Georgian estates are taken from Donald Olsen's The Growth of Victorian London (London, 1976), Chapter 6, 'Salubrious Dwellings for the Industrious Classes', pp265-297.

22 George Augustus Sala, Gaslight and Daylight with Some London Scenes they Shine Upon (London, 1859), p232; a collection of 34 pieces originally published in Household Words between 1851 and 1856.

While more than one factor changed humble-yet-respectable areas into slums, one of the most important was the scale of the streets and buildings. Donald Olsen contends that the best way eighteenth-century developers could have prevented slum formation was 'to lay out the property with wide streets and extensive open spaces, and prevent builders from constructing courts and alleys on the vacant ground behind houses'.[23] Badly drafted or poorly enforced building agreements, and contravention of the Building Acts, saw the erection of many sub-standard dwellings behind mansions and town houses. An article in Household Words pointed out that 'the most lordly streets are frequently but a mask for the squalid districts which lie behind them'.[24]

Jerry-building compounded the problem, and many streets of smaller houses on wealthy estates deteriorated rapidly. The laxity in the wording of the Marquess of Northampton's covenants led to the erection of tenements in the courtyards and gardens of the original houses on his estate just north of Clerkenwell Green in the first twenty years of the nineteenth century,[25] and this consolidated the area's reputation as a slum.

Another Georgian slum, which came to be known as 'The Old Nichol', formed just behind St Leonard's church in Shoreditch High Street. Cheaply built fourth-rate houses on streets named in honour of Admiral Nelson were erected in the first ten years of the nineteenth century; they were instantly sub-divided into one-room tenements. By the middle of the century, infilling on passageways and other small, unclaimed public spaces had created 'a

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23 Town Planning In London, p128.

24 'The Devil's Acre' by Alexander McKay, Household Words, 22 June, 1850, vol I, p297.

25 The Growth of Victorian London, p156 and p271; and Town Planning In London, pp102-3.

maze of alleys. . . so narrow that a brewer's drayman would be compelled to walk in sideways'.[26] Victorian discourses about slums, or 'rookeries', would often refer to the antiquity of the buildings; but often, the rotting houses were comparatively new.[27]

Off the map: how certain areas disappeared from view

In a city where planning and building regulations were so abused, maps soon ceased to be accurate. Thomas De Quincey was the first writer to express the uneasy feeling that some parts of London must be unknown to the authorities, in his 1821 Confessions of an English Opium-Eater. Describing how he wandered around London at night while under the influence of opium, he wrote: 'I could almost have believed, at times, that I must be the first discoverer of some of these *terrae incognitae*, and doubted whether they had yet been laid in the modern charts of London.'[28] In his revised 1856 Confessions, he expanded on this theme and revealed that one alleyway in the seventeenth-century streets of Clare Market, west of Lincoln's Inn Fields, was taking an unorthodox route: 'In one line of communication to the south of Holborn for foot passengers (known, I

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26 Thomas Archer, The Pauper, The Thief and The Convict (London, 1865), p11.

27 The destruction of the Old Nichol district is the back-drop for Arthur Morrison's novel A Child of the Jago (1896).

28 Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings, Oxford World Classics edition, ed Grevel Lindop (Oxford, 1985), p48. All subsequent quotations from the unrevised Confessions (1821), from Suspiria De Profundis (1845) and 'On The Knocking on the Gate in Macbeth' (1823) are taken from this edition. FS Schwarzbach, in Dickens and The City (London, 1979), claims that De Quincey is the first writer to have used the phrase 'terrae incognitae' to describe London, p220.

doubt not, to many of my London readers), the road lay through a man's kitchen; and, as it was a small kitchen, you needed to steer cautiously, or else you might run foul of the dripping pan.'[29] The tone here is light-hearted, but De Quincey's intuition was correct: parts of London were uncharted. When, in 1840, the Poor Law Commissioners made their sixth annual report, they revealed that fewer than half of the maps submitted to the Commissioners by London parishes were sufficiently detailed to assess rateable properties accurately and resolve disputes about parish boundaries. The remaining half, though usable, 'were not fit to be called public documents'.[30] Commercially available maps of London had failed to keep pace with the amount of new building taking place. Richard Horwood's detailed survey of 1799 was revised (though not by professional surveyors) and reissued in 1807, 1813 and 1819; but for the next 30 years, 'new' maps relied on this increasingly outdated plan, and failed to detail the capital's back-streets, lanes, alleys, mews and courts.[31]

The Board of Ordnance, founded in 1716, had been charting the countryside and towns of the rest of the country; but only a sustained campaign by sanitary reformer Edwin Chadwick and engineer Henry Austin (who was Charles Dickens' brother-in-law) focused parliamentary attention on London's surveying needs. An act to finance such a project, with a view

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29 Revised Confessions (1856) in The Selected Writings of Thomas De Quincey, ed Philip Van Doren Stern (London, 1939), p799. All quotations from the revised Confessions and from 'The Nation of London' (1834) are taken from this edition.

30 Sixth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners, H.C. (1840), pp34-5.

31 I Darlington and JL Howgego, Printed Maps of London: c.1553-1850 (London, 1964), p27; and Ralph Hyde, Printed Maps of Victorian London: 1851-1900 (London, 1975), pp1-5, give fascinating details of how London became 'unmapped' in the first half of the nineteenth century.

to constructing sewers, was eventually passed in September 1848.[32]

Partly as a result of the influx of foreign visitors to the Great Exhibition of 1851, and partly because of the publication of the Ordnance Survey skeleton map of central London between 1849 and 1851, an astonishing range of guides became available from the early 1850s, including balloon-views of the capital, maps showing the location of famous monuments, omnibus maps, a guide to finding chapels of various denominations, a pair of gloves with a map of central London on the palms,[33] and the first ever pocket-sized map in 1854 – 'Collins' Illustrated Atlas of London'. But these maps featured only routes that the better-off and tourists would wish to take; and in the mid-1850s, George Augustus Sala could still write of the slum off Gray's Inn Road, 'Mapmakers pass it by in contemptuous silence. . . Take your observations by the sun and moon, and by the help of your chronometer, quadrant, compass steering due north, and a guinea case of mathematical instruments, work out Tattyboys Rents' exact place on the chart. . . or wander till you stumble, somehow, into Tattyboys Rents.'[34]

The view from above

Viewing the city from high buildings (fog permitting) was a popular leisure pastime,[35] as were looking at panoramic illustrations and visiting the camera

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32 Printed Maps of London, p27.

33 The 'Hand Guide to London' was patented in 1851, according to The History of London in Maps, pp118-9.

34 Gaslight and Daylight, p230.

35 In Martin Chuzzlewit, Tom Pinch arrives at the Monument just as two sightseers are admitted entrance for a tanner: Martin Chuzzlewit (1844), Chapter 37.

obscura. The desire to view London in its totality from above was a compelling one, and when the Ordnance Survey took up its position in a roost on the cross of St Paul's in 1848 to undertake trigonometrical measurements, a reporter for Fraser's Magazine went up to visit. He later wrote of how, to some extent, London started to make a little more sense than when the observer is on the ground: 'The vision, bewildered by the multiplicity and beauty of the scene, tended toward objects which, though usually observed through clouds of smoke in painful dimness, were now accurately defined.'

The writer, who went under the pseudonym 'Nerke', scornfully reported the overheard remarks of a labourer who said that the survey had to be done from above because the streets were too crowded, and the OS team too likely to be attacked if they stood still in the streets long enough.[36] However, Henry Austin, had made the same point six years earlier, saying that detailed surveys of 'intricate and dense' districts at ground level were only possible between two and three in the morning during the summer.[37]

The most comprehensive view, however, came from a balloon.[38] When Henry Mayhew was offered a flight over London in 1856, he hoped that this new perspective would add to his understanding of the city he had explored so thoroughly on the ground for his Morning Chronicle reports, later

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36 'London From The Crow's Nest' in Fraser's Magazine, January 1849, vol XXXIX, no CCXXIX, p58-64.

37 Henry Austin, Metropolitan Improvements (London, 1842), p3. This pamphlet was also published in the Westminster Review in January 1842.

38 The first balloon trip over London was made in 1784 by Italian aeronautical inventor Vincent Lunardi. The early days of ballooning were perilous, and most of the pioneers were to die in crash landings. By the 1830s, ballooning had become a popular pastime, and a typical basket would comprise an experimenting aeronaut, a meteorologist and paying members of the public. Details are to be found in Patrick Shepherd, The Romance of Ballooning: The Story of the Early Aeronauts (London, 1971), pp29-71. In Martin Chuzzlewit, the old men who frequent the taverns near Todgers's are lampooned for believing ballooning to be 'sinful', Chapter 9, p129.

reissued as London Labour and the London Poor. 'We had seen the Great Metropolis under almost every aspect,' he wrote. 'We had dived into the holes and corners hidden from the honest and well-to-do portion of the London community; and we had a craving, like the rest of mankind, to contemplate London from above.'[39]

Viewing London in this way brought out Mayhew's predilection for statistics. While musing on the beauty and tranquillity of sailing over 'this perfect maze of bricks and mortar', he quickly fell into computing mode, figuring that if this maze were to be unravelled, it would 'form one continuous street, long enough to reach across the whole of England and France, from York to the Pyrenees.'[40] Perhaps it was because he was overawed by the immensity and complexity of London that he was reduced to making such a banal observation as this. Mayhew's aim had been 'to perceive the previous confusion of the diverse details assume the form and order of a perspicuous unity', but he had to concede that there was no obvious meaning or centre to this maze: 'As well might we seek to find order and systematic arrangement among a ball of worms as in the conglomeration of thoroughfares constituting the British metropolis.'[41] Mayhew would not be the last to express exasperation, bordering on anger, that London could not be easily explained or rationalised, as Chapters Two and Three will show.

So it was that at the high noon of laissez-faire, the wealthiest city in the world

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39 Henry Mayhew, 'A Balloon View of London', in The Great World of London (London, 1856); this essay was reprinted in The Criminal Prisons of London by Henry Mayhew and John Binney (London, 1862), pp7-55, and quotations are taken from this later version.

40 ibid, p14.

41 ibid, p55.

contained many square miles of old and narrow streets that were becoming increasingly unsuitable for the personal and commercial needs of its burgeoning population. Most of these streets were the site of rapidly deteriorating housing stock – the only sort of property that the desperately poor were able to rent.[42] The age and poor condition of such streets, and the nature of their inhabitants, were increasingly felt to be an affront to modern, bustling, mercantile London.

The various novelists, journalists, medical men, sanitary reformers, architects and church men who stepped off the main streets and into these districts used remarkably similar language when recording their reactions to what they witnessed. Animalistic metaphors were commonplace in their reports: words used over and over again include 'rookeries', 'lairs', 'dens', 'nests' and 'hides'. Comparisons were made with unexplored, far-off lands; and there was the notion that the poor were returning to the state of 'savages' in these 'wildernesses'. The likely, though not always proven, criminality of the inhabitants was dwelt upon; and expressions such as 'thieves' haunt' and 'nurseries of vice', for example, became clichéd through over-use.

However, it is the image of London as a labyrinth or maze (hard to enter and escape, hard to negotiate, producing confusion and bewilderment, but with some kind of organising power and centre) that is the focus of the next two chapters. Some writers of fiction came to use this image simply as shorthand for an unknown and probably dangerous place. Others, however, extended the labyrinth metaphor into a powerful and dramatic way of representing aspects of urban experience in the middle decades of the nineteenth century.

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42 A glance at 'Palmer's Index to the Times: 1790-1905' (available on CD-Rom at the British Library) reveals the frequency of fatal fires and total collapses of dwellings in run-down areas of central London.

Something that is reiterated repeatedly is the fact that these labyrinthine regions were the products of another age, whether they were the few remaining Tudor relics, the seventeenth-century City overspill, or the fruit of the Regency building boom. The literary labyrinths examined in Chapter Two, and the frightening maze-like slums explored by reformers in Chapter Three, all reflect an emerging sense of what it meant to be Victorian.

CHAPTER TWO Literature and the labyrinth

Thomas De Quincey, Charles Dickens and George Reynolds all explored aspects of urban life through the metaphor of the maze. For De Quincey, the spectacular multiplication of Georgian streets provided a rich source of imagery in his writing. Dickens' complex attitude to London is reflected in his maze tropes in Oliver Twist and Martin Chuzzlewit. Finally, the mid-century bestseller The Mysteries of London features some extraordinary labyrinthine houses, which seem to encode George Reynolds' vision of the social and political make-up of London.

Firstly, though, it is important to state the exact nature of a labyrinth, which has a set of quite specific attributes. The Cretan labyrinth of King Minos has had a powerful impact on western literature, and so a brief recap of this legend may help to throw some light on comparisons of London with a maze. For this reason, too, Freud's essay 'The Uncanny' is briefly discussed: Freud's discussion of the literary uncanny attempts to explain why labyrinths often cause feelings of unease; his findings may be worth bearing in mind when looking at the writing not just of novelists but also of the social explorers under discussion in the next chapter.

