VINTAGE

THE BLACKEST STREETS

SARAH WISE

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About the Book

In 1887 Government inspectors were sent to investigate the Old Nichol, a notorious slum on the boundary of Bethnal Green parish, where almost 6,000 inhabitants were crammed into thirty or so streets of rotting dwellings and where the mortality rate ran at nearly twice that of the rest of Bethnal Green. Among much else they discovered that the decaying 100-year-old houses were some of the most lucrative properties in the capital for their absent slumlords, who included peers of the realm, local politicians and churchmen.

The Blackest Streets is set in a turbulent period of London's history when revolution was in the air, and award-winning historian Sarah Wise skilfully evokes the texture of life at that time, not just for the tenants but for those campaigning for change and others seeking to protect their financial interests. She recovers Old Nichol from the ruins of history and lays bare the social and political conditions that created and sustained this black hole which lay at the very heart of the Empire.

About the Author

Sarah took an MA in Victorian Studies at Birkbeck College, University of London. Her most recent book, *Inconvenient People*, investigates the Victorian phenomenon of the 'inconvenient' person – sane people who were locked away in lunatic asylums by unscrupulous friends and family. Her debut title, *The Italian Boy: Murder and Grave Robbery in 1830s London*, was shortlisted for the 2005 Samuel Johnson Prize and won the Crime Writers' Association Gold Dagger for Non-Fiction. *The Blackest Streets*, was shortlisted for the Royal Society of Literature's Ondaatje Prize (2009). Sarah was a major contributor to Iain Sinclair's compendium *London, City of Disappearances*. She has spoken on Radio 4's *Thinking Allowed, Woman's Hour, All in the Mind* and the *Today* programme, and she regularly lectures to societies and at history events. She lives in central London.

For my mother, Daphne May, 1929–2009

SARAH WISE

The Blackest Streets

The Life and Death of a Victorian Slum

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

'Twas August, and the fierce sun overhead
Smote on the squalid streets of Bethnal Green,
And the pale weaver, through his windows seen
In Spitalfields, looked thrice dispirited.
I met a preacher there I knew, and said:
'Ill and o'erworked, how fare you in this scene?'
'Bravely!' said he; 'for I of late have been
Much cheered with thoughts of Christ, the Living Bread.' . . .

Matthew Arnold, 'East London'

I thank the Lord for what I've had,
If I had more I should be glad,
But now the times they are so bad,
I must be glad for what I've had.

Grace, as sung by children receiving charity dinners in the Old Nichol

The poetry of history lies in the quasi-miraculous fact that once, on this earth, once, on this familiar spot of ground, walked other men and women, as actual as we are today, thinking their own thoughts, swayed by their own passions, but now all gone, one generation vanishing into another . . . The Dead were, and are not. Their place knows them no more, and is ours today. Yet they were once as real as we, and we shall tomorrow be shadows like them.

G.M. Trevelyan

PART ONE

DEAD LETTERS

The Empire of Hunger

AT FOUR O'CLOCK in the afternoon of a damp, chilly Saturday in November 1887, two men kept an appointment with each other at Shoreditch railway station. Both were Continental revolutionaries – one, a Communist, wished to reveal to the other, an Anarchist, the very worst face of poverty he had discovered in the East End during his stay in London.

The Communist led the Anarchist into the nearby Hackney Road, then turned south, into the maze-like streets of the area known as the Old Nichol. The bustle of the main road suddenly ceased, and as the two walked southwards the streets grew narrower and darker – canyons of two- and three-storey housing, stretching as far into the distance as the mist and drizzle allowed them to see. The Anarchist soon became disorientated by the repeated left turnings, right turnings, his friend was making, and felt strangely unsettled by the symmetry of the streets, the monotony of the blackened buildings and the repetitive vistas revealed on their convoluted journey. This appeared to him to be a world leached of colour: wherever he looked, all he could discern were various shades of grey. After five minutes of walking, the Communist took the Anarchist down a narrow passage (so narrow they had to turn sideways and move crabwise along) that ran between two houses and into a tiny square surrounded on all sides by tenement buildings. He motioned to a small mound of earth rising between pools of filthy liquid and, as bidden, the Anarchist took his stand upon the mound the better to survey the scene. There was no one in sight, and although they could make out the distant, subdued roar and rumble of the four busy streets

that boxed the Old Nichol in, there was no sound nearby. There was not a blade of grass to be seen, but heaps of what looked like rubbish, broken furniture and the like; in one corner lay the carcass of a dog, and here and there a rag of grey linen on a clothesline hung motionless in the cold air. The stone steps leading to the tenement doorways were worn down by generations of feet; every window pane was cracked, some smashed; thin columns of smoke rose from a few of the chimneys and dispersed into the mist. The Anarchist thought that it looked ‘as though death had just passed in giant strides through these streets and touched all breathing things with his redeeming hand’. Redeeming: the Anarchist saw death as a blessing in such a place as this.

