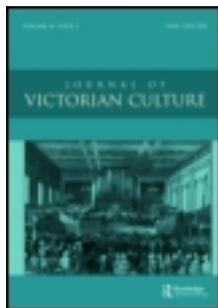


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Fragments of the Modern City: Material Culture and the Rhythms of Everyday Life in Victorian London

Alastair Owens^a, Nigel Jeffries^b, Karen Wehner^c & Rupert Featherby^d

^a Queen Mary University of London

^b Museum of London Archaeology

^c Queen Mary University of London

^d Museum of London Archaeology

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NEW AGENDA

Fragments of the Modern City: Material Culture and the Rhythms of Everyday Life in Victorian London

Alastair Owens, Nigel Jeffries, Karen Wehner and Rupert Featherby

Among the more notable shifts within the intellectual landscape of the humanities in recent years has been the ‘epistemological movement away from the cultural to the material, from questions of representation to matters of process, practice and effect’.¹ This renewed interest in materiality and the ‘more-than-representational’ worlds that individuals inhabit has taken many forms and has emerged in different disciplines in a variety of ways.² However, among cultural historians of nineteenth-century cities, interest in the materiality of urban life has been more limited. Indeed, in the case of Victorian London, the focus of much recent scholarship – emanating from a wide range of disciplines – has been on the immaterial: the construction of power, meaning and identity through representation.³ Interest in the poetics and politics of representations of Victorian London is now so deeply embedded in mainstream historical practice that there is a mounting case for looking beyond the narrative conventions through which the city was imagined – often, predictably, from a ‘lofty, white, male, middle-class’ viewpoint – to consider instead lived experience and practice.⁴

In this article we explore the potential of material evidence to generate new understandings of everyday life in the Victorian metropolis. Our concern is with

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1. Simon Gunn and Alastair Owens, ‘The Modern City and the Transformation of Nature: An Introduction’, *Cultural Geographies*, 13.4 (October 2006), 491–96 (p. 491).
 2. Recent work in human geography usefully traces these shifts see: Hayden Lorimer, ‘Cultural Geography: The Busyness of Being “More-Than-Representational”’, *Progress in Human Geography*, 29.1 (February 2005), 83–94 and Sarah Whatmore, ‘Materialist Returns: Practising Cultural Geographies in and for a More-than-Human World’, *Cultural Geographies*, 13.4 (October 2006), 600–10.
 3. See, for example, Lawrence Phillips, ed., *A Mighty Mass of Brick and Smoke: Victorian and Edwardian Representations of London* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007); Felix Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), chap. 8; Pamela K. Gilbert, ed., *Imagined Londons* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002); Alan Robinson, *Imagining London, 1770–1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004); Joseph McLaughlin, *Writing the Urban Jungle: Reading Empire in London from Doyle to Eliot* (London: University Press of Virginia, 2000).
 4. Alan Mayne, *The Imagined Slum: Newspaper Representation in Three Cities* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1993).

metropolitan material culture and particularly the objects and artefacts that were part of nineteenth-century Londoners' everyday domestic life. The focus is upon a particular kind of material evidence: the archaeological remains retrieved from recent excavations at sites across the city. We examine the broken, tattered and fragmented belongings of Victorian Londoners that were discarded into household privies. Thus, unlike most studies of nineteenth-century 'things', our focus is on the material culture of disposal and abandonment: artefacts that were thrown away, evidently unwanted or no longer of use to their owners.⁵ This evidence takes us away from what might be termed the *materialistic* culture of Victoriana – the items of luxury, novelty and fashion that are the meat and drink of many nineteenth-century studies of material culture and which are more obviously loaded with symbolic meaning and consequently linked to narratives of consumerism and bourgeois projects of 'material improvement' – to the rather more mundane, if not banal, material culture that sustained the everyday social lives of a variety of groups of people in the Victorian metropolis.⁶

As archaeologists frequently bemoan, this kind of material evidence has rarely played a central role in nineteenth-century British urban social history. However, in other contexts – notably Australia and North America – archaeological remains have been pivotal in developing revisionary histories of modern cities, speaking 'for those in the past who had no textual voice': the poor, the enslaved, indigenous and minority populations.⁷ For example, archaeological evidence has been used to challenge the homogenizing, universalizing and pathologizing slum images that dominate representations – and many subsequent academic and popular histories – of poor urban dwellers and the localities within which they lived. In locations such as 'Five Points' in New York, America, or 'Little Lon' in Melbourne, Australia, studies of this sort have reached beyond the bourgeois imagination to recast poor neighbourhoods as sites of creative struggle and resilience and of social diversity and heterogeneity, in contrast to their popular representation as places of unmitigated misery, deviance and squalor.⁸ Such research has demonstrated that archaeological remains offer the potential for seeing through the wilful misrepresentation of urban residents and communities in order to grasp something of the actualities of life in Victorian cities. Although, like any historical evidence, these objects cannot fully illuminate worlds that are now lost, they can cast light on