Organised chaos: the nature of labyrinths

A true labyrinth is tightly planned and highly ordered: but it is designed and constructed in order to confuse and perplex. Those within it want to reach the centre and they want to be able to exit too; but their movements are constantly hindered by the structure of the labyrinth.

There are two types of labyrinth: unicursal and multicursal. A unicursal labyrinth is one single path that meanders tortuously yet inevitably to the

centre and back out again; no decisions or choices need to be made since the centre is reached by perseverance alone. A multicursal labyrinth includes false turnings and blind passages, so, in theory at least, the traveller may never reach the centre, or the exit.

Since the Renaissance, most visual and verbal depictions of labyrinths show the multicursal model, with choice and decision being the keys to its solution.[43] While the writers examined below do not make this distinction, it is the multicursal model they are describing, since the notion of correct and incorrect turnings, dead ends and retreading the same path are vital elements of the depiction of the London labyrinth.

The myth of the Minotaur

The labyrinth that has had the most influence on western culture is the mythical Cretan maze of King Minos. The king asked his chief architect and inventor Daedalus to devise a way of both imprisoning and hiding from the outside world the Minotaur – the half man/half bull creature that resulted when Minos's wife mated with a bull. Daedalus's labyrinth was so complex that the inventor himself nearly got lost in it.

Minos regularly fed the Minotaur with Athenian youths, who were thrust into the labyrinth and wandered, lost, until the Minotaur caught and killed them. However, one of these youths, Theseus, was able to get to the heart of the labyrinth, kill the monster, and get back out again with the help of a ball of thread given to him by Ariadne, Minos's daughter, who had fallen in love

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43 Penelope Reed Doob, The Idea of The Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages (Cornell University Press, 1990), pp4-9.

with Theseus.[44]

Minos then imprisoned Daedalus and his son Icarus in the labyrinth, for their alleged collusion in Theseus' escape. Daedalus invented wings made of wax so that he and Icarus could escape upwards out of the labyrinth. Daedalus escaped, but Icarus flew too close to the sun, and his wings melted.

There are several aspects of the Cretan myth that are relevant to depictions of mid-nineteenth-century London. There is the notion that the labyrinth's centre contains something of power and mystery; and that the labyrinth is a 'solvable' phenomenon, with an order, or logic, that can ultimately be discovered. There is the fact that no one may travel easily through it, movement is always hampered and (mis-) directed. The labyrinth is a prison, which if not exactly underground, at least creates the impression of being subterranean. Finally, there is the idea that its centre is proscribed territory, and that only the successful initiate may know what it contains.

'The Uncanny' and the London labyrinth

Chapters Two and Three will show that the nineteenth-century city regularly presented aspects of itself that made it appear unfamiliar and anxiety-inducing. The haunted castles of Gothic fiction appear to have been superseded by the city as a setting for the mysterious and the frightening. Thomas De Quincey articulated this sense of urban mystery in 1844: 'We have all read of secret doors in great cities so exquisitely dissembled by art that in what seemed a barren surface of dead wall, suddenly and silently an

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44 Despite ancient and medieval depictions of the Cretan labyrinth as unicursal, it must have been multicursal, otherwise Ariadne's thread would have been redundant, since no wrong turnings are possible in the unicursal model.

opening was exposed which revealed a long perspective of retiring columns.'[45] From the 1830s onwards, London was frequently presented by writers as a place of secret passages, hidden doorways, subterranean chambers and mysterious mazes. While tentative and not wholly conclusive, Sigmund Freud's essay 'The Uncanny', written in 1919, was an attempt to define and locate this sensation. Freud observed that the uncanny is an anxiety with a source that is not easily explicable, and which has the effect of rendering familiar things strange. He wrote that the first time he experienced the feeling was when he became lost one summer afternoon in the red-light district of Genoa:

'I hastened to leave the narrow street at the next turning. But after having wandered about for a time without enquiring my way, I suddenly found myself back in the same street... I hurried away once more, only to arrive by another detour at the same place yet a third time. Now, however, a feeling overcame me which I can only describe as uncanny.'[46]

In exploring what it was about this experience that was uncanny, Freud decided that the answer lay in the involuntary repetition of movement which the Genoan streets had caused him to make. The uncanny, he wrote, 'forces upon us the idea of something fateful and inescapable, when otherwise we should have spoken only of "chance"... [One is] tempted to ascribe a secret meaning to this obstinate recurrence.'

The compulsion to repeat, Freud argued, is instinctive but is overcome as

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45 'The Logic of Political Economy' (1844) in The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey, ed David Masson (Edinburgh, 1890), vol ix, p134. Mysterious things lurking behind doors feature in two of De Quincey's most famous essays: 'On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth' (1823) and 'On Murder, Considered as One of the Fine Arts' (1827).

46 'The Uncanny' (1919) in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919), translated by James Strachey (London, 1955), p237. Interestingly, Freud never attempts to link his anxiety on this afternoon with the nature of the district he was lost in.

the ego develops and represses the instinct. Repetitive movement is reminiscent of the mechanical, and is 'evident in the behaviour of small children and neurotics'.[47] When adults discover themselves repeating involuntarily, it is felt to be uncanny because it is a reminder of an early stage of psychological development they believed they had overcome, a stage 'when the ego had not marked itself off from the external world and from other people'. These once familiar actions and sensations have become alien to the self through repression; an uncanny experience brings them suddenly home to us once more, in a way that is similar to an experience of *déjà vu*.

In addition to repetition, Freud named the concept of the double as a major source of the uncanny; this includes both the notion of the doppelgänger, and any kind of inexplicable reduplication. The suspicion that the complexity and multiplicity of streets can render one's actions involuntary, and that individual free will is an illusion, is one of the ideas raised by the labyrinth image. The uncanny also underpins the notion of the city as an attack on the self, bringing about a feeling of disorientation, disintegration and alienation. In his 1834 article 'The Nation of London' for Tait's Edinburgh Magazine, Thomas De Quincey presents just such a picture of repetitive movement by city-dwellers:

'No loneliness can be like that which weighs upon the heart in the centre of faces never-ending... eyes innumerable... and hurrying figures of men and women weaving to and fro, with no apparent purposes intelligible to a stranger, seeming like a mask of maniacs, or, oftentimes, like a pageant of phantoms. The great length of the streets in many quarters of London; the continual opening of transient glimpses into other vistas equally far-

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47 ibid, p236.

stretching, going off at right angles to the one which you are traversing... brood over the aspect of London. All that I remember is one monotonous awe and blind sense of mysterious grandeur and Babylonian confusion.'[48] Here, Londoners are acting according to no law the observer can understand; and they move in their compulsive (or neurotic, to use Freud's word) way in a splendid maze of Georgian streets, which appear to De Quincey to have some sort of rationale – 'the mysterious grandeur'.

This idea that there is a secret order or purpose to the city streets, which is dwelt upon by all the writers under consideration in this chapter, links to Freud's other main explanation for uncanny sensations: animism – the attribution of human characteristics to inanimate objects. Freud stated that experiences of the uncanny remind us not just of our primitive, childhood selves, but also of the time when mankind was primitive and projected human qualities on to external reality. 'An uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression; or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed.'[49] One of the most uncanny moments, he said, occurs when something we had thought was imaginary turns out to be real.

Making no reference to Freud, Dorothy Van Ghent, in her essay 'The Dickens World: A View From Todgers's', puts forward the theory that in his writing, Dickens habitually animates the inanimate; and equally, treats living beings as inanimate objects: 'The animation of inanimate objects suggests both the quaint gaiety of a forbidden life and an aggressiveness that has got

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48 The Selected Writings of Thomas De Quincey, pp173-4.

49 The Standard Edition, p240.

out of control.'[50] Van Ghent makes her point by citing how Coketown, in Hard Times, is presented as being more alive than its inhabitants; the latter are deadened by their mechanical, manufacturing life, while the town's labyrinthine streets are 'wild, uncontrollable, lunatic,' according to Ghent.[51] That a person may actually be an automaton was one of the phenomena that Freud noted as he surveyed the literary uncanny. 'The most successful [writers] are those who keep us in the dark a long time about the precise nature of the presuppositions on which the world he writes about is based.'[52] In fiction, Freud wrote, the uncanny is most successfully aroused when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, or when there is slippage between the dreamlike and reality. This is why realistic fiction is the proper home for the literary uncanny, he stated, while fairy tales and ghost stories (where odd events are the norm) do not arouse this sensation. This may be one reason why the city took over from the haunted castle as a setting for mystery/horror fiction.

To recap, a labyrinth or maze brings about a sense of the uncanny because it forces those inside it to repeat their movements. Also, the visual repetition of its passages, or walls, acts like any kind of double. This involuntary repetition and the notion of the double, according to Freud, remind us of our infantile self and of our primitive humanity. These once familiar notions have been repressed, and when they emerge and confront us, they are experienced as uncanny. This reminder, however, is not

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50 Dorothy Van Ghent, 'The Dickens World: A View From Todgers's' in The Sewanee Review, No 58 (1950), pp419-428.

51 ibid, p425.

52 The Standard Edition, p250.

experienced consciously; instead, it is felt as an anxiety with a source that is not easy to locate. The experience of the uncanny renders familiar things strange.

Thomas De Quincey's search for the 'organizing principle' of London

It was a recurrent theme of De Quincey's that all phenomena can be ordered and 'harmonised' through the power of (opium-enhanced) intellect: 'The fleeting accidents of a man's life, and its external shows, may indeed be irrelate and incongruous; but the organizing principles which fuse into harmony, and gather about fixed predetermined centres... will not permit the grandeur of human unity greatly to be violated.'[53] That London had a 'fixed, predetermined centre' and must be obeying some sort of force was a conundrum that exercised De Quincey's mind for many years. In addition to this, he expressed the idea that London operated its own mysterious centripetal pull on the rest of the nation 'hurrying for ever into one centre the infinite means needed for her infinite purposes.'[54]

De Quincey was a lifelong Tory and was opposed to reform and change of any kind. He demonised 'Advance' as being the enemy of religion, philosophy and dreaming: 'Unless this colossal pace of advance can be retarded... or... can be met by counter-forces of corresponding magnitude that shall radiate centrifugally against this storm of life so perilously centripetal towards the vortex of the merely human, left to itself, the natural

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53 Suspiria De Profundis in Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings, Oxford World Classics edition, ed Grevel Lindop (Oxford, 1985), p144.

54 'The Nation of London' in The Selected Writings of Thomas De Quincey, ed Philip Van Doren Stern (London, 1939), p171.

tendency of so chaotic a tumult must be to evil.'[55] Vast spatial dimensions and violent movement recur throughout De Quincey's imagery. He used them here, in a torrent of phrases, to express the notion that the rapid changes of the early nineteenth century should not allow people to believe that human affairs are central to anything. But if humanity is not at the vortex, what is? This question was to remain, unanswered, at the heart of De Quincey's writing.

As a prolific commentator on political and economic matters, De Quincey was well aware that London had no overall governing body. The absence of a more obvious, corporeal, 'merely human' entity administering and directing London allowed De Quincey to ponder the notion that some sublime principle must be organising the entire city instead.

London was always a fascinating puzzle for him to brood over. He wrote, in 'The Nation of London', that on his first visit to London in 1800, when he was fifteen, he had just three hours to view the capital. This forced upon him and his companion the question of where its centre might be found. They chose 'to place ourselves as much as possible in some relation to the spectacles of London which might answer to the centre. Yet how? What was the centre of London for any purpose whatever, latitudinarian or longitudinarian, literary, social or mercantile, geographical, astronomical or diabolical?'[56] They decided that 'having seen London meant having seen St Paul's'; but having reached St Paul's in his narrative, De Quincey then embarks on a long digression about the issue of charging the public to see monuments; and the cathedral's centrality soon feels doubtful to the reader.

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55 Suspiria De Profundis, p88.

56 The Selected Writings of Thomas De Quincey, pp175-6.

For De Quincey, the complexity of London's streets, and their seemingly organic proliferation, was fodder for his 'faculty of dreaming splendidly'.[57] In the 1821 Confessions he evoked the sensation of meandering alone inside a labyrinth, with which some power was teasing and perplexing him: 'Sometimes in my attempts to steer homewards... I came across such knotty problems of alleys, such enigmatical entries, and such sphynx's riddles of streets without thoroughfares, as must, I conceive, baffle the audacity of porters and confound the intellects of hackney coachmen.'[58] In yoking together the metaphysical and the mundane – sphynx's riddles and enigmas with coachmen and porters – he brings to the realism of everyday London life a dimension which can perhaps be called uncanny; here is the blurring of the real and the imagined, and the apprehension that the inanimate streets may have a mind of their own.

In a similar way, London and eternity are annexed when he writes about his search for Ann, the pauper girl he came to regard as surrogate mother/sister during his brief stay in London when he was seventeen: 'Doubtless we must have been sometimes in search of each other, at the very same moment, through the mighty labyrinths of London; perhaps even within a few feet of each other – a barrier no wider in a London street, often amounting in the end to a separation of eternity!'[59] The agonising idea here is that, as in a maze, just one partition may be separating the questor from completing his search.

