

# The Survey of London's approaches to the history of East London

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*Abstract:*

The Survey of London began in East London in the 1890s. Its founder Charles Robert Ashbee had a strong socialist commitment to the advancement of equality through understandings of a common built environment. The Survey's first monograph, subtitled an 'Object Lesson in National History', was devoted to Trinity Hospital, almshouses on the Mile End Road. It interwove architectural and social history in a preservation campaign that emphasised the social value of historic buildings. In 1910 the Survey was taken under the wing of the London County Council (LCC) where its purposes knitted well with the dominant Progressive party's determination to raise historical consciousness as a counter to the interests of private property. After the Second World War the LCC took the Survey back to its roots to re-engage with development and destruction. An early fruit of this was a volume devoted to Spitalfields (volume 27, 1957). Not only did this bring attention to the district's previously uncelebrated eighteenth-century houses, but it also broadened to account for humble and recent buildings, even those of the inter-war period. In 2016 the Survey once again returned to East London, to work towards publication on Whitechapel, a place currently witnessing huge change. An innovation for the Survey is an interactive map-based website ('Survey of London – histories of Whitechapel' <http://surveyoflondon.org>). This allows the public to contribute knowledge, memories and images to research on the area, a melding of 'official' and 'unofficial' history that takes the Survey onto new methodological ground. It is also a reaffirmation of Ashbee's original mission.

*Keywords:* Survey; London; Ashbee; documentation; public history; unofficial history; interactivity; Spitalfields; Whitechapel

This paper is a short account of aspects of the documentation of parts of East London's historic urban environment. It is a view from the particular and peculiar vantage point of the Survey of London, and emphasises the work of that venerable collective project on which I am privileged to work. The term documentation is used here as signifying survey or recording, whether as a stimulation to conscience and conservation, or as a consolation or bearing of witness in the face of greater forces. The Survey of London can readily be understood as a form of 'official' discourse, but it was founded as an attempt to represent alternative and anti-hegemonic points of view. The paper concludes by describing a current attempt to integrate official and unofficial or counter discourses. So it is also about alternative narratives in a chronological sense, using the Survey as a case study of what has followed what.

Writing in 1984, Sir John Summerson looked back to his discovery of the Survey of London some sixty years earlier, 'since those early days there has been a profound movement, both

intellectual and emotional, in the relationship of Londoners to their city. To appreciate what the Survey has come to mean it is necessary to understand what this movement was about and the phases by which it proceeded.<sup>1</sup> That perception is explored here across an even longer timespan. The Survey of London was begun in East London in the 1890s. It was founded by Charles Robert Ashbee (1863–1942), an Arts and Crafts architect, designer and co-operativist entrepreneur. In the steps of John Ruskin and William Morris, Ashbee had a strong romantic socialist commitment to the advancement of equality through shared understandings of a common built environment. From 1886, when he left university, Ashbee lived at Toynbee Hall, then recently established under the auspices of the Reverend Samuel Barnett, as a ‘Settlement of University men’ in London’s East End, where Whitechapel meets Spitalfields, bringing Christian Socialist ideals to carry out educational and social work in what was then an impoverished and heavily Jewish quarter. Toynbee Hall was set up to ‘provide education and the means of recreation and enjoyment for the people of the poorer districts of London’ and to be ‘a name under which a society holds together, formed of members of all classes, creeds, and opinions, with the aim of trying to press into East London the best gifts of the age.’<sup>2</sup>

There Ashbee set up the Guild and School of Handicraft, a co-operative of local working men which in 1891 moved to workshops elsewhere in the East End, at Essex House on the Mile End Road, from where metalwork and furniture was produced.<sup>3</sup> The Survey of London’s first monograph, an ‘Object Lesson in National History’ according to its subtitle, was undertaken in 1894 and devoted to Trinity Hospital, late seventeenth-century almshouses, also on the Mile End Road, just east of Whitechapel.<sup>4</sup> It interwove architectural and social history, with highly various illustrations. There were careful record drawings, something that has remained a hallmark of the Survey (Fig. 1a). There was also an engraved view that emphasised context, including neighbouring terraces (often then deemed ‘slums’) and costermongers trading in front of the almshouses (Fig. 1b). There were as well sketches of social life, as of retired sea captains playing draughts and reading *The Shipping and Mercantile Gazette* (Fig. 1c). The strong emphasis on people and the life of the institution reflected Ashbee’s view of Trinity Hospital as an expression of charity and communality, in contrast to the commercial and financial forces that he saw as dominating his time. The campaign and publication did help prevent demolition – this was one of London’s first great conservation victories. Trinity Hospital is still there, though gentrified. In