5. On the material culture of 'ridding', abandonment and disposal see Gavin Lucas, 'Disposability and Dispossession in the Twentieth Century', *Journal of Material Culture*, 7.1 (March 2002), 5–22 and Nicky Gregson, *Living with Things: Ridding, Accommodation, Dwelling* (Oxford: Sean Kingston, 2007).

6. On these kinds of Victorian consumerism and materialism see Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

7. Sara Pennell, 'Mundane Materiality, or, Should Small Things Still be Forgotten? Material Culture, Micro-Histories and the Problem of Scale', in *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*, ed. by Karen Harvey (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 173–91 (p. 174).

8. See Alan Mayne and Tim Murray, ed., *The Archaeology of Urban Landscapes: Explorations in Slumland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

quotidian social practices and on the negotiation of power and identity in the ebb and flow of everyday metropolitan life.

In this article we provide an example of how this approach might be applied to London. We draw upon household archaeological and other evidence to examine everyday life in an area of mid nineteenth-century Limehouse, known as Limehouse Hole. While initially a socially mixed neighbourhood, this riverside district was increasingly discursively mapped with the rest of Victorian East London as the underbelly of the city.⁹ A landscape of the residuum, a notorious slum, a site of transient diversity where the washed up foreign populations connected with Britain's imperial trade sought temporary refuge in common lodging houses, it became part of a familiar and enduring imagined metropolitan geography.¹⁰

While exploring what household archaeological evidence can reveal about a locality that was subject to such negative portrayals, we also want to use it to develop insights into the daily rhythms and movements that were a feature of life in this riverside district. Discarded household objects, often marked by years of wear and tear, draw attention to the minutiae of daily domestic routines: the preparation of food and drink and the coming together of people at different times of the day for their consumption; the grind of household chores; the care of children; or the moments of sociability, pleasure and release offered by alcohol and tobacco. The tattered and unremarkable artefacts that form the archaeology point to these diurnal 'pulses' of urban experience and the ways in which metropolitan lives were materially and socially reproduced. Archaeological remains also bear witness to other kinds of (slower) urban rhythms: the mobility of populations and the associated trajectories of people's lives within the city. Like many areas of London, but especially those which lined the river and sat close to the port, Limehouse was a place that experienced a constant churning of people, in, out and around the locality. Many of the objects that comprise household archaeological assemblages are those that were left behind as people moved on. The diversity of the material record – mismatched tea and table wares, for example – can be read as a stratigraphic accumulation of comings and goings. The deposition of the objects themselves – sealed in soon-to-be defunct privies – can be understood in terms of urban improvement: technological and moral interventions that sought to transform urban experience.

Grasping these rhythms requires us to take an analytical perspective which recognizes how the uses and meanings of objects shift over time and according to location. In our discussion we draw upon perspectives in material culture analysis that emphasize the importance of tracing object biographies and lifecycles, fusing this with an interest in the temporalities of metropolitan life and processes of residential

9. Paul Newland argues that this kind of discursive mapping of Limehouse can be detected in Charles Dickens' mid-century depiction of the neighbourhood in *Our Mutual Friend*; Paul Newland, *The Cultural Construction of London's East End: Urban Iconography, Modernity and the Spatialisation of Englishness* (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2008), p. 53.

10. For discussion of representations of Limehouse see: John Seed, 'Limehouse Blues: Looking for Chinatown in London's Docks, 1900–1940', *History Workshop Journal*, 62 (Autumn 2006), 58–85; and Newland, *The Cultural Construction*, chap. 3.

mobility.¹¹ In short, our aim is to consider the dynamic relationship between people and their things in an effort to better understand everyday life in a restless city. One important reason for doing this is that it begins to complicate any rendering of city life that separates ‘fiction’ and ‘actuality’, redirecting our attention to the ‘lived figurations’ of urban dwelling.¹² This necessitates an interpretative framework that considers what objects *did* for, as much as what they *meant* to, Victorian Londoners.