De Quincey had been influenced by Coleridge's enthusiastic description

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57 Suspiria De Profundis, p87.

58 Confessions (1821), pp47-8.

59 ibid, p34.

of Giambattista Piranesi's celebrated engravings 'Carceri d'Invenzione' ('Imaginary Prisons'). These are characterised by self-replicating staircases, galleries and dungeons, suggestive of three-dimensional labyrinths. Piranesi's drawings supplied another haunting theme for De Quincey's dreaming, since, like central London streets, they too gestured at eternity in their seemingly endless multiplicity: 'With the same power of endless growth and self-reproduction did my architecture proceed in dreams.'[60]

Coleridge had, in fact, misrepresented the 'Carceri', since he mistakenly thought that Piranesi's self-portrait appeared in the etchings, presented as some kind of permanently trapped Romantic hero; but the concept suited De Quincey's self-image as a man caught up in the London streets, seeking Ann, but, more importantly, seeking the key to their organisational mystery. Through reverie, De Quincey believed, all phenomena could be made sense of: 'The further we press in our discoveries, the more we shall see proofs of design and self-supporting arrangement where the careless eye had seen nothing but accident.'[61] The battle between randomness and the need for order is a constant tension in his work; but he ultimately fails to present a coherent system, or pattern, for the extraordinary scenes and ideas that his imagination called forth. The critic J Hillis Miller has pointed out that to read De Quincey's work is 'to experience a strange and exasperating sense of disorientation' as De Quincey constantly wanders away from his proposed subject.[62] This notion can, I believe, be taken further, and comparison made with the action of walking in a labyrinth. The reader is brought close to the

60 ibid, p70.

61 'On The Knocking on the Gate in Macbeth', p85.

62 J Hillis Miller, The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth Century Writers (Yale, 1975), p67.

heart of a topic, then directed away, often seemingly miles away, then sharply brought back to the central theme, and away again. This is true of De Quincey's celebrated 'impassioned prose',[63] but his historical, biographical and political writings are of a similar nature.

In later, revised versions of his work, he sought to impose a more conventional, more linear, order on these pieces by a system of extended footnotes for matters that he had come to consider ancillary to his main theme; but this 'correction and pruning'[64] has the action of robbing his writing of some of its power and flavour. The reader doesn't want De Quincey tidied up and re-ordered; the pleasure comes from travelling with him in his maze.

Two Dickens labyrinths: 'Oliver Twist' and 'Martin Chuzzlewit'

Images of labyrinths and mazes recur throughout Dickens' writing, occasionally in a purely figurative sense,[65] but much more frequently in descriptions of streets and houses.[66] Of all the novels of the nineteenth century, Oliver Twist (1837-8) makes the most sustained use of labyrinthine images; they conjure up a nightmare city in which there is little hope of escaping the evil that lies at the centre. The convoluted City backwater in Martin Chuzzlewit (1844), however, offers a more ambivalent view of London,

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63 This is De Quincey's own phrase; The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey, vol i, p14.

64 ibid.

65 For example, 'the gloomy labyrinth of her thoughts' in Little Dorrit, Book I, Chapter 5, p84; and 'they were wholly unable to discover any outlet from this maze of difficulty' in Martin Chuzzlewit, Chapter 48, p744.

66 Labyrinthine houses include John Jarndyce's Bleak House; Todgers's Boarding House in Martin Chuzzlewit; The Warren in Barnaby Rudge; and Murdstone & Grinby's in David Copperfield. Such dwellings are often described as 'crazy'.

particularly with regard to the way the City's past impinges on its present, and the effect of the labyrinth on those caught up within it.

Oliver Twist

The labyrinthine aspect of Oliver Twist has been exhaustively analysed by J Hillis Miller in Chapter 2 of his 1958 book Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels. After briefly summarising Miller's findings in the first two paragraphs of this section, I shall discuss further aspects of the maze imagery.

Miller focuses on the depiction of London as 'an endless daedal prison',[67] filled with images of crushing, suffocation, claustrophobia and sensory and psychological confusion. He notes the number of journeys made through slum streets, which become narrower, deeper, dirtier and darker, and terminate in enclosed subterranean spaces. Fagin lies at the heart of this maze, writes Miller, exercising a 'centripetal force'.

Miller states: 'As in all of Dickens' novels, there is a mystery at the centre of apparently unrelated events which will make them turn out in retrospect to be orderly and intelligible. Here, the mystery is the secret of Oliver's birth.'[68] The characters in Oliver Twist move through the story like travellers in a maze, unable to obtain the overview that will make sense of their movements. 'The mystery, the unintelligibility, of the present is perfectly expressed by these scenes of multiplicity in a state of rapid, aimless agitation.'[69]

Oliver enters the London labyrinth (or, rather, the labyrinth engulfs

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67 J Hillis Miller, Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels (Harvard, 1958), p57.

68 ibid, p81.

69 ibid, p62.

Oliver) as soon as the Artful Dodger has led him through the Islington turnpike. The novel's first paragraph on London marks a dramatic change of setting:

'They crossed from the Angel into St John's Road; struck down the small street which terminates at Sadler's Wells Theatre; through Exmouth Street and Coppice Row; down the little court by the side of the workhouse; across the classic ground which once bore the name of Hockley-in-the-Hole; thence into Little Saffron Hill; and so into Saffron Hill the Great: along which the Dodger scudded at a rapid pace, directing Oliver to follow close at his heels.'[70] The jerkiness of this rhythm, and the speed and vigour of the short phrases, sets the pace for the book's London-based action. It also perfectly mimics the movement of travelling through a maze, with its sudden changes of direction; although the Dodger knows where he is going, Oliver (as in most of the book) is being compelled to move in a certain direction and at somebody else's speed. The movement of the two boys is clearly a descent: they alternately travel 'across' then 'down'.

This passage also underlines the furtiveness that rules the lives of all Fagin's protégés; the Dodger has had to wait until eleven at night to begin his scurrying journey to Fagin at the bottom of Saffron Hill and 'the house near Field Lane'. Fagin is at the centre of the Clerkenwell maze; he is also always to be found in the innermost room of whatever building the gang occupy.[71] He is at the heart of the book's topography, just as he is at the heart of its action.

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70 Charles Dickens, Oliver Twist (published in novel form in 1838), Oxford Illustrated Dickens edition (Oxford, 1991 reprint), p55.

71 These houses belong to another age, and have not made a happy transition to the 1830s, see especially ibid, Chapter 18, p128.

Both Miller and FS Schwarzbach have noted that the topographical detail in the lines quoted above paradoxically makes the streets seem less real: it 'shatters their particularity and renders them virtually interchangeable,' according to Schwarzbach.[72] The technique is used again later, when Sikes frog-marches Oliver across London:

'Turning down Sun Street and Crown Street, and crossing Finsbury Square, Mr Sikes struck, by way of Chiswell Street, into Barbican: thence into Long Lane, and so into Smithfield.'[73] Again, there is the violence of the movement, and the rapidity of the scenes passing before Oliver's eyes. The urgency of this passage signals that another climactic episode is imminent for Oliver (he is being taken off to commit a burglary for Sikes). The relentless listing of street names only serves to underline to Oliver how lost and bewildered he is by the multiplicity of London and the experiences that the city is forcing upon him.

Oliver's movements are also constantly hindered by London street appliances, as Charley Bates points out, with his customary hilarity: 'To see him splitting away at that pace, and cutting round the corners, and knocking up again the posts, and starting on again as if he was made of iron as well as them...'[74] By contrast, Fagin is able to move swiftly around the city, negotiating a route that avoids the main thoroughfares and uses only 'the maze of the mean and dirty streets'.[75]

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72 Dickens and The City, p46.

73 Chapter 21, p152.

74 ibid, Chapter 12, p83.

75 ibid, Chapter 19, p135. For another example, see the description of 'his unusual speed' in the opening paragraphs of Chapter 26, p184.

In The Mysteries of Paris and London, Richard Maxwell points out that the maze of streets in Oliver Twist is linked to two other recurrent motifs of convolution in the book: neckerchiefs and nooses – the stealing of the former leading inexorably to death by the latter.[76] The appearance of various types of knot throughout the novel underlines the idea that the inhabitants of this London underworld are ensnared, morally, physically, psychologically, and that free will is an illusion. Certainly, whenever Oliver does manage to escape the maze, he is seized and propelled back into it. Having lost his way as soon as he enters Clerkenwell, on an errand for Brownlow and Grimwig, Oliver is wandering, 'little dreaming that he was within so very short a distance of the merry old gentleman'. He is passing close to the centre of the labyrinth but is unaware that Field Lane is just a few walls away. He is then assaulted and pulled off the main street by Sikes: 'In another moment he was dragged into a labyrinth of dark narrow courts, and was forced along them at a pace which rendered the few cries he dared give utterance to, unintelligible.'[77]

The physical and moral labyrinth that Dickens had chosen for his setting was already a cause of concern to the authorities. In 1838, as Oliver Twist was being published in book form, the area was facing demolition, following a House of Commons Select Committee's approval for a new street to be built from Holborn Bridge to Clerkenwell Green.[78] The Act of Parliament

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76 Richard Maxwell, The Mysteries of Paris and London (University Press of Virginia, 1992), p74.

77 ibid, Chapter 25, p108.

78 Second Report From The Select Committee on Metropolis Improvement, 1837-38, H.C., Reports From Committees 10, XVI, 2 August 1838. Clerkenwell JP Samuel Mills told the Committee: 'The property is of a very inferior description, and the inhabitants are in a state of misery and destitution. There are slaughter houses, cat-gut makers, tripe-boilers, and bone-strippers; it is horrible.' p83.
The new road had, in fact, been proposed as long ago as 1765; but never materialised. The 'Clerkenwell Improvements' of the mid-nineteenth century turned out to be an expensive and slow project, with

legislating for the 'Clerkenwell Improvements' (which chiefly comprised the construction of what would later be called Farringdon Road) referred to the existing streets being 'extremely narrow, and almost impassable for carriages... the district is densely populated, and inhabited and resorted to by many persons of a vicious and immoral character'.[79] (As I shall discuss in Chapter Three, moral and municipal improvement were to be closely interwoven in the story of Victorian street demolitions.) To the Committee's horror, Frying Pan Alley, off Turnmill Street, had been measured and found to be twenty feet long but just two feet wide.

Saffron Hill/Field Lane featured regularly in newspaper reports of murder, robbery and fatal fires; and the cholera outbreak of 1832 had been particularly severe there, since the Fleet River (or 'Fleet Ditch' as it was more commonly known) had been both refuse tip and water source for many of the inhabitants. The district also had a long tradition of criminal folklore. Known as Jack Ketch's Warren (after the seventeenth-century hangman), Saffron Hill and its environs were also connected with the names Jonathan Wild, Jack Sheppard and Dick Turpin. It mattered little whether these connections had a historical basis; the myth was powerful enough. Oliver Twist was not, however, to prove Saffron Hill's last appearance in literature. Despite the demolitions of the 1840s, the area was to prove a fertile source of inspiration for George Reynolds, who is discussed later.

In the closing chapters of Oliver Twist, the Saffron Hill maze is abandoned for another, even more revolting, one: Jacob's Island in Southwark. This shift of setting, or 'pulling back' (to borrow a cinematic phrase), puts the whole of

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Farringdon Road eventually opening eighteen years after the Select Committee's recommendations.

79 Acts 3 & 4 Victoriae, cap. cxii, 23 July, 1840, pi.

the book into a new and shocking perspective: the maze is to be found duplicated all over the capital. Jacob's Island is just 'the filthiest, the strangest, the most extraordinary of the many localities that are hidden in London, wholly unknown, even by name, to the great mass of visitors'.[80]

Jacob's Island is a festering pile of wooden Tudor/Stuart buildings; the whole area is 'tottering', and is extremely difficult for an outsider to enter: 'The visitor must penetrate through a maze of close, narrow, and muddy streets... he makes his way with difficulty along, assailed by offensive sights and smells from the narrow alleys which branch off on the right and left.' This once thriving area has not made the transition to the nineteenth century, since 'losses and chancery suits' have left it fit only for those who need to hide from society. As in Saffron HIll, the houses are hollowed out and customised by criminals.

This shift in perspective is matched by another when we discover that Fagin is himself trapped within the centre of another and much more powerful maze, 'those dreadful walls of Newgate'.[81] In order to visit Fagin, Oliver and Mr Brownlow have to take a tortuous path 'through dark and winding ways', which are described in disorientating detail. This echoes Oliver's first circuitous trip to Fagin; but Fagin – in his subterranean cell – is no longer the organising principle of the maze. He is a terrified old man, and, reversing the former direction in the maze, he asks Oliver to lead him out. As with the introduction of Jacob's Island, Dickens has revealed that Fagin's maze was just one of many, and is now eclipsed by the power of the Newgate labyrinth. The prison itself centres around 'the hideous apparatus of

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80 Oliver Twist, Chapter 50, p381.

81 ibid, Chapter 52, p408.

death'.[82] As Richard Maxwell has pointed out, it is at this point that the gallows (prefigured throughout the book in the repeated knot images of the maze, the neckerchief and the noose) ceases to be an image and becomes real.