They returned to the street and walked down the middle of the roadway. They now noted shy, curious eyes following them, and interpreted the gaze as conveying half fear and half hatred, with another quality that they could only define as the look of starvation. They greeted a man kneeling in the gutter hammering at the wheel of a broken cart, and he did not reply; a ragged woman crouching in a doorway started in fright as they neared her, clutched her small, equally ragged child to her breast and rose to her feet as if to defend herself.

The two began to walk faster, feeling as though they were intruders, and guiltily conscious of their own comparatively well-dressed, well-fed appearance. The Anarchist had been shocked by the manifestations of destitution he had just witnessed, and had the sensation, as he later wrote, that he had suddenly stumbled upon ‘the secrets of a strange life’, with codes of its own not to be understood by outsiders. He privately christened the fifteen acres of the Old Nichol ‘The Empire of Hunger’.

The Communist muttered to him that when the Worker State was established, this type of environment would be eradicated. Fear, hate, envy and hunger would disappear. Behaviour would change. The Anarchist did not agree,

believing that only when all forms of government were abolished would humanity be able to govern itself, with wisdom and compassion. The reason such a place as the Old Nichol existed, he said, was because the State – parliament, the law – prevented these individuals from running their own lives wisely.[1]

They walked on through the labyrinth until with immense relief they were back out again on a main thoroughfare, Bethnal Green Road, amid the roar of its Saturday market stalls, carts, carriages and cabs.

That was how the streets of the Old Nichol struck strangers on a grey, miserable day; but what was it like indoors? There's no need to knock – in fact, there may well be no front door to knock at, since there is often little else left to burn when you've no money for coals. If the door is still on its hinges, it will no doubt be standing wide open. There's nothing to steal, and no one to fear, and these people have been surveyed and questioned and stared at on such a regular basis for so many years that they're not likely to mind one more set of curious individuals intruding.

Here in Ann's Place, a little court off the western edge of Boundary Street, is a two-roomed tenement that has its own weather: the walls are running with damp, and the meagre fire burning in the grate has drawn some of the moisture out of the plaster, creating a small local fog. Many Nichol rooms feature such indoor mists, caused by the interaction of fires and damp and ill-swept chimneys. This is home to a married couple with six children. There is no bed, and when you ask them how they sleep, the wife replies, 'Oh, we sleep about the room how we can.' Walk through a hole in the wall into the second room and you'll see her husband and two adolescent sons making uppers for boots. They are so busy they don't even look up or gesture; they are haggard and hollow-cheeked. The wife explains that they have to finish their order and deliver it to a local wholesaler by eight

o'clock tonight (it's a Saturday), or the family will not be able to eat on Sunday.

Things are not much better at Mrs P——'s home, in New Nichol Street, running east from Boundary Street. Her husband died recently and she supports herself, her children and her aged mother by matchbox-making – a common home industry in the Nichol. Mrs P——'s hands are deformed by rheumatism; nevertheless, she collects the wood, labels and sandpaper (she must pay for her own glue) from a Bryant & May depot in nearby Bacon Street and can earn herself 2¼*d* for every gross (144) she completes. When she gets as good as the best matchbox-makers, and if her family develops the knack too, she will manage to make eight gross a day, bringing in 1*s* 6*d* – around one-half of her weekly rent.fn1 The room she and her family occupy is filled with drying matchboxes, so there's little space in which to move, and the children are almost always out of doors as a result; sometimes the smaller ones, if they can bear their hunger no longer, will eat her glue.

At 5 Old Nichol Street is another of the many single-room family dwellings in the district. Here, the mother is out at work, having left her seven-year-old daughter and nine-year-old son playing alongside the coffin in which lies their dead father. Along the street at number 53, the Nichol's notorious overcrowding reaches its highest density, with ninety people crammed into one ten-roomed house. But a similar level of tenant-packing is achieved by a room, 7ft 3in by 14ft, in Collingwood Place, which, it is said, is called home by twelve individuals.