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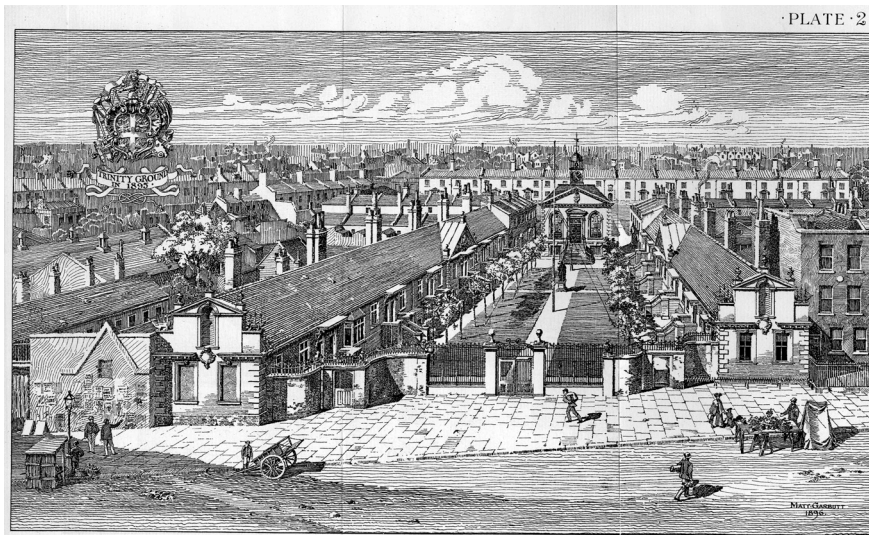
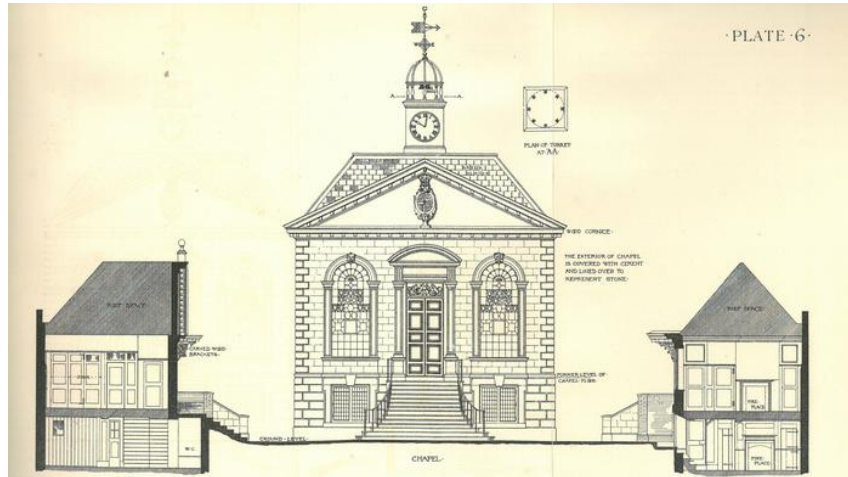
<sup>1</sup> J. Summerson, *The Survey: A Long View*, in *London Surveyed 1894–1984*, Greater London Council exhibition catalogue, 1985, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> H. Walker, *Sketches of Christian Work and Workers*, the Religious Tract Society, 1896, p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> A. Crawford, *C. R. Ashbee, Architect, Designer and Romantic Socialist*, Yale University Press, 1985.

<sup>4</sup> C. R. Ashbee, *The Trinity Hospital in Mile End: An Object Lesson in National History*, Committee for the Survey of the Memorials of Greater London, 1896.

Fig. 1 – C. R. Ashbee, *The Trinity Hospital in Mile End*, 1896: a) elevation of chapel with sections through almshouses; b) bird's-eye view from the south; c) sketch of retired captains playing draughts.