Our study pioneered for Victorian London the use of ‘ethnographic’ approaches that have been developed to research poor nineteenth-century urban communities elsewhere. These approaches interweave examination of archaeological artefacts with other kinds of historical evidence in an attempt to build up an understanding of urban neighbourhoods from the ‘inside out’, producing an ‘ethnography of place’.¹³ The scale of analysis is necessarily local, proceeding through the investigation of household archaeological assemblages, which perhaps relate to a single block of residential buildings. The objects retrieved from these households normally form the starting point of the study, but the ethnographic approach demands consideration of other kinds of historical evidence that provide a synthesizing context for the archaeological finds: information on who lived in the households; records of the physical fabric of the locality; sources dealing with landownership and tenancy; records of local institutions, as well as contemporary descriptions of the locality and so on. Beyond establishing this local context, there is a need to understand more about the objects that form part of the archaeological assemblages, such as their manufacture and cost and the wider socio-cultural contexts to their use and meaning. The distinctive feature of the ethnography of place approach is that it brings these different categories of evidence into an open dialogue. Interpretation involves tacking back and forth between different kinds of material and documentary sources, resisting attempts simply to fit evidence to existing historical narratives, but allowing theory and narrative voice to be ‘responsive to an active engagement with material culture and archaeological contexts’.¹⁴

Our project drew upon the archaeological collections of the London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre, focusing on mid nineteenth-century artefact collections from three contrasting metropolitan sites in Sydenham (south east London), Westminster (central west London) and Limehouse (riverside east

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11. For a useful introduction see Karin Dannehl, ‘Object Biographies: From Production to Consumption’, in *History and Material Culture*, ed. by Harvey, pp. 123–38. In this article the aim is not to fully reconstruct all the ‘biographical’ stages in the life of the objects. Rather, the goal is to be alert to trajectories that objects may have taken in relation to their place within the households of Limehouse residents and their ultimate disposal.
 12. Ben Highmore, *Cityscapes: Cultural Readings in the Material and Symbolic City* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 6.
 13. Alan Mayne and Susan Lawrence, ‘Ethnographies of Place: A New Urban Research Agenda’, *Urban History*, 26.3 (December 1999), 325–48.
 14. Tim Murray and Penny Crook, ‘Exploring the Archaeology of the Modern City: Issues of Scale, Integration and Complexity’, *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, 9.2 (June 2005), 89–109 (p. 93).

London).¹⁵ The site at Limehouse was excavated in 1993 during the re-building of a local primary school. The archaeological finds derive from a series of brick-lined privies located to the rear of a block of houses that fronted Regent Street (later renamed Gill Street), close to the River Thames. Inside these privies were discovered a range of household artefacts that were in circulation between the 1830s and 1860s. Local administrative records indicate that in 1857 an application was made to construct a new sewer and mains drainage for Regent Street and that it is possible that the privies were filled and sealed relatively quickly when they fell into disuse as a consequence of these sanitary improvements.

For the purposes of this article, our principal focus will be on the contents of two privies/cesspits that served numbers 14 and 15 Regent Street.¹⁶ The privy at number 14 Regent Street yielded the largest and most diverse range of artefacts from the site. In total 131 separate objects were identified – some whole, but most broken – including familiar and, in archaeological terms, ubiquitous items such as household pottery (which supplies just over half the total vessel count), glass wares and clay pipes. They supported a range of domestic functions, from drinking and eating, to health, hygiene and recreation. However, there were a number of more idiosyncratic artefacts that had been discarded in the privy: an engraved pewter tankard, a vaginal syringe, children's wooden dolls, a bamboo fan from the Orient, a number of nickel spoons, and an ornamental glass rolling pin. The privy next door at number 15 Regent Street contained a smaller number and generally less diverse range of artefacts. Among the 98 objects retrieved from this location were large numbers of ceramic vessels (mainly table and drinking wares) and a substantial collection of clay pipes. There were also objects relating to domestic hygiene, such as a wooden scrubbing brush. Amid the more unusual items were some children's toys and decorative 'moralizing' china with instructional inscriptions.