At 34 Half Nichol Street, one large family shares its single room with six ducks; the sanitary inspector who has reported this is more used to seeing livestock in the cellars of the Nichol – donkeys, cows, geese and rabbits. Caged songbirds are often to be spotted on windowsills, kept either for the bird-singing competitions in certain Nichol pubs, or for sale in the bird and animal markets of nearby Club Row

and Sclater Street. Plant-life abounds in the tenements, and many a foetid Nichol room is to be found packed with the gorgeous blooms of the street flower-sellers. Hawkers of watercress, lavender and herbs also keep their stock in their homes after collecting it from Spitalfields fruit and vegetable market, half a mile to the south. Vile back yards can sometimes be seen filled with cut roses ready for the next day’s hawking. In fact, the 730 or so houses of the Nichol adapt themselves very well to various small trades. At 36 Fournier Street Mr Joseph Hyams is one of the area’s many smoked-fish purveyors; he has constructed three smoke-holes built of wood, with a tile roof and a large cowl. Nobody minds the smell – it is one of the more pleasant in the neighbourhood. It mingles with another predominant aroma – that of the timber trade. Nearly one-fifth of workers in the Nichol make their living as woodworkers and furniture-makers,[fn2] and there are hundreds who live by making cabinets, couches, chairs, mirrors and toys; as sawyers, carvers, french polishers, ivory turners, japanners and upholsterers, their tiny homes doubling as makeshift workshops. On weekdays, carts and barrows full of newly sawn planks and freshly turned furniture components sail through the streets, and men and boys laden with tables, chairs, wardrobes, whatnots and tallboys struggle along to the local wholesalers. The Nichol is home to several timber yards, with their large piles of mahogany, rosewood, birch, beech, ash, Italian oak and American walnut.

In a garret in Old Nichol Street, Mr and Mrs Bordon, both in their sixties, are working at two handlooms, a spinning wheel and a wool-winder. The room, for which they pay 3*s* 3*d* a week, is in a terrible state of repair but they keep it as clean as they can. The dilapidated ceiling slants down from a height at one end of 7ft 6in to 4ft 6in at the other. They have plenty of work, but the pay is poor and wages are getting lower. This is the notorious ‘sweating’ system of labour, and one local nickname for the Nichol is ‘The

Sweaters' Hell', so prevalent here is this type of increasingly unremunerative home-based artisan work. The couple have worked for seventeen years to supply a respected West End furnishings store with woollen upholstery fringing, which retails for a very high price. Working together, they earn 9*s* a week. They have to be very careful to keep the wool clean and to make sure that the rain that drips through their roof never damages their completed trimming. Once, the husband tried weaving at a small textiles factory but found himself earning 8*s* a week for a fourteen-hour day, in which he was also expected to act as the factory's porter and errand boy.

Nearby, an eighty-four-year-old former governess to a duke proudly hoards all the crested letters she has received from her noble connections, and elsewhere in the Nichol the brother of a baronet, who has lost all his inheritance through drink, settles to his work of manufacturing billiard balls for a nearby pub.

At 9 New Turville Street, a dog-dealer named James Box has taken over the whole of a former weaver's cottage. His dogs have free run of the three storeys, and Box also stores his offal there, which smells appalling. The ceiling falls in before long, and the rain makes the rotting wood smell so bad that the local sanitary inspector is called in.

In her room around the corner a woman is nursing her young child, who is in bed with a fever. On the floor lies the body of her six-year-old son, who died a few hours earlier. Her husband is a 'chanter' – a singer of street ballads, the sheet music and lyrics of which he sells: 'He's out in the streets singing about the man who was hung on Monday morning. He was cut up when Bobby died in the night, and said he would leave off singing when he had got half a crown, and come home.' When the man does get back, he storms out again when he finds a religious missionary attempting to get his wife to pray.

In a small room in Boundary Street, Charles Mowbray, tailor, is falling behind with his rent. He's secretly rather pleased that this is so, as he has recently co-founded the anti-slum-landlord No-Rent League. In the room that he shares with his wife and four children he has set up a tiny print shop, where he publishes manifestos, posters and pamphlets urging the poor on to revolution. When he finally absconds, Mowbray leaves behind, for his landlord, the paving stone he has been using as an ink slab, with a note stating that the stone is as hard as a slum landlord's heart.[2]

Plenty of people have come to visit Nichol inhabitants such as these, offering practical advice, charitable donations and spiritual guidance – the latter two often interlaced. So thoroughly explored was the Nichol by late 1887, the time of the Anarchist–Communist field trip, that it was becoming a national embarrassment; in fact, in the very month of the foreign revolutionaries' Nichol adventure, commissioners appointed by the Home Secretary were hearing evidence about its sanitary inadequacies at a public inquiry. Added urgency for such an investigation came from the economic crises and subsequent social unrest that were deepening from the mid-1880s.