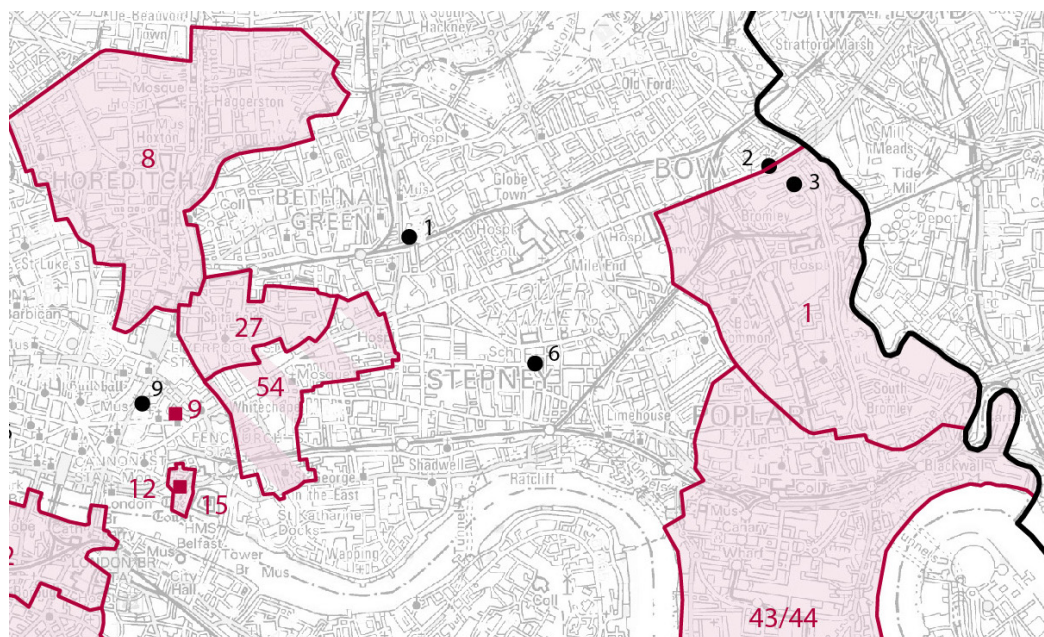




2018 it faces a new kind of threat, the shadow of a 28-storey tower. With his emphasis on the social value of architecture, Ashbee cultivated a strong link to the East End. The first area or parish volume by his Committee for the Survey of the Memorials of Greater London (not yet abbreviated to the Survey of London) was an account of Bromley by Bow of 1900 (Fig. 2). Already this benefitted from the auspices of the London County Council (LCC), the first London-wide municipal authority, formed in 1889, controlled by the Progressive party, and notably committed to housing reform. Ashbee's introduction was characteristically emotive and portentous in its rhetoric:

The greatest city of England—of the whole world—should not only look to the preserving of her historic record, she should go out of her way to see that immediate, that short-sighted considerations, whether public or private, should not intrude themselves. . . We plead that the object of the work we have before us, is to make nobler and more humanly enjoyable the life of the great city whose record we seek to mark down; to preserve of it for her children and those yet to come whatever is best in her past or fairest in her present . . . and to stimulate amongst her citizens that historic and social conscience which to all great communities is their most sacred possession.<sup>5</sup>

Fig. 2 – East London extract from the Survey of London's map of areas covered, showing parish volumes in red (1 – Bromley-by-Bow, 1900; 8 – Shoreditch, 1922; 27 – Spitalfields, 1957; 43/44 – Poplar, 1994; 54 – Whitechapel, forthcoming), and monographs in black (1 – Trinity Hospital, 1896; 2 – St Mary, Stratford Bow, 1900; 3 – Old Palace, Bromley-by-Bow, 1901; 6 – St Dunstan's Church, Stepney, 1905).



<sup>5</sup> C. R. Ashbee (ed.), *The Survey of London; being the first volume of the Register... containing the Parish of Bromley-by-Bow*, London County Council, 1900, pp. xxv and xxxvi.

Ashbee thus initiated a London-wide register of buildings of interest to bring together photographs, measured drawings and historical notes. It was not only the loss of London's historic and everyday fabric that distressed him, but also its degeneration into a commodity, without meaning for ordinary people. He saw old buildings through a philosophy of social enlightenment; they had the potential to educate and thus to enhance the lives of Londoners, like libraries or museums. Ashbee understood that survey is partisan not neutral, a matter of bearing witness, of providing evidence. It may not have immediate utility. One of its great virtues is that it can be laid down for posterity.

Institutionally, the Survey's late-Victorian roots lay with well-connected philanthropic individuals banding together to take initiatives when state engagement was not a possibility. In the development of systems for conserving historic buildings the Survey stands alongside other bodies formed in the same period – such as the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. There was nothing at the time in the way of statutory protection for London's building fabric so it was an imaginative departure. It came before the formation of the Victoria County History and the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, national bodies of documentation. At first the scheme was to be confined to the East End, but it was soon extended to include the whole of London. The idea of a register of important and threatened structures was central to Ashbee's project, but his vision was for something much more than simply a work of architectural history. The work continued. Members of Ashbee's 'Watch Committee' were given areas of London to investigate. Three more East London monographs were produced before Ashbee departed in 1907 and the committee's partnership with the LCC was strengthened and put on a more formal footing in 1910, when the Council undertook to research and write alternate volumes of the Survey of London, roaming across the metropolis, westwards and back to Shoreditch in 1922. In the process, a kind of informal 'official' status was conferred. Yet the LCC's patronage was part of its Progressive administration's determination to raise historical consciousness as a counter to the interests of private property. The Council's municipal political philosophy, and such there was, lay great emphasis on the historical origins of what we might now term the commons. The spearhead was George Laurence Gomme (1853–1916), the Council's Clerk (chief executive), who, incidentally, was a leading folklorist.<sup>6</sup> The LCC kept the series going, taking on an increasing share of the work. Part of this was photographic recording in advance of the Survey's research. Spital Square in Spitalfields was photographically recorded in 1909, an early date for the

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<sup>6</sup> K. Ito, *Municipalization of Memorials: Progressive Politics and the Commemoration Schemes of the London County Council, 1889–1907*, "The London Journal", 2017, 42, 3, pp. 273–290.

appreciation of eighteenth-century urban houses as historic. By way of comparison, the Royal Commission's inventory of East London, published in 1930, had a cut-off date of 1714. Spitalfields's buildings warranted no more than cursory mention, and no illustration.<sup>7</sup>