Oliver Twist is a world of lost paths, wrong turnings, dead ends, trap doors, secret hideaways and subterranean cells. Worst of all, as Dickens reveals in the final chapters, this world is found all over London.

Images of confusion and thwarted movement in London streets feature in Martin Chuzzlewit, too, written six years after Oliver Twist. However, the mazes here are of a less sinister nature.

Martin Chuzzlewit

'Todgers's was in a labyrinth, whereof the mystery was known but to a chosen few.' The celebrated passages at the end of Chapter 8 and the opening of Chapter 9 of Martin Chuzzlewit, locating Todgers's boarding house, combine the sense of London being both threatening and benign. One of the reasons that these words are so notable and so arresting is that Dickens mixes equal amounts of scorn and affection for this little backwater.[83]

Prior to the construction of new streets and the widening of some old streets in the City during the 1850s and 1860s, the area between Cornhill and the Thames just north of London Bridge was indeed a seventeenth-century warren. Dickens locates Todgers's at the heart of olde London, next to Wren's Monument of 1677, which was erected to commemorate the

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82 ibid, p411.

83 Charles Dickens, Martin Chuzzlewit (published in novel form in 1844), the Everyman's Library edition (London, 1994 reprint). The Todgers's labyrinth passage is found between pp122-130 of this edition.

destruction of the medieval city. However, the Monument is also a visual reminder that Wren's ambitious new look for the City came to nothing – that the beautiful boulevards he had planned were never realised. Wren's elegant, spare white tower is jammed up against a 'choice collection of dingy edifices'; and when Pecksniff and his daughters finally get to stand at its base, they are unable to see it anyway because the fog is so dense. The Monument ought to provide some sort of centre for London, but as Tom Pinch discovers, it harbours a cynical keeper, who is unlikely to give correct bearings and directions.

Its environment prevents the Monument from symbolising anything very much, until you get up on to the roof of Todgers's. Up there, the Monument's shadow throws 'upon the housetops, stretching far away, a long dark path'. Its straight line cuts right across the 'wilderness' that is the City; there is a striking contrast between Wren's rational aesthetics and the higgledy-piggledy street-plan below. Dickens then presents the amazing picture of the Monument gazing in terror, with 'every hair erect upon his golden head, as if the doings of the city frightened him', at the streets he is supposed to symbolise, but which appear instead to have grown organically, and independent of human will.

Todgers's and its surrounds are similarly anthropomorphised as Dickens describes how the sheer density of the City appears to be physically bullying the boarding house: it 'hemmed Todgers's round, and hustled it, and crushed it, and stuck its brick-and-mortar elbows into it, and kept the air from it, and stood perpetually between it and the light.' As with the best labyrinths, the area around Todgers's dictates the actions of those who enter it:

'You couldn't walk about in Todgers's neighbourhood, as you could in any

other neighbourhood. You groped your way for an hour through lanes and bye-ways, and court-yards, and passages; and you never once emerged upon anything that might be reasonably called a street. A kind of resigned distraction came over the stranger as he trod those devious mazes, and, giving himself up for lost, went in and out and round about and quietly turned back again when he came to a dead wall or was stopped by an iron railing, and felt that the means of escape might possibly present themselves in their own good time, but that to anticipate them was hopeless. Instances were known of people who, being asked to dine at Todgers's, had travelled round and round for a weary time, with its very chimney-pots in view; and finding it, at last, impossible of attainment, had gone home again with a gentle melancholy on their spirits, tranquil and uncomplaining.'

These people are behaving mechanically, going 'round and round', and this passage has an uncanny flavour to it. Despite its power, however, the Todgers's labyrinth is more bemusing than frightening. It renders the traveller passive and puzzled, although there is the potential for wickedness in this confusing state of affairs. After all, if one is unable to get to dinner with one's friends, how much longer before all types of human communication break down?

The weary wanderers, resigned to their fate of never reaching Todgers's, are in sharp contrast to Pecksniff in the maze. Ambitious, ruthless, self-possessed, he launches himself into the environs of Todgers's, intent on conquering their mystery: 'Mr Pecksniff, with one of the young ladies under each arm, dived across the street, and then across other streets, and so on up the queerest courts, and down the strangest alleys and under the blindest archways, in a kind of frenzy: now skipping over a kennel, now running for his life from a coach and horses; now thinking he had lost his way; now

thinking he had found it; now in a state of the highest confidence, now despondent to the last degree, but always in a great perspiration and flurry; until at length they stopped in a kind of paved yard near the Monument.' These lines have a staccato, rushed rhythm, in comparison to the meandering, hypnotic tone of the passage quoted before. To underline that the good get quietly lost in London, while the bad attack its secrets with gusto, Tom Pinch gives himself up to the maze:

'So on he went, looking up all the streets he came near, and going up half of them; and thus by dint of not being true to Goswell Street, and filing off into Aldermanbury, and bewildering himself in Barbican, and being constant to the wrong point of the compass in London Wall, and then getting himself crosswise into Thames Street... he found himself, at last, hard by the Monument.'[84]

This dizzying passage reads like a satire on the language used to give directions to strangers in town. After being whirled around its thoroughfares, London finally deposits Tom at the Monument and at Todgers's.

Todgers's itself is a labyrinth, but, again, it is a benign one. It is a confusing building, but it's a place of safety and humanity. It has 'a maze of bedrooms', and its basement is a 'grand mystery', which is reputed to be full of wealth and which belongs to someone else – no one knows who. Again, antiquity protects the basement's mystery, since its freehold arrangement is so old that no one alive can remember it.

The satire in these pages is a gentle one, with plenty of affection for this 'queer' and 'crazy' region; but Dickens' concern is, nevertheless, a serious one. The City's antiquity and air of neglect is at odds with progress and the

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84 ibid, Chapter 37, p578.

improvement of human affairs. The confusing streets; the forgotten, untended graveyards with their air of desolation and rottenness;[85] and the 'strange and solitary' pumps and fire ladders; these are all now enjoying a life of their own and are setting their own rules, since humanity has failed to intervene and redeem the area. It is a kind of quiet anarchy. It is also animism, and this whole passage has an air of the uncanny about it: people are behaving like things; things are taking on human attributes.

The local residents are making their own rules here, too, unseen by any authority. The merchants are founding 'perfect little towns of their own', while buildings are being made unsafe as their foundations are dug away to make stables.

Old things are to be seen everywhere: 'There lingered, here and there, an ancient doorway of carved oak, from which, of old, the sounds of revelry and feasting often came; but now these mansions, only used for storehouses, were dark and dull, and, being filled with wool, and cotton, and the like... had an air of palpable deadness about them.'

This is not nostalgia, nor is it criticism of the present; it's an observation of how London is just having to make do with hand-me-down structures that are inappropriate for the needs of the 1840s. The City was also having to make do with the antiquated administrative structure of the City Corporation (which notoriously managed to avoid reform until the Local Government Bill of 1888). The past has not been adapted for the present, and the stagnation which this state of affairs has caused shows in the heavy goods that are permanently frozen in mid-air, dangling from cranes; the constant traffic jams

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85 Mouldering and obsolete churches and graveyards are similarly treated with a mixture of melancholy and scorn in The Uncommercial Traveller (1860), principally 'The City of The Absent' and 'City of London Churches'. In Bleak House, Chapter 59, Lady Dedlock visits her lover in his graveyard, where 'a thick humidity broke out like a disease'.

brought about by the streets' impassability; and the intractability of the old men in the taverns who have somehow survived their Regency heyday and 'were much opposed to steam and all new-fangled ways, and... inclined to the belief that virtue went out with hair powder.'[86]

The Todgers's labyrinth offered a note of warning about the potential for total municipal petrification. That it is not condemned more strongly by Dickens may be due to his experiences in America in 1841-2. FS Schwarzbach has stated that during this visit, Dickens saw things that modified his antipathy towards the past. Among Dickens' many disappointments with America was his horror at the uniformity and sterility of the grid pattern of city streets. Of Philadelphia, he wrote: 'It is a handsome city, but distractingly regular.... I felt I would have given the world for a crooked street.'[87] If this was what the brave new future looked like, perhaps the crooked streets near the Monument had something better to offer after all.

'The Mysteries of London': a multiplicity of mazes

During the 'Clerkenwell Improvements' of August 1844, undertaken to clear a path for Farringdon Road, the Saffron Hill/Field Lane area became popular for sensation-seekers, as it was revealed that it was indeed riddled with secret passages, trap doors, subterranean rooms, sliding panels and escape routes across the Fleet Ditch. The Old Red Lion Tavern at No 3 West Street, a turning off Field Lane (and which was also called Chick Lane), was discovered to have been a warren-like house, hollowed out and customised

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86 Another picture of pub bores who loathe and fear change (especially 'metropolitan improvements') is found in 'Scotland Yard' in Dickens' Journalism: Sketches by Boz and other Early Papers, 1833-39, ed Michael Slater (London, 1994), pp65-69.

87 American Notes (1842), Penguin English Library edition, eds John S Whitting and Arnold Goldman (London, 1972), Chapter 7, p98.

to hide booty and prisoners on the run.[88] The building dated back to 1683 and was also called 'Jonathan Wild's House' by locals.

The 'Clerkenwell Improvements' revealed that Dickens' nightmarish vision of the area in Oliver Twist had been accurate in substance as well as in spirit: his 'poetic symbol of an infernal labyrinth'[89] had been a physical reality. It was a slightly uncanny moment in London history: things that had been assumed to be imaginary by middle-class Londoners had turned out to be real. The Times described how people from neighbouring districts gathered to see the street plan of Field Lane/West Street, once demolition had laid bare the outlines of the streets and buildings. They came to discover the key to the maze that they had been afraid to enter while it stood, but also to tour 'The Old House In West Street', as The Times named it. 'Royalty and parties moving in the highest walks of literature' were given a personal tour of the Old Red Lion Tavern by the vestry clerk, one Mr Wakeling, who had been issuing daily admission tickets, so the newspaper reported.[90] It would be interesting to know whether George Reynolds had been one of this party, since just two months later, The Mysteries of London began publishing in weekly instalments.[91] Its opening scene takes place in

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88 Reported in The Times, 6 August, 1844, p8, col e; 9 August, p5, col f; and 16 August, p6, col c. Also in Wykeham Archer, Vestiges of Old London (London, 1851), p6; and in George Godwin, Town Swamps and Social Bridges (London, 1859; reprinted by Leicester University Press Victorian Library, 1972), p9.

89 J Hillis Miller, Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels, p58.

90 The Times, 16 August, 1844.
Thomas Beames, in The Rookeries of London (London, 1852; reprinted in 1970), pp25-26, gives details of how the curious also came to view the remains of northern St Giles when it was demolished to make New Oxford Street. 'The recesses of this Alsatia were partially laid open to the public, the débris were exposed to view; the rookery was like an honeycomb, perforated by a number of courts and blind alleys, culs de sac, without any outlet other than the entrance.'

91 GWM Reynolds, The Mysteries of London (London, 1844-48); vols 1 and 2, First Series, abridged and reprinted 1996, Keele University Press, ed Trefor Thomas. All quotations are taken from this edition. Following a disagreement between Reynolds and his publisher in 1848, Reynolds continued the series as

'The Old House in Smithfield', which is in 'that labyrinth of narrow and dirty streets which lies in the immediate vicinity of the north-western angle of Smithfield Market'. Reynolds' readers will have recognised it immediately as No 3 West Street.

Labyrinthine streets recur throughout The Mysteries: Reynolds' London is a series of mazes. As Anne Humpherys has pointed out, 'in The Mysteries there is no geographical centre to London, a realistic detail, of course, and one way in which the real London, with its multiplicity of centres of power, is reflected in the novel.'[92] Humpherys is right, I believe, in pointing out that The Mysteries reveals the disconnected and disparate nature of London through its structure, and I would argue further that this effect is not purely stylistic; that additionally, it arises from the fact that Reynolds was writing for a massive but fickle weekly-serial readership. The series' sales were very high, particularly among the literate working classes, but there was no guarantee that they would remain so, and it is quite possible that Reynolds, a seasoned journalist, was juggling a variety of plots and milieux to hedge his bets and keep as many readers on-board as possible.[93]

Reynolds himself referred within the novel to the meandering nature of The Mysteries: 'The reader who follows us through the mazes of our narrative has yet to be introduced to many strange places.'[94] Settings were varied by the author in order to maintain interest and both the underworld low-life and

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The Mysteries of the Court of London, which continued to sell well until its demise in 1856. His publisher, meanwhile, hired two new writers (Thomas Miller and EJ Blanchard) and continued publication under the title The Mysteries of London until 1850.

92 Anne Humpherys, 'The Geometry of the Modern City: GWM Reynolds and The Mysteries of London' in Browning Institute Studies, vol II, 1983, pp69-80, p76.

93 Trefor Thomas' introduction to The Mysteries of London gives the estimated sales figures of 30,000 to 40,000 each week, pix.