The Nichol's thirty or so streets and courts of more or less rotten early-nineteenth-century houses were home to around 5,700 people, of whom four-fifths were children. Its death rate was almost double that of the rest of Bethnal Green, the very poor East London parish at whose western boundary the Nichol stood. (Six of its streets were in Shoreditch, across the border that gave Boundary Street its name.) The annual mortality rate of the Nichol in the late 1880s was 40 per 1,000 people; Bethnal Green's hovered between 22 and 23 per 1,000 for these years, not much above the London (and, indeed, the national) figure of 19 to 20 per 1,000. (Today, the death rate for England and Wales is 5.94 per 1,000.) One-third of all these London deaths

were those of babies and infants. Bethnal Green's death rate for babies under the age of one was in line with the average figure for England and Wales of 150 per 1,000 live births; in the Nichol it was a horrific 252 per 1,000. [3]

Communicable diseases such as whooping cough (which killed more children under five than any other transmissible illness), scarlet fever, diphtheria, measles, smallpox, bronchitis and, above all, tuberculosis proved fatal to twice as many people in the Nichol as in the rest of Bethnal Green, even though the Nichol's contagion rates were not particularly high. Once stricken, however, you were less likely to recover here than elsewhere. Contemporary medical thinking had no hesitation in linking such appalling statistics to environment – to overcrowding; primitive or non-existent sanitary fittings; unconquerable, pervasive damp; and lack of light and wholesome air.

This local scandal was made all the more piquant by rumours that the owners of the freeholds and leaseholds of these death-traps included peers of the realm, churchmen, Bethnal Green vestrymen and several corpses: almost half the properties were managed by solicitors and other trustees to benefit the estates of the long-deceased, and two of the largest Nichol holdings – the Gwatkin Estate and the Woolley Estate, with, between them, 297 houses – were farmed partly on behalf of phantoms. Several other estates, meanwhile, were the subject of long-running Chancery cases, some never to be resolved within the Nichol's lifetime.

One investigator of housing conditions described the mysterious nature of slum-property ownership, writing that many tenants had huge difficulty in finding out who their landlords really were.

> Their rent books contain only the names of the tenants, the amounts and the dates of payment, and the initials of the rent collector. They can . . . only ascertain by chance to whom their houses belong. The collectors are often merely the agents' clerks. Sometimes the persons for whom the

> collectors act are only farmers of the rents; and they not only bully the tenants, but often take the law into their own hands, and turn the people into the streets without legal warrant of any kind.[4]

A single house could have several interested parties, with the ground landlord, or freeholder, being unaware (if they were alive, that is) of how his or her leaseholder was behaving. Frequently, leaseholders would, in turn, lease out various parts of a house, with the chain of tenure ending in the weekly tenant, who in turn might sublet to lodgers. Lodgers were even known to sublet to other lodgers.

Some 85 per cent of working-class households in London spent one-fifth or more of their income in rent; half of them paid between a quarter and half of their income to their landlords. Per cubic foot, the rents of the Nichol were between four and ten times higher than those of the finest streets and squares of the West End, averaging between 2*s* 3*d* to 3*s* for a single room and around 7*s* 6*d* for a three-room lodging. This yielded high returns for speculative property dealers – 'the vampyres of the poor', as another housing-reform campaigner called them.[5] The London evening newspaper the *Pall Mall Gazette* criticised the avidly entrepreneurial house-farmers of London, stating: 'These fever dens are said to be the best-paying property in London, and owners who, if justice were done, would be on the treadmill, are drawing from 50 to 60 per cent on investments in tenement property in the slums.'[6] In fact, the *Gazette* had underestimated the money that could be made, and profits as large as 150 per cent per annum were not uncommon.[7] The potential for high rental returns was balanced by the higher risks involved in owning and renting slum property. The landlord in the very poorest areas was probably more likely to face the 'moonlight-flitting' tenants who left by night with unpaid arrears, and the squatters and wreckers who might strip a house of its pipework, fireplaces and roof lead to sell on for scrap.