After the Second World War the volunteer committee finally disbanded. The LCC, which maintained its strong commitment to conservation, took over the whole project on a professional basis in the early 1950s. The Survey thereby became a part of the post-war welfare-state settlement. In the early post-war years attention had turned to Bankside and Lambeth, across the period of South Bank regeneration and the Festival of Britain.<sup>8</sup> The LCC then imposed a change of focus under a new editor, Francis Sheppard (1921–2018). As Summerson put it in the 1980s, the shock of war damage 'did not truly register until development started to move again in the 1950s. Then, within a very few years, there was what one can only describe as an "environmental revolution". It suddenly dawned on the people of London that the devastation of London by enemy action was nothing compared with the utter ruin threatened by the pickaxe and the swinging ball. This was the turn of the tide. It was then that the developer, from being a more or less socially beneficial figure and an emblem of "progress", became an ogre wielding Thor's hammer.'<sup>9</sup>

The first fruit of this re-engagement with development and destruction, war-damage and dereliction, was volume 27 in the series, published in 1957, and devoted to Spitalfields, Mile End New Town and the liberties of Norton Folgate and the Old Artillery Ground. Its preface starts: 'During the last few years London has entered as important a period of rebuilding as any since that which followed the Great Fire.' It goes on to explain that the Architectural and Historical Buildings Sub-Committee of the LCC's Town Planning Committee 'decided that the *Survey* should concentrate its attention upon those central areas of London – Westminster, St Marylebone, Holborn and part of Stepney– which contain a large proportion of London's finest surviving buildings.'<sup>10</sup>

Sheppard brought greater urban historical rigour to the Survey and the approach to recording under his leadership was increasingly inclusive, heavily influenced by his friendship with H. J.

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<sup>7</sup> Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England), *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in London, Volume 5, East London*, His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1930.

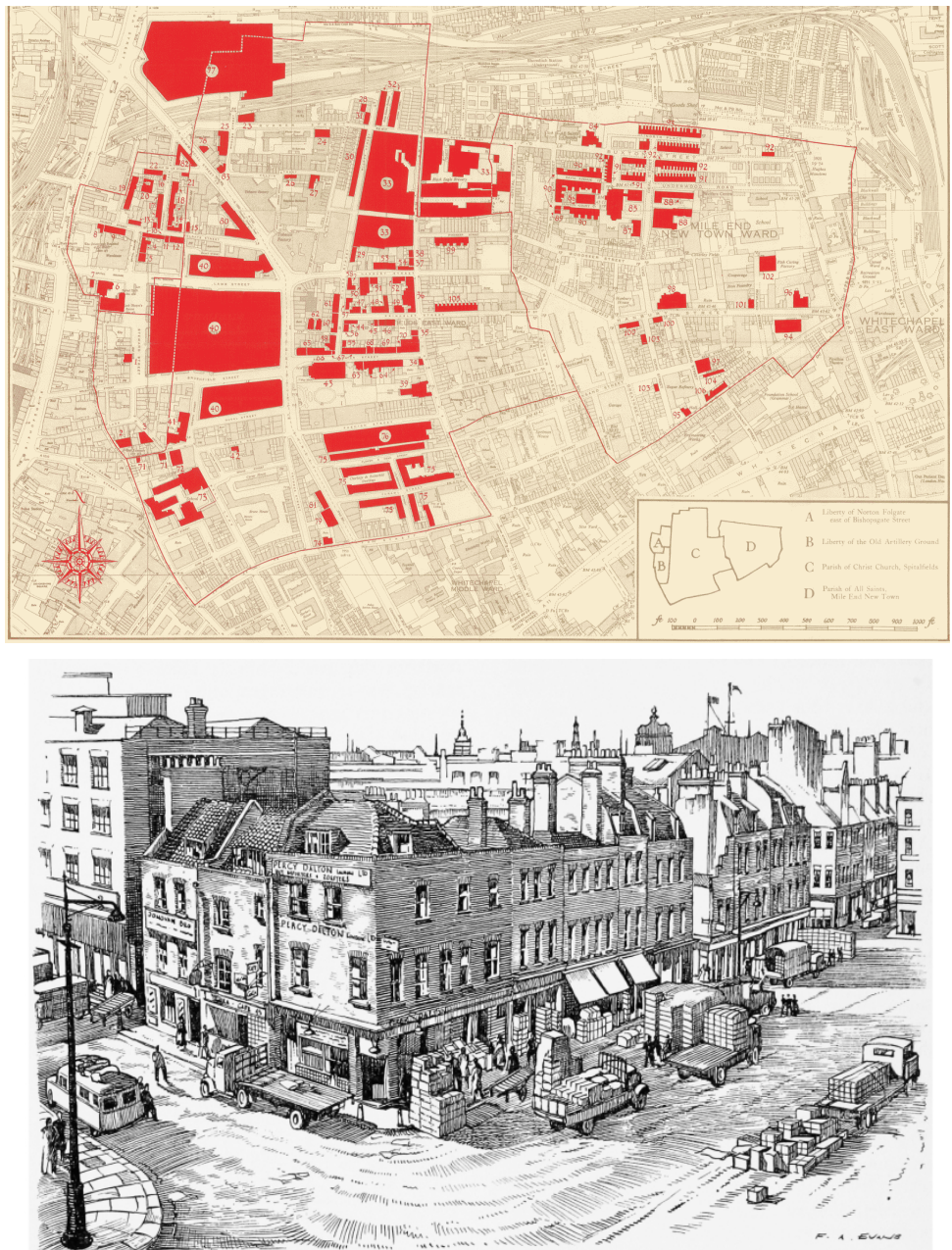
<sup>8</sup> H. Hobhouse, *London Survey'd: the work of the Survey of London 1894–1994*, Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, 1994, pp. 50–56.