94 The Mysteries of London, p64.

the 'society' action moves on regularly to new locations. The low-life scenes rotate through Saffron Hill/Field Lane, St Giles, the Mint and Shoreditch, and each new rookery is puffed as the deepest, darkest den of infamy when first brought into the narrative. This hyperbolic introduction to a section of central East London is typical: 'There is probably not in all London – not even in St Giles nor the Mint – so great an amount of squalid misery and fearful crime huddled together, as in the joint districts of Spitalfields and Bethnal Green. Between Shoreditch Church and Wentworth Street, the most intense pangs of poverty, the most profligate morals, and the most odious crimes rage with the fury of a pestilence.'[95]

The 'mazes of our narrative' meant that the plot of The Mysteries had a series of centres too. Weekly publication required frequent climaxes, but without the permanent loss of an intriguing character. This is a contributory factor in the endless 'back from the dead' episodes in The Mysteries.[96] Closure, when it does come, at the end of the first series, appears in a rushed, 'telescoped' form.[97]

In The Mysteries of London, as in Oliver Twist, the bad characters negotiate the city's mazes with ease; the good become hopelessly lost and are preyed upon by the various minotaurs they encounter. This was a well-established literary device; but there is an unintentional irony in Reynolds' use of it. Reynolds was a Chartist and self-appointed champion of the poor but reveals his essentially bourgeois outlook in showing that the wicked characters

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95 ibid, p66.

96 But I concede that the motif of resurrection (particularly with regard to the Resurrection Man) in The Mysteries has a symbolic function too.

97 ibid, pp326-7.

know the topography of the slums. The body-snatching Resurrection Man and his criminal associates can move 'rapidly along the narrow lanes and filthy alleys... They threaded their way in silence, through the jet-black darkness of the night, and without once hesitating as to the particular turnings which they were to follow. Those men were as familiar with that neighbourhood as a person can be with the rooms and passages in his own house.'[98] Working-class life was lived largely out of doors, and knowledge of the complexities of a locality reflected this; but here, Reynolds presents such knowledge as indicative of criminality.[99]

The labyrinthine streets are, however, less dramatically depicted than the extraordinary series of labyrinthine buildings that appear in The Mysteries, such as The Old House in Smithfield, The Dark House in Brick Lane, the Resurrection Man's dungeon and King Zingary's gypsy 'palace' in St Giles. The bowels of these ancient, rotting buildings contain horrors that are the nineteenth-century equivalent of those found in the dungeons of eighteenth-century Gothic fiction. Putrefying corpses and incest are just two of the revolting secrets revealed once the confusing layouts of these houses have been passed through.[100] At the other end of town, the Marquis of Holmesford's West End palace is a labyrinth containing at its centre a chamber devoted to sensual excess. 'The mysteries of Holmesford House'[101]

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98 ibid, p68.

99 In this passage Reynolds also makes the assumption that his readership are likely to have houses with passages and more than one room, and so another gap between intent and content is revealed. The book is full of them.

100 The excesses of Matthew Lewis' The Monk (1796) spring to mind when reading The Mysteries.

101 The Mysteries of London, p242.

is the Marquis's harem, in which he dies, drunk and syphilitic.

The Establishment, too, exercises its power through a series of menacing buildings, which have darkness and treachery at their heart. Newgate, with its 'dark, gloomy passages, where the gas burns all day long', is understandably one of these; but so too are the Houses of Parliament, Buckingham Palace and the General Post Office. Anne Humpherys has written that when 'we reach the inner sanctum, we find not some evil power figure, but – nothing'.[102] I would modify Humpherys's point, suggesting instead that the 'nothing' that is found is in fact malevolent – an absence of political will, and a moral vacuum. Such phenomena are difficult to depict in a dramatic way, and this may help to explain why some episodes in The Mysteries end in bathos. While the narrative is certainly gripping, the action well-paced and the symbolism a rich source of interest to the present-day reader, Reynolds' socio-political explanations of the horrors of urban life often undercut the power of his imagery. The intrusive didacticism frequently squashes the sense of the uncanny that has been built up. The Mysteries explicitly sets out to prove that the organising principle of London (and of the nation) is the aristocratic stranglehold on its resources and power. So while anything can happen in the book, we are never in any doubt as to why it happens.

Only Markham Place, home of The Mysteries' hero, Richard Markham, stands outside the labyrinths that constitute London, offering some sort of

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102 'The Geometry of the Modern City', p78.

103 ibid, p76.

moral centre, albeit a rather colourless one. Significantly, Markham Place is located on a hill in north London, and so offers the only overview of London: 'From the summit of that eminence the mighty metropolis might be seen in all its vastitude.'[104] But instead of attempting to tackle the 'vastitude' of London, Reynolds wisely focuses tightly on specific locales, giving a strong impression of the city's whole by holding its separate parts up to the light one at a time.

104 ibid, p19.

CHAPTER THREE Social reformers enter the labyrinth

While Chapter Two examined how three writers extended the labyrinth metaphor to explore ideas about urban life, this chapter investigates how the image of the maze reflected the anxieties of the medical profession, parliamentarians, sanitary reformers, architects, civil engineers and the various professionals who were concerned with the physical and social fabric of London in the last century. The centres of many parts of the city were increasingly believed to contain things that were deeply inimical to the values of the middle classes, who felt themselves to be in the ascendant following the Reform Act of 1832. The minotaurs of disease and crime were their particular concern.

In his 1986 book The City as a Work of Art, Donald Olsen has written, 'Let us rid ourselves of Dickensian and Chadwickian images... By contemporary standards, London was healthy and technologically advanced.... Dickens reinforced the false image by imposing his brilliant but perverse vision of London on the consciousness of both his contemporaries and of posterity.'[105] However, there is much evidence to suggest that Olsen is wrong on this matter; the various reports considered in this chapter are remarkably consistent in their 'Dickensian/Chadwickian' depiction of London. These commentators focus on the labyrinthine spaces of the city as the sources of epidemics, immorality, civil unrest and the alienation from mainstream society of the very poorest Londoners. Most of these professionals stress the sheer physical difficulty of entering and negotiating these mysterious spaces, and the bewildering nature of the experiences they met with as they undertook their investigations. While the intentions of these

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105 Donald Olsen, The City as a Work of Art (Yale, 1986), p23.

writers are not artistic, there is much in their reporting that is dramatic and vivid; considered together, their voices reveal a growing sense of urgency as the mazes reveal their secrets.

This chapter is divided into three sections, reflecting the three dominant concerns that arise from the reports: sanitation; criminality; and the difficulty of moving around in the city. [106] However, these three issues are inextricably bound up with each other in the discourses of the nineteenth century; as this chapter will show, no commentator took up one of these subjects without referring to at least one of the others. A typical example is to be found in the 1837-38 report of the Select Committee on Metropolis Improvement. In discussing plans for what would eventually be New Oxford Street, the report refers to 'the formation of a new, straight and spacious street into Holborn, suited to the wants of the heavy traffic constantly passing... provision would, at the same time, be made in a very great degree, for the important objects of health and morality'. [107]

The sanitary/health investigations have been placed first in this chapter. Although the fear of increasing criminality and social unrest came to a head in the 'Hungry Forties', I believe that it was the cholera outbreaks of 1832 and 1848/9, together with the London typhus epidemic of 1837/8, that gave the greatest impetus to discussions about the sort of city London ought to become.[108] Moreover, the epidemics first compelled middle-class

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106 The issue of civic splendour is also frequently referred to, but aesthetic concerns appear to be subordinate to the need for more practical 'metropolitan improvements'. In Chapter Four, I shall argue that this constitutes one of the main differences between Regency and mid-Victorian attitudes to the city.

107 Second Report From the Select Committee on Metropolis Improvement, 1837-8, H.C., Reports From Committees 10, XVI, pvii.

108 The 1832 cholera epidemic killed 6,000 Londoners (of a population of 1,778,000). The 1848/9 epidemic killed 15,000 (of around 2,300,000). Cholera struck again in 1853/4 and 1866/7. Figures taken from Anthony S Wohl, The Eternal Slum: Housing and Social Policy in Victorian London (London, 1977),

professionals to enter and embark on a study of the slums; but, as will be seen, the mid-Victorians found it very hard to divorce notions of cleanliness, godliness and commercial progress.

To the Victorian street-planners, the ideals of good health, respectability and the efficient flow of goods dovetailed very conveniently. While the wiping out of slums was not the main thrust of metropolitan improvements, it was viewed as a highly desirable side-effect, regretted by nobody except the poor themselves. Run-down districts were almost always the location for new roads and railway lines, since low-grade housing stock was the cheapest to buy up for demolition. As will be discussed later, the increase in overcrowding caused by the demolition of slum housing stock was to be an important social issue in the second half of the century. Dickens raised the matter in 'On Duty With Inspector Field' in 1851; and in the same year Parliament debated measures to alleviate the problem.[109] However, the desirability of removing old streets and houses was itself not questioned until the late 1870s.

Sanitary reformers in the 'hotbeds of fever'[110]

Central to the Victorians attitude towards disease was their conviction that epidemic illnesses were airborne – or miasmatic. Dr Thomas Southwood Smith, physician at the London Fever Hospital and author of A Treatise on Fever (1830), wrote: 'No fever produced by contamination of the air can be

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p16.

109 Anthony Wohl explores this subject in depth throughout The Eternal Slum.

110 George Godwin, London Shadows: A Glance at the 'Homes' of the Thousands (London, 1854), p2.

communicated to others in a pure air.'[111] Edwin Chadwick was rather more terse: 'All smell is disease.'[112]

That cholera and typhoid are ingested intestinally was not demonstrated until 1883; typhus was discovered to be spread by body lice. The Victorian obsession with fresh air and ventilation was to underpin their attempts to reshape the city, since it was felt to be the best defence against the diseases that killed thousands of the urban population each time they struck. One of the simplest measures to give the population more air was the abolition of the Window Tax in 1851; but much more drastic action was proposed. The recommendation of London doctors Neil Arnott and James Kay-Shuttleworth to the Poor Law Commissioners in 1838 was: 'Free ventilation by wide streets, open alleys, and well-constructed houses, to dilute and carry away all the hurtful aeriform products of the processes of society.'[113] Since the medical officers and health campaigners who entered the slums believed disease to be airborne, they felt their lives to be in danger by the very nature of their explorations; this is worth bearing in mind when we read their reports.

Ventilation also informed nineteenth-century discussions on moral improvement. London medical officer Dr Jordan R Lynch wrote to the Poor Law Commissioners praising the proposed plans for Farringdon Road, which would destroy 'West Street, St John's Court and Field Lane, with their

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111 Quoted in Anthony S Wohl, Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain (Harvard, 1983), p87.

112 The Life and Times of Edwin Chadwick, p217. Although Chadwick is the best-known figure in the sanitary reform movement, his accounts have less of the flavour of eyewitness experience, when compared to those of Hector Gavin and George Godwin, who are referred to in this section.

113 Appendix A to the Fourth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners, H.C., 1838, p69.

numberless intricate labyrinths and courts, the haunts of prostitutes and thieves of every description, in which fever seems to have taken up a permanent abode. I understand that the narrow area into which such a mass of life is impacted will be shortly thrown open to the city authorities.'[114]

Further east, and ten years later, medical officer Dr Hector Gavin went exploring the back streets of Bethnal Green. He made these investigations in 1848, the year that London was excluded from the Health of Towns Act, and the year that the second, and the most devastating, cholera epidemic was to break out. Foreshadowing Charles Booth's investigations at the end of the century, Gavin compiled a street by street, alley by alley, catalogue of Bethnal Green living conditions. The worst conditions were the hardest to gain access to: 'Another peculiarity in this district is the number of alleys and narrow lanes, many of them forming cul-de-sacs. The houses in these alleys are always of the very worst description.'[115] Narrow passages had to be negotiated before the small courts and lanes revealed themselves. Gavin could not help but get mired with filth himself, since the walls of the passages oozed with slime and the unpaved ground was covered with mud. Sometimes he was unable to continue in his steps because of the smell and a fear of suffocation: he was beaten back from entering Garden Place, James Street, by 'the most disgusting and sickening odours'.[116]

Gavin's narrative frequently takes on mythic, or fairy-tale, dimensions as he makes such discoveries as 'a table mountain of [human] manure', which

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114 ibid, p76.

115 Hector Gavin, Sanitary Ramblings, being Sketches and Illustrations of Bethnal Green (London, 1848; reprinted 1971), p18.

116 ibid, p9.

towered alongside 'a lake of more liquid dung... The decomposing organic particles which are ever being set free from this putrescent mass are wafted with each wind that blows over a population to whom they bring disease and death.'[117] Gavin's account is gripping, because its hard-headed factual tone is hard to maintain in the face of the grotesque phenomena he encounters, literally around every corner. It the innermost courts Gavin found the combination of 'moral debasement and physical decay... and the complete disregard of all the characteristics of civilisation.'[118] At times, adjectives, which do not seem powerful enough to express his feelings, start to pile up, like the heaps he observes: 'The space between Pleasant Row and Pleasant Place is, beyond description, filthy; dung heaps and putrefying garbage, refuse and manure, fill up the horrid place, which is covered with slimy, foetid mud. The eastern end has likewise its horrid filthy foetid gutter reeking with pestilential effluvia.'[119]

Such regions could no longer be ignored, as Dickens was to point out in Bleak House in 1853. Jo, the slum-dwelling crossing sweeper, infects people in high society, having himself been infected by Lady Dedlock's dead lover, who rots in an untended graveyard in the centre of a built-up area. Miasmatic diseases (the 'nauseous air' and 'pestilential gas' of Tom-all-Alone's)[120] seep out of the slums and into more salubrious regions. Dickens had made the same point in an 1851 speech in support of the Board of

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117 ibid, pp9-10.