This rotten housing stock was the only type of property that the very poorest could afford to rent, and the surviving Poor Law case histories of the area's inhabitants do indeed show that the Nichol was for many an East Ender a final stopping-off point before entry into the dreaded workhouse, and the less-dreaded death therein. Nichol homes were decrepit, even lethal, but they catered for a vast, desperate section of the London property market. The district was only just outside the City boundary, fifteen minutes' walk from Liverpool Street station, and twenty-five minutes from the Bank, Mansion House and Guildhall, and therefore well situated for those who lived by street selling. It was even closer to Shoreditch's Curtain Road furniture depots and wholesale emporia; and its relative proximity to the London Docks – consumer of vast amounts of casual, ill-paid labour – further increased the Nichol's desirability to those with the least ability to carve out their own destiny.

With regard to overcrowding, a bad situation had been made significantly worse by the destruction of thousands of homes in the areas immediately adjacent to the Nichol. In the twenty years to 1887, various 'improvement' projects had substituted amenities and commercial premises for dwellings. These included the widening and re-routing through slum streets of Bethnal Green Road in the late 1870s, at the southern edge of the Nichol, which unhoused 800 people; the creation of a large number of warehouses and factories in Shoreditch; and the construction, within the Nichol, of three massive London School Board buildings; later, in 1888/9, a new church in Old Nichol Street would require the eviction of 500 people. Further pressure on available housing stock resulted from the constant flow of hopeful young migrants from the British countryside, which placed great demands on both living space and employment prospects, as did the influx into East London of Jews from eastern Europe and Russia; by 1890, around 30,000 were estimated to have settled in Whitechapel, Spitalfields and

Stepney, districts to the south and east of Bethnal Green. However, the 129,000-strong population of Bethnal Green itself, in the late 1880s, was still racially homogenous, a phenomenon that was at its most noticeable in the Nichol, where second- and third-generation Londoners formed a large majority. While just over a third of London's four million inhabitants had been born outside the metropolis, this figure dipped to an eighth in the Nichol – the lowest figure for any part of London.[8] Although there was a significant number of settled and half-settled Irish gypsy ('didicai') and Romany families, and, to judge by surnames, descendants of the late-seventeenth-century Huguenot settlers, the Nichol was a Cockney enclave.

It was widely alleged that it was a criminal enclave too, with its strange geography assisting a street robber or sneak-thief in his dash to safety. The Nichol had always been a backwater, but in the nineteenth century the vast warehouses along the west side of Boundary Street (punctuated by just two narrow passageways) cut it off from the shops and businesses of Shoreditch High Street. To the north, Virginia Road/Old Castle Street, to the east, Mount Street, and to the south, Church Street/Bethnal Green Road contained few sizeable routes into and out of the maze. 'In the Nichol, there seemed to be a wall enclosing you,' said one resident. 'You got the idea in your head that you were a nation apart, that you were something different.'[9] If you knew which alley connected to which court, which house could be passed right through to bring you out into a different street, which section of fence could be lifted for an escape from one back yard into another, you could easily evade pursuing policemen. Quite how many of the Nichol's inhabitants needed such aids to flight was to be one of the most controversial aspects of its late history.

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fn1 See Appendix 1 here for a table of late-Victorian East London wages and prices.

fn2 See Appendix 2 here for a table of occupations of the inhabitants of the Nichol.

How to Create a Slum

ITS EARLY HISTORY was fairly murky too. The lands that became the Nichol are likely to have been a garden, with large barn, belonging to the hospital of St Mary Without Bishopsgate, founded in 1179 a quarter of a mile to the south. Also known as St Mary Spital, the hospital had at the time of its Dissolution in 1538 around 180 beds for the relief of the sick poor. Simcock's (or Sincook's, or Smethecook's) Well, mentioned in 1399, supplied St Mary Spital with water, and may have been the small spring found in Old Nichol Street during building work at the end of the nineteenth century.[1]

It has also been suggested that at the eastern extent of the Nichol there had been buildings and a garden belonging to the nunnery of St John the Baptist at Holywell, founded in 1189 just west of today's Shoreditch High Street. There was a strongly held local belief in the Nichol that there had once been a monastery halfway along Mount Street (which was called Rose Street until the early 1800s), and the eastern part of the Nichol was colloquially known as Friars Mount. Rabidly anti-Catholic writer George Borrow decided in 1874, on very little evidence, that the name Friars Mount was a relic of the days of Popery. In Mount Street, he wrote,

> a set of fellows lived in laziness and luxury on the offerings of foolish and superstitious people . . . The neighbourhood, of course, soon became a resort for vagabonds of every description, for wherever friars are found, rogues and thieves are sure to abound. And about Friars Mount, highwaymen, coiners and Gypsies dwelt in safety under the protection of the ministers of the miraculous image.[2]