<sup>9</sup> J. Summerson, *The Survey: A Long View*, in *London Surveyed 1894–1984*, Greater London Council exhibition catalogue, 1985, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> F. H. W. Sheppard (ed.), *Survey of London: volume 27: Spitalfields and Mile End New Town*, London County Council, 1957, p. v.

Dyos, whose pioneering work on London helped to establish urban history as a field of study.<sup>11</sup> There was still cherry picking, but the LCC's supervisory committee had decided (before the founding of the Victorian Society) that serious note should be taken of nineteenth-century buildings (Fig. 3a). Even twentieth-century buildings (this was the 1950s) were deserving of passing attention, and there were once again evocative bird's-eye views (Fig. 3b)

Fig. 3 – *Survey of London, volume 27: Spitalfields and Mile End New Town, 1957*: a) map showing buildings covered; b) Brushfield Street, view from the northeast, showing houses of the 1780s with market.



<sup>11</sup> See especially, H. J. Dyos, *Victorian Suburb: A Study of the Growth of Camberwell*, Leicester University Press, 1961.



The introduction, probably written by Walter Ison, among the more judgmental historians to have written for the Survey, concludes:

A return to a more amiable style of building is to be seen in the uniform ranges surrounding Spitalfields Market (1886–93), designed by George Sherrin in a pleasant semi-domestic style that derives from Norman Shaw’s work at Bedford Park. Sherrin’s building is preferable to the large additions made to the market in 1926–8, in which an attempt is made to clothe the shed-like structure with the dress of early Georgian houses. Neo-Georgian feeling of a better kind pervades the blocks of flats on the large Holland Estate, built on the Tenter Ground site for the London County Council between 1927 and 1936. The only other twentieth-century building that need be mentioned here, principally on account of its great size, is the faience-fronted factory of Messrs Godfrey Phillips in Commercial Street, built in the 1930s.<sup>12</sup>

In terms of both style and content much has changed since in the way the Survey of London conducts its research and presents its material.

Much too has happened in Spitalfields across the sixty years since the Survey of London’s volume on the area, and it is worth diverting briefly from the Survey to look at representational shifts in relation to this place. There had been some Listing (statutory protection of buildings) in 1950 and more ensued in the 1960s and 70s. Further, Spitalfields was an early beneficiary of governmental Town Scheme grants. But adjacency to the City of London meant that development pressures continued. The Spitalfields Historic Buildings Trust, founded in 1977, noted that of what it called ‘period houses’ in the area, ninety of 230 had come down in the twenty years since publication of the Survey volume.<sup>13</sup>

In 1981 the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, founded by William Morris as Anti-Scrape, bought 37 Spital Square from the Trust and has been based there since. The domestic industry (garment sweatshops) that had long sustained the local economy faded away and the fruit and vegetable market gave up the ghost and closed soon after *The Saving of Spitalfields* was published by the Trust in 1989. That book’s minority report, Raphael Samuel’s trenchant essay titled ‘The Pathos of Conservation’, echoed Morris in saying that conservation could, as he put it, produce ‘the opposite of its intended effect... Removing every memory trace, it allows neither imaginative nor physical space for the barnacles which have accreted over time.’<sup>14</sup> He insisted

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<sup>12</sup> F. H. W. Sheppard (ed.), *Survey of London: volume 27: Spitalfields and Mile End New Town*, London County Council, 1957, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> M. Girouard, D. Cruickshank, R. Samuel *et al.*, *The Saving of Spitalfields*, The Spitalfields Historic Buildings Trust, 1989, back cover.

<sup>14</sup> M. Girouard, D. Cruickshank, R. Samuel *et al.*, *The Saving of Spitalfields*, The Spitalfields Historic Buildings Trust, 1989, p. 164.



that ‘From the point of view of historicity, or even of aesthetics, there is no reason for privileging one period over another.’<sup>15</sup> The first volume of his *Theatres of Memory* of 1994 presented a barnacled looking 9 Elder Street in Spitalfields on its cover.<sup>16</sup>

Much more than barnacles were cleared, and a great deal more has been written about the history of the area’s buildings, both informed by and informing the Survey of London.<sup>17</sup> The Museum of Immigration and Diversity opened in a former synagogue on Princelet Street,<sup>18</sup> and Dennis Severs’s house on Folgate Street, a ‘still-life drama’ fitted out as a private ‘historical imagination’ of eighteenth-century family habitation, is open to the public and popular eighteen years after Severs’s death. Since 2009, Spitalfields Life and associated publications by ‘the Gentle Author’ have generated ever more enthusiasm for the place. And now Dan Cruickshank has published another book devoted to Spitalfields.<sup>19</sup> Is there anything more to say or do?