Understanding the processes by which and the reasons why these privies were filled with objects like those briefly described above, provides an immediate illustration of some of the potentials and challenges of using archaeological evidence to understand everyday life in the households and localities of nineteenth-century cities. Privies, cesspits and similar features offer a unique archaeological resource. As Penny Crook and Tim Murray have argued, they are a fortuitous but 'unintended consequence of sanitary reform', providing a material culture time capsule, illuminating a particular moment in a household's history.¹⁷ The act of filling and sealing a privy represents in itself a significant instance of the abandonment of a

15. On the wider potential for this kind of research in a London context see Nigel Jeffries, Alastair Owens, Dan Hicks, Rupert Featherby and Karen Wehner, 'Rematerialising Metropolitan Histories?: People, Places and Things in Modern London', in *Crossing Paths, Sharing Tracks: Future Directions in the Archaeological Study of Post-1550 Britain and Ireland*, ed. by Marilyn Palmer and Audrey Homing (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2009), pp. 323–49.

16. There were in total five cesspits serving this block of houses. Only the two serving 14 and 15 Regent Street are dealt with here.

17. Penny Crook and Tim Murray, 'Analysis of Cesspit Deposits from the Rocks, Sydney', *Australasian Historical Archaeology*, 22 (2004), 44–56 (p. 47).

material structure with important consequences for everyday social practices (the introduction of sewers, for example, meant that human waste and domestic rubbish began to be disposed of separately).¹⁸ But in relation to the main focus of this article, the existence of mid nineteenth-century cesspits as an archaeological resource raises significant and perhaps surprising insights that challenge dominant and popular representations of the impoverished Victorian East End. First, their abandonment is an obvious manifestation of a concern for hygiene and health, a theme that runs counter to the idea of 'dirt', which lies at the heart of the metaphorical repertoire of many urban writers and commentators concerned with poor urban communities at this time.¹⁹ Second, the apparently wasteful disposal of useful material possessions within these privies would seem to be at odds with images of extreme poverty and with the Victorian moral systems of thrift and prudence.

To take these insights further it is necessary to know more about the individuals who filled the privies and their motives for doing so. The last is a difficult task and we have been unable to trace any evidence of this process.²⁰ Nevertheless, household archaeology of this sort is often founded upon the assumption that objects in privies were sourced from their adjoining household and that it can therefore be assumed that they were once in the possession of that household's residents. Frequently, as is the case here, the objects retrieved from a domestic cesspit do suggest a strong connection within the adjoining household. The deposition of material artefacts may have occurred over a few years, particularly as residents moved in and out of the properties. However, it is also possible that as a consequence of sanitary improvement, the privy was filled more rapidly and the contents acquired from elsewhere for this purpose.

These uncertainties are a source of concern to many historical archaeologists, yet they do not invalidate the use of archaeological remains as a source for understanding everyday life in Victorian cities.²¹ We would claim that in any locality (like Limehouse) where there is a rapid turnover of residents the need to link specific objects to particular people is secondary to recognizing how deposits of material culture provide insights into mobility and transience which complicate patterns of possession and ownership. Moreover, the artefacts present in the privies still point towards some of the routines and restless social experiences of everyday life in this locality, even if in a more anonymous way.

18. See Kathleen Wheeler, 'Theoretical and Methodological Considerations for Excavating Privies', *Historical Archaeology*, 34.1 (Spring 2000), 3–19.

19. On the symbolic agency of 'dirt' see Tom Crook, 'Putting Matter in its Right Place: Dirt, Time and Regeneration in Mid-Victorian Britain', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 13.2 (Autumn 2008), 200–22.

20. See Nigel Jeffries, 'The Metropolis Management Act and the Archaeology of Sanitary Reform in the London Borough of Lambeth 1856–1886', *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, 40.2 (September 2006), 272–90.

21. Diana di Zerega Wall, 'The Language of Plates', Presentation given to the 'Poverty In-Depth: New International Perspectives Symposium', York Archaeological Trust, York, 2–4 July 2009.

The block of terraced houses that included numbers 14 and 15 Regent Street was developed by local lime and timber merchant Jeremiah Rosher. Rosher's estate comprised several streets around the area known as Limehouse Hole; the east side of Regent Street was laid out by surveyor William Robert Laxton sometime around 1811.²² The houses were two storey terraces with 15 feet frontages; rents were modest and in line with the generally low levels in the neighbourhood.²³ By the middle part of the century the street was gaining something of a negative reputation; newspapers disapprovingly reported the prosecution of brothel keepers – by 1897 this and a neighbouring street was dismissed by William Booth's researchers as 'a nest of brothels frequented by common seamen of every nationality'.²⁴