But there's a rival explanation. Shoreditch was the meeting point of crucial routes north and east, and during

the English Civil War, earthworks, with forts and cannons, were built near the beginning of both Kingsland and Hackney Roads in 1642 – part of the chain of twenty-three fortifications constructed by Parliamentarian London against the expected arrival of 15,000 Royalist troops. Mount Street follows the line of the rampart connecting these Cromwellian redoubts to the next most easterly fort in the chain, halfway along Brick Lane, and some Bethnal Green antiquarians believed that the Nichol's Old Castle Street and Mount Street names commemorated the existence of this rampart.[3] In the 1720s, one James Fryer was farming the field around a small hillock in Mount Street/Rose Street, and it is, alas, far more likely that the 'Friar' part of the name derives from this rather earthbound fact than from Borrow's tales of rollicking monks and Romish debauchery.

Since the tenth century there had been a church of St Leonard's at Shoreditch. The third (and current) St Leonard's, by George Dance the Elder, opened for worship on the north-western corner of the Nichol in 1740, leading to another local nickname for the area – the Back o' St Leonard's.

Upon the Dissolution of the monasteries, the gardens and fields had passed into private hands, and the various parcels of land became known by such names as Preston's Gardens (the southernmost part of the Nichol) and Swan Field (later Mount Street; today's Swanfield Street). At some point, Cock Lane (later Boundary Street and Church Street) was formed, and its curious L-shape, with only tiny alleys connecting it to the wider world, was the original topographical misfortune on which the Nichol's later seclusion would be based.

In the 1670s, central London merchants and lawyers – rather than local men – began buying up the small freeholds behind St Leonard's. Gray's Inn lawyer John Nichol bought 4¾ acres bounded by the two arms of Cock Lane and built seven houses in the fields; in 1680 he leased the land to Jon

Richardson, a mason, with permission to dig clay for brick-making, which Richardson did, during London's Restoration era building boom. Richardson then subleased his land to builders to construct houses, and in the 1680s and 1690s Nichol Street (later Old Nichol Street) was developed. Nichol Row and its houses were added by 1703; New Nichol Street between 1705 and 1708, and later Half Nichol Street.[4] Many of the 25,000 Protestant Huguenot *émigrés* – whose main trade was silk-weaving – who arrived from France in the late 1680s and 1690s, settled in Spitalfields and south Bethnal Green.[5] Many houses in the Nichol featured 'long lights' (also known as 'weavers' windows') – casements that maximised daylight in the upper storey where handloom weavers worked.

Virginia Row/Road and (Old) Castle Street had been built in the 1680s, and Mount/Rose Street existed by 1725. Between these and Half Nichol Street lay fields, until the first decade of the nineteenth century, when the Nichol tragedy really began. Together with a flurry of demolition and rebuilding of the late-seventeenth-century houses, speculative new building saw the creation of Nelson, Vincent, Collingwood, Trafalgar, Mead, Christopher and Sarah Streets, and numerous courts in between. Away from the eyes of surveyors, and in contravention of the Building Acts, an almost instant slum was erected by local builders who had leased the land from owners who did not care what use was made of their acreage so long as it was profitable. Admiral Nelson, his various captains and their victories at Trafalgar and St Vincent had their names commandeered for some of the new streets – a fate their enemies would have relished had they known of it.[6] Later, in the 1870s, the street names of the northern section of the Nichol were changed, in order to protect the admiral's memory from further contamination by association.

Local soap and tallow manufacturer Saunderson Turner Sturtevant bought up land and had mean little houses,

some just eight feet in width, constructed in Mount Street between 1804 and 1819. Sturtevant may also have been responsible for one of the most important factors in the swift deterioration of the building fabric of the Nichol. Instead of using traditional mortar, the speculative builders found a cheaper lime-based substance derived from the by-products of soap-making at a local manufactory, possibly Sturtevant's. This 'cement' was known as Billysweet, and quickly became infamous for never thoroughly drying out, and so leading to sagging, unstable walls. Other architectural crimes added to the Nichol's problems. Most of the early-1800s houses had no foundations, their floorboards being laid on to bare earth; cheap timber and half-baked bricks of ash-adulterated clay were used. Roofs were badly pitched, resulting in rotting rafters and plasterwork, with this damp from above joining the damp seeping upwards from the earth to create permanently soggy dwellings.