To turn back to the Survey of London, in 1986 Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative Government abolished the LCC’s still-uppity (anti-hegemonic) successor, the Greater London Council. The Survey was transferred to carry on its work from the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, which, despite its name, was another bastion of counter discourses, a haven for vernacularists. The Survey spent a spell back in East London in the late 1980s and early 1990s, for two volumes (43 and 44) on Poplar, Blackwall and the Isle of Dogs, in what had then been branded Docklands (Fig. 2).<sup>20</sup> Thereafter, and through a merger in 1999 of the Royal Commission into English Heritage, then the national body for oversight of the historic environment, the Survey’s itinerary was west, north, south and west (Knightsbridge, Clerkenwell, Woolwich, Battersea and Marylebone), not east.

Institutional upheavals continued, and in 2013 the Survey was rescued from possible oblivion associated with the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition Government’s thirty-five per cent cut to English Heritage’s budget, very fortunately finding a new home in the Bartlett School of Architecture at University College London (UCL). Thus, for the first time, the Survey of London is working from within a university. This means that we are involved in teaching, an entirely

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<sup>15</sup> M. Girouard, D. Cruickshank, R. Samuel *et al.*, *The Saving of Spitalfields*, The Spitalfields Historic Buildings Trust, 1989, p. 148.

<sup>16</sup> R. Samuel, *Theatres of Memory, Volume 1: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, Verso, 1994.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Another Georgian Spitalfields: Workshop Tenements in London’s Silk District’, in P. Guillery, *The Small House in Eighteenth-Century London: A Social and Architectural History*, Yale University Press, 2004, pp. 79–115; B. Cherry, C. O’Brien and N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England, London 5: East*, Yale University Press, 2005; C. Harward, N. Holder and N. Jeffries (eds), *The Spitalfields suburb 1539–c.1880: Excavations at Spitalfields Market, London E1, 1991–2007*, Museum of London Archaeology Monograph 61, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> See R. Lichtenstein, *Rodinsky’s Room*, Granta Books, 1999.

<sup>19</sup> D. Cruickshank, *Spitalfields: The History of a Nation in a Handful of Streets*, Random House Books, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> S. Porter (ed.), *Survey of London: volumes 43 and 44: Poplar, Blackwall and the Isle of Dogs*, Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, 1994; A. Cox, *Docklands in the Making: The Redevelopment of the Isle of Dogs 1981–1995*, Survey of London/Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, 1995.

welcome development. However, given our history and continuing commitment to public history, we are determined (and encouraged) to be in but not of academia. After the shift it was judged appropriate and timely that we should head back to East London.

Since 2016 the Survey has been engaged with Whitechapel, a parish area that adjoins Spitalfields to the south (Fig. 2). Work there will lead eventually to publication in the book series.

Whitechapel is another district under a great deal of development pressure, land values and demand for space pushing out from both the City of London and, at the area's eastern end, a station for Crossrail (the Elizabeth Line), London's biggest infrastructural project of recent decades. At the same time Whitechapel is a place with its own long and fascinating history of immigration that has strong architectural expressions.

Working with UCL's Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis, we secured a major Arts and Humanities Research Council grant that has allowed us to create a map-based website for our Whitechapel project that enables public participation (alternatively co-production or citizen history).<sup>21</sup> Titled 'Survey of London – histories of Whitechapel', this allows us to break new methodological ground, to experiment with possibilities for public engagement in the research stages of our work. Our website was launched in September 2016, promoted through local events and social media, and has since (to July 2018) seen 28,747 visits with 541 contributions that are enormously varied.