Over the middle decades of the century a large number of individuals and families lived in our houses in Regent Street: some were poor and unskilled, others skilled and probably a little better off. At number 14, for example, the 1841 census shows the building to have been split between two families (probably each taking a different floor). The first was headed by a brass founder, William Jones, who lived with his wife Elizabeth and three children under the age of nine. Sarah Gibbons, a 60-year-old widow of independent means headed the second family group, residing with her son Robert, a butcher. By 1861 the census reveals a cramped property with eleven inhabitants. Split between three family groups, each was headed by unskilled males; two employed as dock labourers, with the last having 'no profession'. Next door, at number 15, residency was more stable: the widowed Elizabeth Garland lived in the property as its owner (she also owned number 14) from the early 1850s to the mid 1860s in the company of a long-term lodging family headed by Henry Sampson, a shipwright. Henry, his wife Mary and daughter Mary were at this address for well over twenty years having also been present there at the time of the 1841 census.

Multiple occupancy and frequent residential moves are well-established features of Victorian cities, especially of their poorer areas, where there was constant mobility.²⁵ In London, as was the case in other British cities, these moves were often local as well as regular, leading to the conclusion that in spite of intensive mobility there was still a degree of community stability.²⁶ The picture of residency for Limehouse derived from the census misses the continuing movement of people in

22. The leases begin 25 December 1811. See London Metropolitan Archives MDR/1812/3/348.

23. Anon, 'Limehouse Hole: The Inland Area', in *Survey of London: Volumes 43 and 44: Poplar, Blackwall and Isle of Dogs*, ed. by Hermione Hobhouse (London: Athlone, 1994), pp. 397–406 <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=46509>> [accessed online 20 December 2009].

24. The prosecution of brothel keepers took place at the Middlesex Sessions, 13 October 1860. For Booth's description see: 'Walk with Mr Carter, District Inspector of Police, 28 May 1897', Notebook 346, pp. 126–27, in *Charles Booth Online Archive* <<http://booth.lse.ac.uk/notebooks/b346/jpg/81.html>> [accessed online 5 March 2010]. The street was coloured black 'semi-vicious and criminal' on the accompanying map.

25. Colin G. Pooley, 'Residential Mobility in the Victorian City', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, n.s., 4.2 (July 1979), 258–77.

26. See, for example, David R. Green and Alan Parton, 'Slums and Slum Life in Victorian England: London and Birmingham at Mid-Century', in *Slums*, ed. by Martin Gaskell (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1990), pp. 17–91.

and out of Regent Street in the inter-censal years, some understanding of which we were able to glean from local rate books and trade directories. Moreover, in this riverside area of London, there would have been many who sought more temporary lodgings and shorter stays and whose presence would have been unrecorded. What can material evidence tell us about this mobile and transient riverside community? We first focus on some of the everyday routines and experiences of our Limehouse householders, before using one of the more unusual artefacts to raise questions about the other moments of transition and experiences of mobility in this locality.

The mundane and banal quality of much nineteenth-century archaeological evidence is one of its most interesting and insightful qualities. In his seminal study of the material culture of early American life, *In Small Things Forgotten*, James Deetz articulated most persuasively the value of studying 'little and insignificant things' in order to understand the full breadth of social experience and practice.²⁷ Amidst the assemblages for our Limehouse households are large numbers of commonplace and seemingly valueless artefacts, objects often undocumented and therefore invisible to the historian, but which, as we suggested earlier, offer a palpable sense of the routines that sustained domestic life in the city. Moreover, the materiality of these objects – their physical condition and appearance – adds further insights into these everyday social practices and experiences.

Clay pipes were found in the cesspits relating to all of our properties and are among the most common nineteenth-century archaeological finds. Smoking tobacco was an activity important at all levels of Victorian society and although predominantly a male pastime, among poorer communities visual evidence suggests that women also sometimes enjoyed a pipe. The pipes at Limehouse were nearly all locally made in neighbourhoods either side of the river; the largest collection was manufactured by John Ford who was based in Stepney (from 1805 to 1860). They carry varying designs. While some are plain, most of the bowls have decorative mouldings – foliage, ribbing, wheatsheaves and the Prince of Wales' Feathers – and probably cost a little more than the simpler varieties. Several of the pipes found at 14 Regent Street appear to have been cast from the same mould, indicating (as was the norm) that they had been bought in bulk. Pipes were often available in public houses, or could be brought from a local retailer or hawker. Diagonally opposite the houses on Regent Street lay the Spread Eagle Tavern (a tankard bearing its name was another item found in the privy at number 14), which was a likely local venue for purchasing and using the pipes. Smoking was a commonplace and relatively inexpensive pastime: the cost of pipes was not great and they had a short life span – anything from a few days to a few weeks. This might be lengthened by snapping off bits of stem that had become blocked or attempting to widen bore holes; some evidence of both is present among the pipe remains. Tobacco was readily available and could be bought in bulk and stored: the privy at the rear of the adjacent 16 Regent Street contained two, relatively inexpensive but attractively decorated, yellowware tobacco jars and the largest collection of pipes.