By 1836 the entire fifteen acres had been built, or rebuilt, upon; but construction didn't stop there. Over the next fifty years, the back yards of Nichol homes and other open spaces would sprout a separate shanty-style development, outrunning surveyors' and cartographers' attempts to keep accurate maps of the Nichol – a parallel world of illegal courts, small houses, workshops, stables, cowsheds and donkey stalls, substantially increasing the already high population density.

The same decades saw the utter failure of a slew of legislation to deal with rotten metropolitan environments and to improve the housing conditions of the nation's working classes. Victorian government, and the Gladstonian Liberalism of 1868–94 in particular, is often identified with *laissez-faire*. The market place made its own rules, and was not to be subject to any governmental interference. Yet non-intervention in commercial matters sat ill with the Evangelicalism and moralism of many who would have

considered themselves among *laissez-faire*'s staunchest defenders. And, in fact, the briefest glance at the parliamentary history of the second half of the nineteenth century reveals that far from this being the era of 'Leave it be', it was a period of vast expansion of central government and ceaseless inquiry into the social effects of, among other things, the unfettered market. The conflict between *laissez-faire* and moral/social concern was to result in some very interesting legislative tinkering, nowhere more so than in the field of working-class housing. No fewer than twenty-five Acts, amendments to Acts and consolidations of existing laws were passed by parliament between 1847 and 1885 in the expectation that 'permissive', or 'adoptive', legislation would be all that was necessary to encourage landlords to improve their behaviour and to make it more attractive for private companies – including the so-called Five Per Cent Philanthropists, who needed to make that sum as a minimum profit from working-class housing – to build and let 'model lodgings' for the poor. Surely these moves would make State involvement in the supply or regulation of housing as unnecessary as it was undesirable. The political parties did not significantly differ in their approaches to the housing issue. No matter if legislation had a Liberal or Tory source, the two sacred Victorian cows that were on no account to be slaughtered were the sanctity of private property, and the self-reliance of the poor. Concern that the poor should not be 'de-moralised' by being given any help salved the conscience of many who had property rights that were well worth protecting.

Two early pieces of legislation sought to improve the quality and stimulate the creation of a greater quantity of low-rent housing. The 1851 Common Lodging Houses Act required the registration and regular inspection of the hundreds of dosshouses, or 'flop-house kips', that gave nightly shelter to those with no hope of a more permanent roof over their heads. In 1883 the Metropolitan Police

estimated that 27,000 Londoners slept in common lodging-houses; the Nichol contained seven dosshouses, accommodating a total of around 150 people. Meanwhile, the Labouring Classes' Lodging Houses Act, also passed in 1851, hoped to encourage the local authorities of England and Wales (its vestries) to create new working-class tenements by permitting them to borrow money for this purpose (using the rates as loan security) to buy land and build homes, which were then to be quickly disposed of to the private sector. This Act, extraordinarily ahead of its time, sanctioning the use of rates money for 'public' housing, was hailed by Charles Dickens as 'the best piece of legislation that ever proceeded from the English parliament'.[7] Nationally, only one vestry ever made use of it.

Another early Act, the 1855 Nuisances Removal Act, allowed vestries to prevent overcrowding in any house that was occupied by more than one family; other nuisances included bad paving, drainage, ventilation and water supply, and the more nebulous concepts of cleanliness and state of repair. But the 40*s* fine the Act permitted held little terror for unscrupulous landlords. Eleven years later, the Sanitary Act gave Whitehall the right to intervene and compel vestries to ensure that nuisances were remedied. Whitehall never did so. Under the same Act, vestries were permitted to register tenement houses let to more than one family and to draw up overcrowding by-laws. But by 1884, of London's thirty-eight vestries, only Chelsea and Hackney had registered their low-rent, multi-occupancy tenements. The Bethnal Green Vestry, the local authority for all but six streets of the Nichol, chose to register not one single house.

Next came two series of Acts that were to be known by the names of the men who introduced them to parliament: William McCullagh Torrens (Liberal MP for the central London seat of Finsbury) and Sir Richard Cross (Tory Home Secretary under Disraeli). The distinction between the Torrens Acts and the Cross Acts is that the former targeted individual

unhealthy houses, to be dealt with by vestries, with action funded from the local rates; while the latter were intended to deal with entire areas that were so insanitary as to be fit only for wholesale demolition and reconstruction by a centralised authority, usually a city council, and paid for by the whole city.[8] One of William Torrens's original intentions, dropped during two and a half years of parliamentary wrangling, had been to allow vestries to build, own and rent out housing for the poor. But in the late 1860s, this was felt to be far too radical. The member for Portsmouth, Serjeant S. Gaselee, argued in the House of Commons that this would be 'monstrous . . . If such a principle were admitted, they did not know where it could stop. The next demand made of them [parliament] might be to provide clothing, if not carriages and horses, for the poor.'[9]