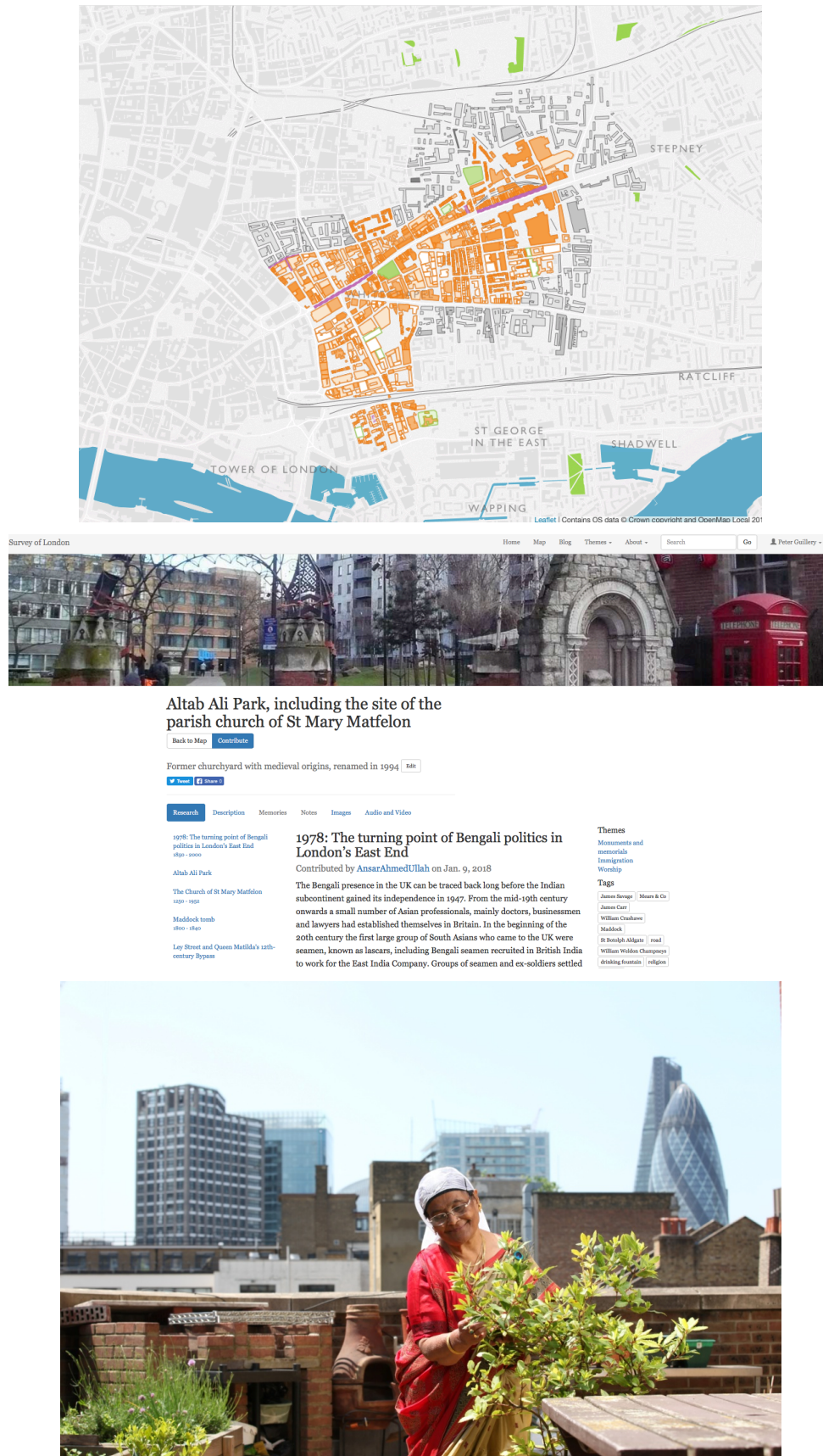
In an entirely innovative digital approach, the website map represents every one of several hundred buildings by an interactive vectorized polygon, for all of which there was at the outset a minimum of a basic description and a snapshot photograph (Fig. 4a). To help to show continuities across waves of redevelopment, there are historic maps underneath, the first edition Ordnance Survey map of 1873 and John Rocque's map of London, published in 1746. Tabs allow visitors to navigate between and contribute different sorts of content: research, description, memories, notes, images, audio and video (Fig. 4b). The online platform also permits us to be liberal with images, including short films. We have commissioned new photography, including a series of images of people in private domestic spaces (Fig. 4c), a film about Bengali restaurants, and drawn illustrations of outdoor life in a market, park and playground. Oral history is a significant component of the project, with more than fifty interviews being uploaded as audio and partially transcribed. We have also brought in external research by subject experts on Jewish architectural history, and lodging houses and co-operatives.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> <http://surveyoflondon.org>. The website was designed by Dr Duncan Hay.

<sup>22</sup> Derek Kendall and Rehan Jamil, photographers; Mile End Community Project for the film; Judit Ferencz, illustrations; Sarah Milne, Aileen Reid and Shahed Saleem, oral history; Sharman Kadish and Rebecca Preston, research.

Fig. 4 – Survey of London – Histories of Whitechapel: a) the website’s interactive map showing intensity of coverage; b) the head of the main page for Altab Ali Park; c) view to the City of London across the roof terrace of Mosque Tower, Whitechapel Road, in 2016, photograph by Rehan Jamil.