27. James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life* (London: Anchor Books, 1996).

All the examples of pipes in the privies show evidence of being well-smoked – they were scorched with clogged or broken stems – hinting at the importance of this routine social pleasure. Smoking was a mobile activity that might be combined with working as well as leisure and sociability. Within a diverse and fast-changing locality, the pipe was a common currency and could be a shared social experience. While the pub would form one important context where males might have smoked, the presence of tobacco jars in one of the privies also suggests a domestic context to pipe-smoking. Smoking was commonplace but it was important. It crossed the different boundaries of everyday life, reducing nerves, offering relaxation and easing hunger; it kept pace with the daily routines of working, eating, drinking and socializing.

Another daily routine that stands out from the archaeological materials is tea drinking. Material evidence for the drinking of this beverage was in much greater abundance than that for alcohol, even though contemporary descriptions of London's poorer districts tended to emphasize the problem of drunkenness. A relatively small amount of mismatched glassware for the consumption of wine, a number of broken wine bottles – quite possibly 'recycled' for uses other than the storage of alcohol – some yellowware pitchers and a pewter tankard from the neighbouring pub (mentioned above) contrasts with the volume and range of tea-drinking equipment found in the privies relating to all three properties. The teawares include a variety of different, if relatively inexpensive, designs. Mismatched pottery is often taken as an indication of a poor household, forced to assemble whatever they could from cheap second-hand acquisitions and cast offs, but in this instance it seems plausible to interpret variety as a sign of multiple occupancy and residential mobility. People came and went; objects were left behind and were appropriated by others or were kept safe in anticipation of their owner's return (many left Limehouse for the sea).

However, what is notable about the material evidence is that both households owned some matching sets of teawares. The privy at number 14 had multiple items from at least three green transfer-printed whiteware designed tea- and tableware sets: the Daisy, Corinth and Crystal prints (since these designs are of the same colour they might easily have been used in conjunction with one another). Purchased sometime between 1820 and 1840, these tea sets probably served the resident Jones family. As a brass founder, William Jones would have enjoyed a better income than some of his neighbours – he and his wife both managed accounts in the local savings bank – enabling the family to purchase some material comforts. Evidence of sets of teawares exists in the next door privy. Probably once in the possession of Elizabeth Garland, long-term resident and owner of 15 Regent Street and other properties in the locality, or her tenant family the Sampsons, one four-piece set comprises pearlware London shape tea cups with saucers carrying similar blue transfer-printed scenes of British rural pastimes, views and occupations, while the other set is decorated with a Broseley Chinoiserie transfer-print.

A considerable amount of the pottery carries designs that were fashionable in the 1820s and 1830s, suggesting that many of the items had been in circulation for some time at the moment of their deposition. There are signs of wear and tear, such as stir marks on cups. Evidence of repairs made to artefacts also suggests the way that older

items were valued by their owners: most notable there is a mid eighteenth-century Chinese porcelain tea pot found at 14 Regent Street which has a replacement riveted iron handle (Figure 1).

Collectively, this material culture of tea drinking demonstrates the significance of tea within the domestic routines of poorer families. This insight runs counter to much of the discursive evidence of everyday life in poor metropolitan neighbourhoods which tends to emphasize liquid pleasures of an alcoholic kind. Tea drinking was a valued and habitual social practice that punctuated the course of the day, offering moments of rest and the possibility of familial or neighbourly interaction. The archaeology suggests that an interest in the aesthetics of teawares and a desire for matching items was as much a concern for these poorer residents as it might have been among middle-class households.²⁸ Here then, is evidence of engagement with a mass consumer culture, turning a commonplace activity into something that became significant in constructing domestic and personal identity in a local context.