118 ibid, p43.

119 ibid, p21.

120 Bleak House, Chapter 46, pp628-629.

Health: 'The air from Gin Lane will be carried, when the wind is easterly into Mayfair.'[121]

In fact, it was the activities of the private water companies and the inertia of the vestries that led to the outbreaks; but the slums were increasingly viewed as the cause of the disease. Dr Southwood Smith had described how on tropical islands, 'ignorant inhabitants' believed that malaria swamps in deep valleys were 'the habitations of malignant spirits'. In attacking such primitivism, Smith was not aware of how he and his contemporaries sometimes tended to demonise London's courts and alleys in a remarkably similar way.[122] But there is no doubt that the medical profession's reports led to a growing attack on laissez-faire's effect on London's health matters. They highlighted the piecemeal, ad hoc nature of Parliament's response to the cholera and typhus epidemics, and the 'dead-letter' legislation that was easily ignored by the confusing combination of vestries, Poor Law Guardians and sewage and building commissions. As Edwin Chadwick's biographer put it: 'The intricacies of London's sanitary administration were labyrinthine.'[123]

Quite apart from contagious diseases, the general physical condition of the poor was believed to be deteriorating quickly because of the absence of air and light in the crowded areas. The Health of Towns Association urged, in 1846: 'Go into the narrow streets and the dark lanes, courts and alleys of our splendid cities; there you will see an unusual number of deformed people... the pale and sickly complexion, and the enfeebled and stunted

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121 KJ Fielding (ed), The Speeches of Charles Dickens (Oxford, 1960), p128. The speech was made on 10 May, 1851; Dickens goes on to attack 'vestrylisation' and calls for 'centralization'.

122 Appendix A to the Fourth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners, p68.

123 SE Finer, The Life and Times of Edwin Chadwick, p306.

frame.'[124] George Godwin, editor of The Builder, did go into the narrow streets, in order to write his series of articles on the poor construction of slum housing. Referring to Reynolds' fiction, Godwin wrote: 'Deep are "The Mysteries of London", and so environed by difficulties that few can penetrate them. Few persons venture into these haunts... It seems difficult to discover the climax of London poverty and destitution. In every depth, there is a deeper still.'[125] Godwin wrote his accounts in a present tense narrative, describing the baffling ramifications as he turns this way and that through the winding alleys of Smithfield, Whitechapel, Holywell Street and Drury Lane, but also the 'many unwholesome parts in the fashionable west... in passages leading from the good streets.'[126] His progress is constantly thwarted by the narrowness of entrances, illegally erected gates and fences, piles of manure and the convoluted topography of 'this mighty maze... Petticoat Lane is a narrow thoroughfare, from which branch off numerous alleys and courts... The entrance is dark and narrow. Beyond are thirteen or fourteen houses, and narrow avenues pass here and there, not so regularly, but in something of the same manner as the cells of a honeycomb.'[127]

Godwin's conclusion was that the slums had to come down, both for health reasons and to expose the inhabitants to the wholesome influence of 'the good streets'. He wrote: 'If there were no courts and blind alleys, there

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124 Health of Towns Association Report on Lord Lincoln's Sewage, Draining &cetera of Towns Bill (London, 1846), p110.

125 George Godwin, London Shadows: A Glance at the 'Homes' of the Thousands (London, 1854), pp1-3. This is a collection of Godwin's early writings in The Builder, which was founded in 1842. Town Swamps and Social Bridges (London, 1859) is the follow-up volume.

126 London Shadows, p49.

127 Town Swamps and Social Bridges, p35.

would be less immorality and physical suffering. The means of escaping from public view which they afford generate evil habits.'[128] The notion that criminality too could be prevented by pulling down old streets is the focus of the next section.

'This lamentable evil': morality and the maze

That rookeries harboured criminals was not a Victorian concept. As far back as 1800, there had been calls for convoluted areas to be made more visible to the law-abiding world. One CG Stonestreet, author of the cantankerous pamphlet Domestic Union, or London as it Should Be, wrote that 'ruinous mazes... form a cover and shelter for people of the worst casts in society'. Such an area, Stonestreet railed, should be destroyed by 'carrying through the midst of it a free and open street. Let in that eye and observation which would effectively break up their combinations.'[129] From the mid-1830s, the demolition of slums on moral grounds gained a new urgency. The English Chartist movement was in the ascendant until 1848; and during that year, every capital in Continental Europe experienced revolutionary uprisings. Thomas Beames, author of The Rookeries of London, wrote that 'rookeries are among the seeds of revolutions... in connection with other evils, they poison the minds of the working classes against the powers that be, and thus lead to convulsions'.[130]

Petty, and not so petty, criminality was also perceived as having a breeding ground in the unseen regions behind the main streets, although

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128 ibid.

129 CG Stonestreet, Domestic Union, or London as it Should Be (London, 1800), p16.

130 p244.

reliable data was not available to back up these fears. Often, just the look of a slum and its inhabitants was enough to convince a middle-class Londoner of immorality. Many of the early street-planners suggested that the opening up of slums by driving new roads through could spread middle-class values since interaction between the poor and the wealthy would be increased. As the 1837-38 Select Committee on Metropolis Improvements put it: 'There are some districts in this vast city through which no great thoroughfares at present pass, and which... entirely secluded from the observation and influence of wealthier and better educated neighbours, exhibit a state of moral degradation deeply to be deplored. Whenever the great streams of public intercourse can be made to pass through districts such as these, the cure of this lamentable evil will be speedily effected.'[131]

The notorious district of St Giles was one of the first areas to be tackled. As early as 1836 a Select Committee had stated: 'By pulling down the aforesaid district, a great moral good will be achieved by compelling the 5,000 wretched inhabitants to resort and disperse to various parts of the metropolis and its suburbs.'[132] Since St Giles was also situated at one of London's most troublesome traffic bottle-necks, and had one of the highest death rates from disease, it was a top priority for destruction. (The Devil's Acre in Westminster; Field Lane/West Street; and Commercial Street, Whitechapel, were the three other major demolition and reconstruction schemes of the 1840s.) Douglas Jerrold incorporated the redevelopment plans in his novel The History of St Giles and St James. 'And now St Giles is to be wholly reformed. He is to be made a cleanly saint [changed] from the

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131 Second Report From the Select Committee on Metropolis Improvement, 1837-8, piv.

132 First Report From The Select Committee on Metropolis Improvement, 1836, H.C., Reports From Committees 10, XX, p42.

foul dark vault of a loathsome lane to the wholesomeness, the light, the airiness, the respectability. . .' [133]

St Giles' appalling reputation was centuries old, linked originally to the leper colony founded there in the twelfth century by Queen Matilda. Charles Dickens admitted to a minor obsession with the district.[134] The extraordinary formation of the Seven Dials in St Giles was described by Dickens in 1837 in these words: 'Look at the construction of the place. The gordian knot was all very well in its way; so was the maze of Hampton Court. . . But what involutions can compare with those of Seven Dials? Where is there such another maze of streets, courts, lanes and alleys?'[135] Fourteen years later, in 1851, Dickens wrote his account of a tour of Rats' Castle, a criminals' haunt in St Giles, which he visited in the safe company of police Inspector Field. 'On Duty With Inspector Field' was written after the completion of New Oxford Street, which had cut through the north of St Giles between 1844 and 1847, displacing thousands of people and doubling the rate of overcrowding in the remaining streets.[136]

One of the consultant engineers had specifically urged the 1837-8 Select Committee to follow a certain route for the road, because this would prove to 'be the means of destroying a vast quantity of houses which are full of the very worst description of people.'[137] Dickens, though, pointed out that far from

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133 Douglas Jerrold, The History of St Giles and St James (London, 1841; reprinted in 1852), p14.

134 'What wild visions of prodigies of wickedness, want, and beggary, arose in my mind out of that place!' he wrote; John Forster, Life of Dickens, quoted in Dickens' Journalism: Sketches by Boz and Other Early Papers, 1833-39, p70.

135 'Seven Dials' (1837), ibid.

136 Refugees from the famine in Ireland helped to swell the population in the newly reduced St Giles, from 1847 onwards.

137 Second Report from the Select Committee on Metropolis Improvement, p93.

reducing crime and letting in the light of 'respectability', the new road had exacerbated the conditions most likely to cause crime: 'Thus we make our New Oxford Streets, and our other new streets, never heeding, never asking where the wretches whom we clear out, crowd... We timorously make our Nuisance Bills and Boards of Health, nonentities, and think to keep away the Wolves of Crime and Filth.'[138]

Despite the obvious failure of New Oxford Street, Victoria Street (through the Devil's Acre) and Farringdon Road to reduce criminality, the 'Red Tape', as Dickens called it, was to keep repeating the same formula for dealing with old and run-down districts for many years. In 1875, Mr Leon Playfair, MP, told Parliament that 'dispersion' of paupers during street improvements 'is one of the greatest advantages of such a measure... the rooting out of the rookeries has been the cause of much moral improvement.'[139] Later in the century, a Mr Henry Hughes of Grosvenor Square wrote to The Times that Newport Market, a seventeenth-century rookery near Leicester Square, ought to be pulled down. Mr Hughes had had his gold watch and chain snatched nearby, and he and a police officer had tried to give chase. 'Notwithstanding the vigilance of the police officers, they are baffled in their efforts, owing to the maze-like intricacy of its rows of doorless hovels, harbouring and screening those who fly there after their depredations.'[140] Mr Hughes soon got his way, since Newport Market stood in the path of Charing Cross Road,

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138 Charles Dickens, The Uncommercial Traveller and Reprinted Pieces, the Oxford Illustrated Dickens edition (Oxford, 1978), p518.
In a similar way, Sala wrote of how Tattyboys Rents had been completely unaffected by the passing of the Metropolitan Buildings Act, Common Lodging House Act, Nuisances Removal Act, and the Health of Towns Act, in the late 1840s/early 1850s; Gaslight and Daylight, p231,

139 Leon Playfair, Hansard, vol CCXXII, 381, 1875.

140 The Times, 30 March 1880, p6, col c.

and was demolished in 1887.

The arrival of the railways in the capital offered the wealthier citizens a new way of regarding previously hidden parts of the city: they could literally 'look down' on the poor. Before the late 1830s, the opportunity to view the streets of London from above was restricted to trips to the top of the Monument or St Paul's Cathedral, the hazy panorama offered from Hampstead Heath, or going up in a balloon. The cutting of the railway lines through central London, which began in 1838, gave rail travellers the unexpected bonus of being able to look down from the viaducts into the streets of strange districts; what's more, this mode of voyeurism entailed no threat to physical safety. As Walter Besant was to put it, much later, in 1909, the railways 'opened up many parts of London which had previously been closed to the respectable people'.[141]

In The Mysteries of London, George Reynolds noted how anyone travelling by the Eastern Counties railway through Bethnal Green could 'obtain a view of the interior and domestic misery peculiar to the neighbourhood; he may penetrate, with his eyes, into the secrets of those abodes of sorrow, vice and destitution'.[142] The very rooms the poor lived in, the clothes they wore and what they ate, drank and smoked were opened up to the travellers' gaze; if he was really lucky, a passenger could spot a poor woman 'half-naked', washing her only item of clothing, Reynolds points out, rather heartlessly. Not for the first time, the sexual vulnerability of poor women unconsciously comes to the surface (note the use of the word 'penetrate' in the passage just quoted).[143]

This new angle, or perspective, on London was also described in Household Words, in 1850. Travelling on the line out of Fenchurch Street, the reporter looked down and noted that 'the streets and alleys form a sort

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141 Walter Besant, London in the Nineteenth Century (London, 1909), p271.

142 The Mysteries of London, p67.

143 ibid.

of labyrinth – a tangled web of dingy structures, ins and outs, and twisted meshes of lane and alley'.[144]

The cutting of the railways had mixed consequences for poorer districts. Such regions were the first choice for the site of rail and road developments because low-grade housing stock was the cheapest to buy up. Thousands of houses were demolished to accommodate the lines; and at least 50,000 people are believed to have lost their rented accommodation between 1836 and 1867. In a seller's market, the poor had little choice but to pack into already overcrowded streets.[145]

Far from opening up the labyrinths to the moral influence of the middle classes, the railways and the new streets were simply speeding up the segregation of the poor from the rest of society, while vestries profited from the increased revenue from the rates that redevelopment usually brought.[146] This was not likely to result in a reduction in crime and revolutionary tendencies. A letter to The Times in 1845 from 'Coronistes' complained that the 'march of improvement' was leading to the alienation of the poorest in society: 'The prevailing desire for wide streets, sumptuous shops, and spacious churches has overridden all feeling for the houseless multitude. A decree appears to have gone forth that the capital is henceforward to be the

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144 'What A London Curate Can Do If He Tries' by Frederick Knight Hunt, Household Words, 16 November, 1850, vol II, p172.