We are collaborating with a range of local institutions including Tower Hamlets Borough Council, the Whitechapel Gallery, Wilton's Music Hall, local schools, and the East London Mosque (London's largest mosque by attendance). That is something Ashbee might not have imagined, though public co-production or citizen history does seem very much in keeping with his ideals. Whitechapel is in many respects contested ground. Processes that are generally lumped together as gentrification mean that locally the politics of history is very much alive and kicking. There are numberless new tall residential towers, in which nugatory percentages of the apartments are even nominally 'affordable'. On Commercial Street, immediately opposite Toynbee Hall where Ashbee started, there is a new block called Kensington Apartments, a reference to west London clearly intended to attract moneyed overseas investors, with wanton disregard for any particularity of place. More of Whitechapel's old and variegated buildings and streets are set to be replaced by urban landscapes more akin to those of Singapore or Denver. Major historic sites are getting a full and fairly traditional Survey of London treatment, as for example the Whitechapel Bell Foundry, a remarkable place where the manufacturing of bells continued from the 1740s up to a controversial closure in 2017. This is a well-known site of major historic importance, but our account is the first history of the foundry's buildings principally based on primary documentary research. There is also an interview with Alan Hughes, the elderly master bell founder who was obliged to close the foundry. Our work has contributed significantly to a current debate about the site's future – the developer proposes a boutique hotel, while the Factum Foundation has advanced an alternative to keep founding and other craft work alive. Influencing change of this kind through educational ideals is far harder now than it was in Ashbee's day. We have few illusions about our ability to stem the capitalist tide, romantic socialist roots notwithstanding. Bearing witness sometimes can and must suffice.

The frontage to the west of the Bell Foundry has been redeveloped since 2016. Its history had not previously been investigated. Through the eighteenth century and up to the 1860s there were coach-makers here. A mission hall was then put up as infill and taken around 1890 by the Salvation Army, whose origins are in Whitechapel. The front buildings came down in the 1960s and were replaced by a single-storey wholesale clothing shop. This is entirely typical.

It is important to note the plural 'histories' in our project title. As far as possible, we are trying to avoid the creation of a hierarchy between Survey of London content and user submissions.<sup>23</sup> We want to integrate our own comparatively scholarly work, pedantic or elitist if you prefer, with community and individual narratives, without worrying about overlap or even contradiction. At the same time we are fostering an online environment that successfully solicits high-quality

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<sup>23</sup> Sarah Milne, *Heritage and the Urban Historian: the challenge of producing multi-vocal histories of place*, European Association for Urban History, conference proceedings, 2018.



submissions from contributors. We have had good material from a number of expert amateur historians. Architects are making images available, and family historians, whether current residents of Whitechapel or diasporic descendants, are submitting their research, sometimes remaining pseudonymous. Here is a contribution from ‘Nance’ about 102 Whitechapel Road, just east of the East London Mosque, and a humble building of 1852.

My Italian great-grandparents Filomena and Antonio Fusco ran a café and boarding house at 102 Whitechapel Road, from about 1909–10, but they were definitely there in 1911 when the census records them as having six children, one servant (Abe Goldberg) and 36 boarders - a total of 45 people all living in 10 rooms! The boarders’ ages ranged from 19 to 57, most were born in the East End, with a smattering from further afield – Scotland, Ireland and one from Austria. Most were occupied in low-paid unskilled work – hawkers, a tinker, a costermonger, general labourers – but there was a clerk, and a couple of tailors, which, like the fish curer and dock labourer also boarding there, is indicative of local employment. More unusual occupations included a coffin repairer and a farmhand. Antonio and Filomena ran this establishment until 1928 and at some point within the next three years the family moved to Fulham.<sup>24</sup>

There are, of course, theoretical and opposed ideological reasons for blurring the boundaries between ‘unofficial history’ and ‘official history’ to use Raphael Samuel’s terms, and the notion of *lieux de mémoire* looms large in our consciousness.<sup>25</sup> For present purposes, may it suffice to say that through interactive digital technology the Survey of London is striving to retrieve an aspect of Ashbee’s founding ethos, that of the craft workshop, to widen the definition of who is responsible for the authorship of narratives about one capital city (London), at the same time bringing those histories to a broader audience. Our Whitechapel project represents an opportunity to make good Samuel’s argument that ‘history is not the prerogative of the historian’, but is ‘rather, a social form of knowledge; the work, in any given instance, of a thousand different hands.’<sup>26</sup> It also offers an opportunity to build a deeper engagement with the processes by which our ideas of the past are constructed, and to what purpose these ideas are put in the present.

There is still a lot of London, even of the East End, yet to be covered by the Survey of London, and the commitment persists, maintaining Ashbee’s original mission. Ashbee was not a scholar, nor was he a typical conservationist; he saw historic buildings not simply as bricks and mortar, as isolated architectural compositions, but as a key part of the fabric of society, and the outcome

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<sup>24</sup> <https://surveyoflondon.org/map/feature/861/detail/>.

<sup>25</sup> Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory vol. 1: Conflicts and Divisions*, Columbia University Press, 1996, pp. 1–20.

<sup>26</sup> R. Samuel, *Theatres of Memory, Volume 1: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, Verso, 1994, p. 8.

and expression of changes to that society—broad, slow-moving changes. His reasons for recording old buildings, and for fighting to save them from destruction, were as much social and political as they were aesthetic. Ashbee's original purposes in forming the Survey of London are important because he grasped why buildings are worth understanding and saving and for whom they should be understood and saved.