This signals one of the difficulties associated with object-driven investigations of poorer communities. Rather than demonstrating the complexity of urban poverty and individual and collective responses to it, such investigations replace narratives of



Figure 1. Chinese porcelain with *famille rose* decoration teapot and lid with its original handle replaced with a riveted iron repair. From sitecode LHC93, from context [1]. Photograph by Andy Chopping, courtesy of Museum of London Archaeology.

28. For similar observations in a New York context see Rebecca Yamin, 'Alternative Narratives: Respectability at New York's Five Points', in *The Archaeology of Urban Landscapes: Explorations in Slumland*, ed. by Alan Mayne and Tim Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 154–70 (p. 160).

deprivation and disadvantage with ones of material affluence and self improvement. The problem here is that we view the past through consumerist eyes, failing to step outside bourgeois rhetorics of improvement so that we feel unable to judge nineteenth-century object-rich households in deprived neighbourhoods as poor. An interest in aesthetics is easily interpreted as an aspiration for social mobility, in spite of the fact that other studies have drawn attention to the subtle distinctions in the way that different social groups used material objects to construct domestic identity.²⁹ Thus, James Symonds has argued that urban archaeologists run the risk of reinforcing the very bourgeois attitudes they are seeking to critique by emphasizing tales of ‘tenacity, individual resilience, and self-responsibility’. This, he contends, ‘can be dangerous as it breaks things down to the level of the individual, and denies the existence of class relationships and class struggles’.³⁰

But if it does obscure class struggles and forms of collective social identity that were built in workplace and institutional settings, domestic archaeological artefacts bring into view the household as a site of labour and other forms of inequality. The repetitive daily grind of domestic work is palpable within the archaeological record. Two stoneware black leading bottles for cleaning cooking ranges, wooden pegs for hanging laundry, two well worn scrubbing brushes for cleaning doorsteps, a range of small cylindrical glass medicine phials for treating family ailments, as well as a wide variety of cooking equipment, burnt, scrubbed and scratched through years of use, stand as a clear indicator of the tasks of domestic reproduction – of maintaining the home, caring for family and filling daily Victorian Londoner’s bellies – that women like Elizabeth Jones and Sarah Gibbons at 14 Regent Street devoted much of their daily lives to undertaking. As Spencer Wood and others have suggested, archaeological evidence can offer insights into gender divisions of labour, ‘documenting’ female domestic work that is otherwise unrecorded.³¹ For Rebecca Yamin, archaeological evidence uniquely positions women as central characters in poor neighbourhoods, demonstrating their energy and struggles in ensuring survival and well-being.³²

While the mass of everyday objects in the Limehouse privies allows us to listen to the diurnal rhythms of life in the city, some of the more unusual artefacts point to the impact and experience of mobility within this riverside community as well as to longer term life course transitions. As a locality, Limehouse was distinctively shaped by its maritime connections: it was, Dickens suggests in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), ‘a

29. Diana di Zerega Wall, ‘Sacred Dinners and Secular Teas: Constructing Domesticity in Mid-19th-Century New York’, *Historical Archaeology*, 25.4 (Winter 1991), 69–81.

30. James Symonds, ‘The Poverty Trap? Abject and Object Perspectives on the Lives of Slum Dogs and other Down-and-Outs’, Presentation given to the ‘Poverty In-Depth: New International Perspectives Symposium’ York Archaeological Trust, York, 2–4 July 2009.

31. Suzanne M. Spencer-Wood, ‘What Difference Does Feminist Theory Make in Researching Households’, in *Household Chores and Household Choices*, ed. by Kerri Barile and Jamie Brandon (Tuscaloosa: Alabama Press, 2004), pp. 235–53.