145 The Eternal Slum, pp36-37. Until the introduction of workmen's fares in the Cheap Trains Act of 1883, there was no way of 'dispersing' the industrious poor from central districts through suburbanisation.

146 This is stated as one of the aims of building Farringdon Road in an appendix to the First Report From The Select Committee On Metropolis Improvements, p26. 'The change from degraded to respectable classes of inhabitants [would bring] great improvement in the parochial assessments consequently available.'

abode of the wealthy and the comfortable.'[147] The Bishop of London took it even more to heart. He told the House of Commons that he could never travel along 'the noble streets which had been formed during the last twenty years without asking himself what had been the fate of the thousands of poor people who used to live upon their former sites'.[148]

Traffic: the broad lines of communication

The sheer difficulty of moving through London, either on foot or by carriage, gave rise to some highly enjoyable outbursts in print. CG Stonestreet made his irascible way around town in 1800 taking notes on the location and timing of the numerous traffic 'locks' his carriage became caught up in; and inveighing against the so-called 'widened' streets. Union Street in the Borough was, he exclaimed, 'a line from Nowhere to Nowhere!' According to Stonestreet, London was 'a *ſ*ink of filth! A ma*ſ*s of ruin*ſ*!'[149]

A humorous map was published 30 years later; it was a spoof on magazine puzzle pages, but operated at the level of an in-joke for the city-dweller baffled by roadworks. 'Labyrinthus Londinensis, or the Equestrian Perplexed – a Puzzle Suggested by the Stoppages Occasioned by Repairing the Streets' made fun of the number of impassable routes in the centre of town. 'The object is to find a way from the Strand to St Paul's without crossing any of the bars in the streets supposed to be under repair.'[150]

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147 The Times, 13 November, 1845, p6, col e.

148 Bishop of London, Hansard, vol CXXV, col 408, 1853.

149 Domestic Union, or London as it Should Be, p7.

150 Catalogued in Printed Maps of London; the original is held in the British Museum Map Library.

In 1834, architect Sydney Smirke took his readers on a ride through the west central districts of London, pointing out the lack of north-south roads, and showing that 200-year-old thoroughfares were still expected to take the traffic of a population that had tripled in size. His was a serious plea for the government to set up a centralised body to plan and finance the restructuring of the city: 'No parliamentary measure could be more truly patriotic.'[151] In Smirke's analysis, London was stagnating because insufficient money was made available by Parliament for reconstruction, while private property rights were considered to be so sacred that any public-minded schemes were compromised or simply abandoned.

Straight lines should push through convoluted, congested regions, stated Smirke, as he catalogued the 'strange irregularity' and 'ill-directed lines' of London thoroughfares. The kink in the road by St Giles church was 'very objectionable'; Clare Market was 'populous and ill arranged [and] the best mode of improving this district would be to open a spacious avenue through the centre of it.'[152] Smirke wanted to obliterate the streets of the past and create a city that reflected the new-found power, wealth and mores of an ascendant middle class: 'By some objectors we are told to "live as our fathers have lived before us," who, being content to jostle through crooked and devious lanes, were fain to make their fortunes in blind alleys, with the internal satisfaction that... their monies contracted no offensive taint from the foetid localities in which they were earned.'[153] The seventeenth century was a

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151 Sydney Smirke, Suggestions for the Architectural Improvement of the Western Part of London (London, 1834), p57.

152 ibid, pp52-55. This is exactly what happened with the construction of Kingsway, 1900-1905.

153 ibid, p2.

corrupt age, according to Smirke, and this has found its physical expression in the twisted streets of that era. The nineteenth-century city must, by contrast, be 'laid out as to be wide, clear and regular'. Corruption, stagnation, lack of communication, and the 'noxious miasmata' of disease would be eradicated at a stroke with the 'very beneficial purgation' that 'a perfect symmetry' would bring. The 'rotten core' of London would be 'cut out'.[154] These are medical references, which are perhaps not so surprising when it is remembered that Smirke is writing just two years after the first cholera epidemic. It is as though London can be given surgery; or an implant that would relieve a congestion.

Straight lines and perfect symmetry were also required by those in charge of building sewers. Henry Austin, in 1842, spoke of the need for pulling down the whole of St Giles – not just the northern part – and 'making a straight street, instead of a crooked line, from Bow Street to Broad Street'.[155] This would facilitate interaction between 'quarters of the town now separated by a labyrinth of lanes and alleys'. The image here is of the old, economically unproductive regions hampering commercial progress. Austin was involved in Edwin Chadwick's sanitary movement and was doubtless influenced in his love of straight lines by the knowledge that such streets were best-suited for carrying sewage pipes. [156]

According to the architects and engineers, London needed to have its

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154 ibid, p50-58.

155 Henry Austin, Metropolitan Improvements, p2.

156 In fact, Farringdon Road eventually carried in its central section a large drain to take over the functions that the Fleet Ditch had unofficially provided.

crooked 'no-thoroughfares'[157] replaced by straight broad streets. Appendices A, B, C and D are four of the proposed routes supplied to the Select Committee on Metropolis Improvement in 1838, and dramatically illustrate the intention to cut mercilessly through the existing topography. Appendix A is a proposal for Farringdon Road, and this was the plan that was adopted in 1844, and is the route we still travel on today. Appendix B shows the approximate line that Shaftesbury Avenue would follow in around 40 years' time. C and D are bizarre schemes which seem to have as their chief aim the obliteration of St Giles and the Seven Dials. Documents such as these capture perfectly the spirit of the age, and its attitude towards the city it had inherited.

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157 Dickens' name for the streets around Todgers's, where trucks constantly thwart the movement of traffic; Martin Chuzzlewit, p129.

CHAPTER FOUR Aftermath and Conclusion

'The nineteenth century substituted order for disorder,' wrote Walter Besant, nine years into the twentieth century.[158] Besant's verdict was a general one, but can be applied, with some reservations, to the map of London. By 1900, there were a significant number of new, wide thoroughfares, allowing for a greater volume of traffic and providing frequent interconnections with other routes. By comparison, the map of 1800 shows few roads that travel in one direction for any great distance; and central London has great tracts of tiny streets, impassable for two-way traffic. However, Besant's notion of 'order' does not encompass the disruption caused to small communities who stood in the path of new streets. In addition, the redevelopment of London was a painfully slow and piecemeal process, in comparison, for example, to Haussman's reshaping of Paris from the 1850s.[159] The rate of change did, however, accelerate in the second half of the century.

The Victorians may have hated the Georgian era, but they could not complain about the dimensions of eighteenth-century main streets; these were as broad and straight as those of the nineteenth century. Only third- and fourth-rate Georgian buildings were destroyed to any extent, usually because of railway building, not street improvement. It was the seventeenth-century streets, labyrinthine London, that was really under attack. Lane after lane was obliterated from the map, to be replaced by monolithic streets and buildings, as Appendix E reveals.

The creation of the Metropolitan Board of Works in 1855 is the most

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158 London in the Nineteenth Century, p271.

159 Donald Olsen compares Haussman's Paris to late nineteenth-century London in The Growth of Victorian London, pp56-59.

significant factor in the story of metropolitan improvements in London. The Board took over the duties of the Commissioners for Woods and Forests, a Crown office that had been responsible for planning and constructing new streets. The formation of the Board was the first step towards the centralisation of local government for London; it came about partly as a response to the third outbreak of cholera, in 1854, which had damaged the case of those who argued in favour of laissez-faire. The Board existed alongside the vestries, but took over responsibility for the entire capital's main drains, sewage disposal, and street and bridge construction; after 1875, it was invested with the separate power of slum clearance.[160]

The second half of the nineteenth century is a story of the very gradual erosion of the sanctity of private property rights, and a growth in the concept of acting – and spending – for the public good. If this seems too much like a Whig view of history, I shall temper it by saying that the actions of the Board continued to unhouse thousands of slum inhabitants, and that sanitary and sewage schemes continued at a snail's pace in the poorer districts, with many lives lost as a result. In addition, the drive for a more convenient and magnificent London led to the destruction of many beautiful buildings and streets, and the substitution of certain grandiose and uninspiring boulevards. Northumberland Avenue, Shaftesbury Avenue and Charing Cross Road, all constructed in the last 30 years of the century, were much criticised at the time. A more complex attitude to the changes in the physical fabric of London appeared to be emerging. A leader column in The Times in 1866 may be an early indicator of this shift in opinion. The unnamed writer took a walk through the area scheduled

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160 The full story of the Metropolitan Board of Works is told in Chapter Two of David Owen's The Government of Victorian London, pp31-46.

for demolition for the construction of the Law Courts in the Strand. He wrote: 'The extensive and complicated network of lanes, courts and alleys... is being fast deserted. A few of the winding thoroughfares are not yet disturbed... passage was rendered somewhat difficult by the human swarms whose modes of existence are among the unsolved "social mysteries". The grimy, stooping, unwholesome buildings wear an aspect of weird gloom... [In Clement's Lane] still stand some old houses, the very peculiar, perhaps unique, character of whose construction is worthy a visit.' He then goes on to muse on the 'roystering' that no doubt took place in these lanes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; then details the amounts of compensation paid, and the overcrowding in nearby areas that had resulted from the mass evictions in Bell Yard/Clement's Lane.[161] This article reveals a mixture of disdain and incomprehension about the left-overs of the past; and there is the customary dismissal of the 'swarms' who have made it their home. But there is also an unmistakable air of romance and wonder. Perhaps this is the early stirrings of the nostalgia that led, nine years later, to the founding of the Society for Photographing Relics of Old London. Two years later, in 1877, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings was founded by William Morris; and in 1882 the first legislation to protect architectural heritage was passed with the Ancient Monuments Act.[162]

The destruction of Tudor buildings triggered these preservation movements. The Oxford Arms in Warwick Lane, near St Paul's, was a wooden, galleried coaching inn, demolished in 1878 despite a campaign

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161 The Times, 12 November, 1866, p8, col c.

162 Gavin Stamp, The Changing Metropolis: Earliest Photographs of London, 1839-1879 (London, 1984), p17.

in the press to save it. At the end of the century, Cloth Fair in Smithfield, and Wych Street/Holywell Street were demolished; these were almost the last remaining examples of timber-framed houses with overhanging gables. All three had been inhabited up to the time of demolition.

The march of improvement now seemed to some observers to be robbing London of its flavour;[163] and the taste for the weird, wooky and wonderful found expression in such campaigns as the battle to save Northumberland House. In 1875, this sixteenth-century mansion stood in the way of the Metropolitan Board of Work's proposed route for Northumberland Avenue. Despite questions in Parliament and the objections of The Times, the Board refused to accept the revised plan of a gently curving street that would have left the house standing.

The Northumberland House demolition made it clear that aristocratic privilege was not going to stand in the way of metropolitan improvement. In a simultaneous episode, the Crown failed to have the Embankment re-routed so that a public road would not run at the bottom of aristocratic gardens.

This triumph of middle-class values highlights the difference between Regency and Victorian city improvements. Regency architects were just as keen as the later age to express splendour, wealth and separation between the classes in their improvement schemes. As Donald Olsen points out, Nash deeply opposed any plans to build homes for the 'lower classes' on the great estates;[164] while many Georgian civic improvements, such as the Westminster Paving Act of 1751, applied only to the main

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163 Donald Olsen points out that the Victorian love of flamboyance, eccentricity and the picturesque found its expression in the suburbs, rather than in the heart of town, in Chapter Five of The Growth of Victorian London, pp190-264.

164 The Growth of Victorian London, p272.

thoroughfares where the wealthy promenaded, and did not extend their powers to humbler streets.[165] These impulses were strengthened, I would argue, as the century progressed by three things: the awareness that London was now the capital of an empire; the panic triggered by cholera and fears of revolution; and the drive to connect up the centres of commerce and power within the city. Many of the streets listed on Appendix E show this last point. The Bank and Mansion House are points from which many of the new streets radiate; Victoria Street links Parliament and Westminster Abbey to Victoria Station; New Oxford Street and Holborn Viaduct created a single line from the shops and mansions of the West End to St Paul's and the Bank.

The physical shape of London in the 1830s and 1840s proved a rich source of inspiration for fiction. Its convoluted topography was a suitable emblem for the mystery and complexity of urban life at the start of a turbulent new age. For De Quincey, London was a 'mighty labyrinth', and his task was to figure out its centre and its meaning. The magnificence and multiplicity of the Georgian West End summoned up uncanny sensations of a secret organising principle. For Dickens, the maze could be intensely evil and destructive of individual will. It also highlighted the fact that London was failing to adapt itself physically to the demands of a new era, with potentially disastrous consequences. For George Reynolds, the maze was an apt and frightening metaphor for a society which had as its Minotaur a corrupt and unjust ruling elite; their actions dictate the movements of the rest of society.