In 1876, the Shoreditch Vestry ordered the demolition, under the Torrens Act, of a group of houses in Ann's Place, off Boundary Street (home to the starving bootmaker and his family here). But the owner of these tenements successfully appealed to the court of Quarter Sessions, which allowed him to 'repair' them instead; this despite a consultant hired by the vestry describing himself as 'nearly poisoned' by his visit to Ann's Place.[10] The legal case cost the Shoreditch Vestry the huge sum (to be paid from the rates) of £500, and the medical officer of health, Dr Henry Gawen Sutton, was convinced that these repairs would prove to be a superficial patching up, and that within weeks the conditions at Ann's Place would be as bad as ever. This experience of trying to implement the Torrens Act had shown the Shoreditch Vestry good reason why it should shirk its responsibilities. In addition, the Act had included no workable provision for rehousing any tenants made homeless as a result of demolition, which was all the excuse that vestries needed to continue doing nothing at all. Permission to act was also permission not to act, and so the vast majority of London's vestries opted for inertia.

In the meantime, the governing councils of Edinburgh, Liverpool and Glasgow had all obtained powers under local Acts of compulsory purchase, demolition and reconstruction and were making use of them, creating the first municipal housing in Britain. London, by contrast, didn't even have a council. The nearest thing was the Metropolitan Board of Works, created in 1855 as a supervisory body for London's sewers, fire brigade, street improvements, highways and parks, as well as a rag-bag of other matters that included enforcement of animal-disease regulations, the licensing of dairies, slaughterhouses and baby-farms; and the sale and storage of petrol and other explosive substances. The Board oversaw more than 300 separate bodies acting under 250 pieces of legislation; it had no jurisdiction over London's magistrates, who maintained powers in sanitary matters; nor over the Metropolitan Police, the London School Board or the Poor Law, and had no medical officer of health of its own to co-ordinate health and sanitation matters across the capital. The Board was not directly elected by London ratepayers – the vestries chose its forty-five members – and its major actions (the creation of new streets, for example) each had to be separately sanctioned by Whitehall. Was this any way to run an imperial capital – *the* imperial capital? Many did not think so, but attempts at London government reform failed throughout the 1860s, 70s and 80s.

In 1875 the Metropolitan Board of Works had its administrative portfolio added to with the passing of the Cross Act – the first attempt at comprehensive slum clearance.[11] Henry Gawen Sutton, in Shoreditch, tried, in 1882 and again in 1883, to use the Cross Act to deal with Ann's Place, Boundary Street, since he had failed in his attempt to use the Torrens Act. But when he reported the condition of the tenements to the Metropolitan Board of Works, in the hope that they would demolish the entire court, the Board told him that the Shoreditch Vestry would have to deal with the place under the Torrens Act, at the

expense of its own ratepayers. It said that no action could be taken by the Board until it had had further experience in operating the Cross Act. So, nothing new could be tried, because it had not been tried before. Many a medium-sized London slum would be batted back and forth in this way as the vestries and the Board attempted to evade the cost and the controversy of razing private property to make room for new working-class housing.

In proposing his legislation, it had been Richard Cross's intention that 'science', in the form of medico-sanitary professionals, would have the main say in whether or not an area should be condemned and cleared. However, the naïvety of this view quickly became apparent: unfitness for human habitation proved itself to be a subjective judgement, not an empirical fact. Appeals by property-owners to higher courts were often successful when medical officers of health were unable to prove beyond all reasonable doubt that a certain house or street could not be lived in without injury to health. Worse, some slum-property-owners (in Shoreditch, the figure was given as nine out of ten such owners) allowed homes to dilapidate, or even speeded up the deterioration process by acts of vandalism, hoping that the vestry could be compelled to make them a cash offer, as the legislation allowed. This loophole – which seemed to reward the very worst slumlords – would be closed in 1885.

So unworkable did the Torrens and Cross Acts prove to be that a House of Commons Select Committee was convened to consider the source of their failure. Blame was attributed to the complexity and costliness of Cross; and to the slow, tedious nature of proving under Torrens that an individual property was unfit.[12] The Artisans' Dwellings Act of 1882 was passed, which lowered the numbers of people required to be rehoused in a demolition/reconstruction scheme to half the number evicted and further reduced the compensation payable to owners of 'nuisance' property.