32. Yamin, ‘Alternative Narratives’, p. 166. See also Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

ship's hold of waterside characters'.³³ It was a point of entry and a resting place for people that came to London with the trade of empire and from other parts of the world. Along the wharves that lined the river front, goods of many descriptions were brought ashore. Trade directories reveal the large number of local inhabitants engaged in the building, maintaining and repairing of sailing vessels. Virtually all the known occupants of 14 and 15 Regent Street depended on this trade: shipwrights, anchor smiths, brass founders and labourers. The fortunes of others depended more directly on the sea, as they left Limehouse on long voyages, not to be seen for months. The comings and goings of these men were a feature of life in this locality and one which must have marked profoundly the experiences of many families. Among the more unusual items recovered from the site was an incomplete ornamental glass rolling pin, deriving from 14 Regent Street (Figure 2; a further example was found in the privy of number 16). It appears to have been manufactured in Bristol and represents a decorative object once common in the homes of men that went to sea. Such rolling pins were a popular gift given by sailors to their loved ones as they parted for sea. Although not visible on the one found in our privy, they are commonly decorated with a ship and with a sentimental rhyme (although our example does have faint traces of over-glazed enamelling). They were intended as a token of love and fidelity and were traditionally hung by a silk cord or ribbon above a fire place. If the rolling pin were to fall and break, superstition held that the ship must have been wrecked, or that the donor had been lost to the arms of another woman!³⁴ It is tempting to speculate on what might have happened to the Limehouse man that gifted this rolling pin that is smashed in the privy. However, its significance as an object retrieved from these households is that it underlines the social and emotional upheavals that mariner families faced as a consequence of the global mobility of nineteenth-century metropolitan sailors.

Through the meshing of artefactual and other evidence we have been able to build up an understanding of some of the rhythms of everyday life in households in mid nineteenth-century Limehouse. This provides an alternative perspective to that which derives from popular, bourgeois-driven representations of poor East London neighbourhoods during this period. The households in Regent Street capture some of the social diversity of the locality; the archaeological remains suggest a population comparatively rich in material possessions through which daily routines were sustained and life's transitions negotiated. While the area may have been poor, transient and with a range of social and environmental problems, interrogation of material evidence suggests the need to grasp the complexity and diversity of the rhythms of everyday life – a task that necessarily takes us beyond familiar narratives of urban degeneration and marginality.

Nevertheless, the insights gained from our analysis in this article will seem modest – glimpses of domestic routines and of quotidian social practices – processes of some consequence but at a scale that is too limited to contribute substantially to a

33. Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2002; first published 1865), p. 330.

34. *The Times*, 6 June 1964, p. 13.



Figure 2. Two ornamental glass rolling pins from number 14 and number 16 Regent Street, Limehouse. From sitecode LHC93, Museum of London accession numbers <107> and <116> from contexts [1] and [5] respectively. Photograph by Andy Chopping, courtesy of Museum of London Archaeology.

rethinking of nineteenth-century urban modernity. The insights that can be gained from material ethnographies are fragmented and ambiguous. Objects yield at best a fleeting understanding of everyday life and their role within the lives of past urban dwellers is open to numerous interpretations. While this may be taken as a salutary reminder of the ambiguity of all historical evidence, weaving a convincing historical narrative out of these fragmented insights – one that might stand against the still influential accounts of nineteenth-century urban explorers and writers – is a challenge.³⁵ One possible response to this is for historians to deploy their own fictional narrative voice; to re-imagine historical communities and to re-tell stories. This ‘narrative response to a narrative image’ has been deployed to good effect by Rebecca Yamin in her archaeological investigations of mid nineteenth-century New York’s Five Points; there is potential for this strategy in a London context too.³⁶

A final challenge is that of scale. This article has examined the material culture of a few people living in two houses in one Limehouse street. While the point of the ethnographic approach is to develop a deep level micro-analysis of people and things, it is valid to ask how far ‘the study of material culture can satisfy social scientific demand for typicality and representativeness, while also reflecting the complex fabric of social relationships and meanings’.³⁷ Our project has investigated similar questions for other London sites and the Museum of London Archaeology’s own research agendas are developing analyses of, and encouraging engagement with, other

35. Alan Mayne, ‘On the Edges of History: Reflections on Historical Archaeology’, *American Historical Review*, 113.1 (February 2008), 93–118.

36. Yamin, ‘Alternative Narratives’.

37. Karen Harvey, ‘Introduction’, in *History and Material Culture*, ed. by Harvey, pp. 1–23 (p. 7).

Victorian domestic archaeological assemblages. However, as Tim Murray and Penny Crook have suggested, there is need for drawing comparisons between cities and countries and for considering household archaeology in a transnational frame, in order to move beyond the particularism of single case studies and to maximize opportunities for interpretation and exploration.³⁸

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Alastair Owens
Queen Mary University of London
a.j.owens@qmul.ac.uk

Nigel Jeffries
Museum of London Archaeology
njeffries@museumoflondon.org.uk

Karen Wehner
Queen Mary University of London
karen.wehner@nyu.edu

Rupert Featherby
Museum of London Archaeology
rfeatherby@museumoflondon.org.uk

38. Murray and Crook, 'Exploring the Archaeology of the Modern City', p. 93.