The social reformers who went exploring in the slums found a maze-like structure that enhanced the horror and anxiety such places aroused.

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165 The City as a Work of Art, p219.

The London they explored contained hidden worlds with their own, alien customs and habits, many of which were perceived as potentially fatal if untackled. However, hindsight reveals that the straight lines that drove through these areas failed in all their stated intentions. The gradual improvement in the health of Londoners by the end of the nineteenth century, and the decrease in recorded crime that occurred from the 1890s, had nothing to do with street improvements; and the new roads simply attracted more vehicles, so London's congestion problem was only partially tackled.

The picture that was built up both by fiction and by official reports sealed the fate of many such districts. The last 30 years of the century saw the glimmerings of an appreciation of older London; but when new streets were driven through labyrinthine London in the middle of the century, no one tried to stop it. ●

APPENDIX A

REPORT ON METROPOLIS IMPROVEMENTS. 1838.

PLAN

Shewing the

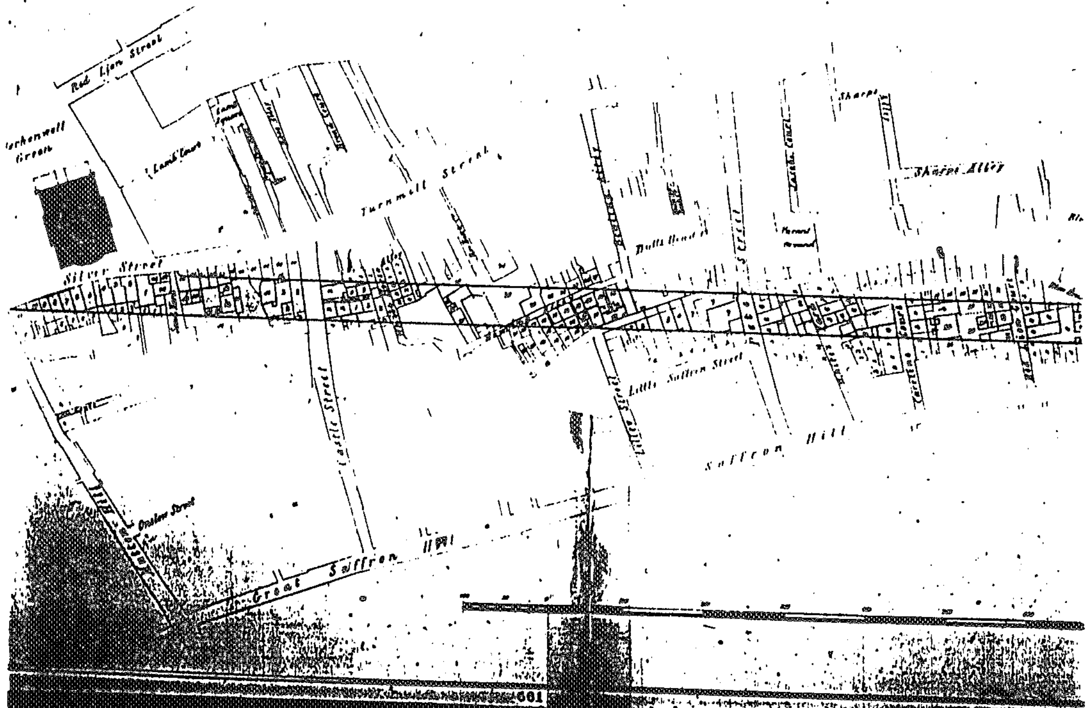
PROPOSED STREET

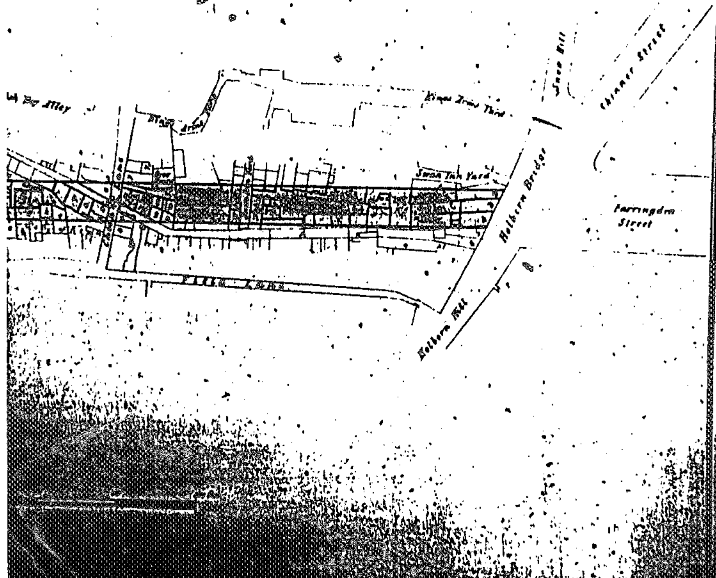
FROM

FARRINGDON STREET,

TO THE

SESSIONS HOUSE, CLERKENWELL.





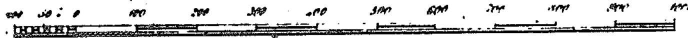
NEW HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT

APPENDIX. B

A. Nº I. Regent Circus to the British Museum, with branch to St. Martin's Lane.
The portion from the Circus to St. Giles' Church to be as wide as Regent Street

The YELLOW tints denote the Improvements contemplated in the neighbourhood

SCALE OF FEET.



DETAIL PLAN

of the

Proposed Thorofares

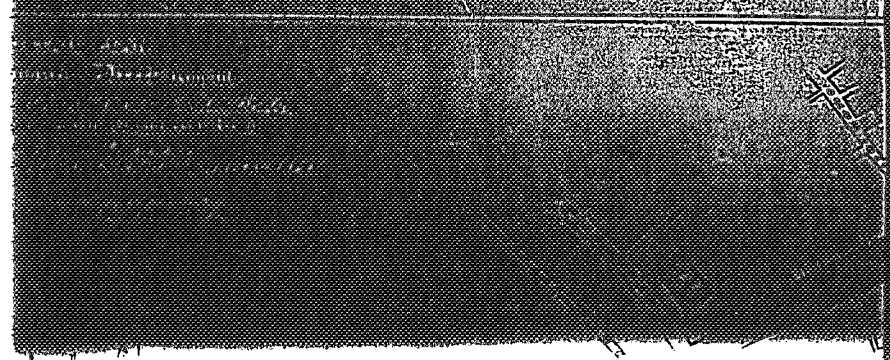
shewing the

HOUSES TO BE TAKEN DOWN.

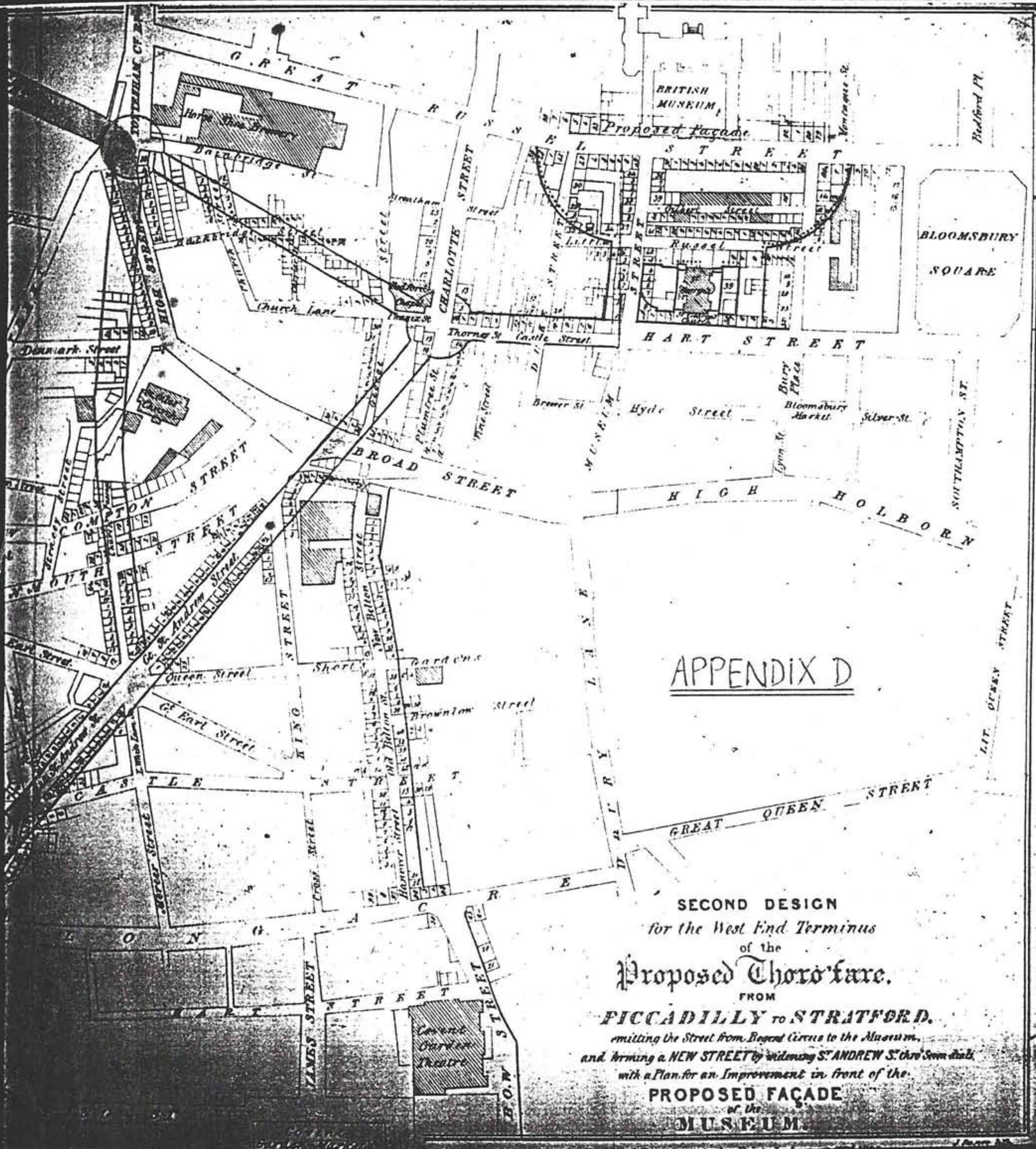
APPENDIX C

T. Marsh Nelson
Archt
Charles Street, St. James's Square
1838.

Ordered by the House of Commons, to be Printed August 2nd 1838.



SECTION of the VALLEY of the FLEET
from Clerkenwell Green to Hatton Garden, over which
the Viaduct is proposed to be constructed.



6. That it likewise appears to this Committee, that it is expedient that ...

APPENDIX E
A Brief Chronology of 'Metropolitan Street Improvements'

Date	Development
1817-1823	Regent Street replaces Swallow Street rookery in Soho
1827	Turnpike Act ensures several are removed to free up traffic
1830	Commercial Road built to take cargo to and from the Docks
1830-1831	Trafalgar Square built on the site of the King's Mews
1831	New London Bridge replaces the narrow bridge dating back to 1209
1835	King William Street built to connect Mansion House and London Bridge
1840	Moorgate connects Lothbury with London Wall
1844-1847	New Oxford Street built through the northern part of St Giles
1844-1856	Farringdon Road built through Field Lane/Saffron Hill rookery
1845-1851	Victoria Street, Westminster, built through the Devil's Acre slum
1848	Commercial Street built through Whitechapel slum
1854-1855	Cannon Street widened and extended to link St Paul's and Mansion House
1857-1877	The City of London undergoes massive redevelopment as banks and businesses buy up large plots and erect monumental office blocks
1859-1865	Joseph Bazalgette's sewers constructed
1861	Garrick Street built in Covent Garden
1862-1864	Southwark Street connects Borough and Blackfriars
1862-1874	Thames Embankment removes riverside housing and industries
1863	Metropolitan line underground railway opened, running from Farringdon Road to Paddington; more of old Clerkenwell demolished
1864-1869	Holborn Viaduct built; surrounding housing demolished
1868	Torrens Act passed, the first attempt to deal with the problem of overcrowding exacerbated by the metropolitan improvements
1868-1871	Queen Victoria Street built connecting Blackfriars and Mansion House; remains of a Roman villa and temple discovered
1868-1882	Construction of the Law Courts in the Strand; demolition of seventeenth-century Bell Yard and environs
1872-1879	Bethnal Green Road built through Shoreditch slums
1875-1876	Northumberland Avenue built, connecting Trafalgar Square and the Embankment; Northumberland House demolished

1878-1902	Theobald's Road, Clerkenwell Road and Rosebery Avenue built to improve East-West traffic flow
1879	Temple Bar removed (it had been known as 'the bone in the throat of Fleet Street', according to The History of London in Maps, p71)
1879-1887	Shaftesbury Avenue and Charing Cross Road built; Newport Market removed and the southern part of St Giles demolished
1900-1905	Aldwych and Kingsway built upon Clare Market, Holywell Street and Wych Street

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