Jack the Ripper and the East End

According to the 1881 census, over one million people lived in London’s East End, with up to one third living in poverty. For those living outside the area, the East End was regarded as an ‘alien place’ full of poverty and crime. Two out of every ten children died, and diseases like tuberculosis, rickets and scarlet fever were very common. The life expectancy of an East End labourer was less than 19 years.

However, for many families, the East End was also a place of safety, particularly for the large numbers of eastern European Jewish refugees fleeing economic hardship and persecution. Others also settled in the area, including Irish dockers and Asian and Chinese seamen. It was here that Jack the Ripper murdered at least five women in 1888, disappearing into the alleys of the East End and baffling police.

Why were living conditions so bad in the East End?

This hand-coloured map, showing part of the East End, was published as part of an investigation into the conditions of the working classes in London. Charles Booth began his survey into London life and labour in 1886. His research began in the East End as it was ‘supposed to contain the most destitute population in England and to be, as it were, the focus of the problem of poverty’. The maps were known as the Descriptive Maps of London Poverty. The colour code shows levels of poverty and wealth. Section 28, shown here, covers Spitalfields, Wapping and Whitechapel.

Here you can see many of the roads coloured black and purple, although there are also large areas of red (‘Well-to-do’ or ‘Comfortable’) where small business people lived above their shops and workshops. Whitechapel High Street is one of these areas.

Housing was very overcrowded, with whole families or groups of strangers crammed into a single room to cook, eat and sleep, sharing beds or sleeping on the floor. Rags covered the broken windows in damp, insect-infested rooms. Water came from shared standpipes in the street and sanitation was almost non-existent. The homeless sheltered in doorways or spent the night in coffin-like bunks in mission shelters.
How did people survive?

This photo shows a woman working outside her lodgings, earning 2½ pence for every 144 matchboxes made. Witnesses at the Ripper inquests described how people made their living. ‘Sweated’ labour like tailoring and boot-making took place in small, dusty rooms, or at home making brushes, skinning rabbits or, like this woman, making matchboxes. Others found work in the street markets and slaughterhouses.

Horrible living and working conditions resulted in some of the poorest residents resorting to drink. Pubs and music halls were common in the East End, providing warmth and an escape from the streets and overcrowded slums. Alcohol was cheap and pubs were open for long hours, providing many opportunities for drunkenness. All Jack the Ripper’s victims were addicted to alcohol.

Who were Jack the Ripper’s victims?

The image describes the discovery of the ‘seventh’ victim, Mary Jane Kelly. This shows that the newspaper also included the earlier murder of Emma Smith in April 1888 in the tally. The murders in the East End were widely reported, reinforcing the savage reputation of the area.

Jack the Ripper’s victims were all prostitutes. For the many unskilled women in the area, prostitution was a way to earn enough money to survive. These women were popularly called ‘unfortunates’. They owned only what they wore or carried in their pockets, and sold their bodies to pay for drink and a bed for the night. The common lodging houses in Flower and Dean Street and Dorset Street were effectively brothels where eight pence would secure a double bed for the night.

Six ‘unfortunates’ fell victim to Jack the Ripper in a three month period in 1888. Martha Tabram, the first victim, was discovered on the landing of a tenement block on 7 August. She was followed by Mary Ann ‘Polly’ Nichols on 31 August, Annie Chapman on 8 September, Elizabeth Stride and Catherine Eddowes on 30 September, and Mary Jane Kelly was the final victim on 9 November. All the women were killed within a square mile of each other and all the bodies had been horribly mutilated.
Five other murders are occasionally attributed to Jack the Ripper as well. Emma Smith (April 1888), Rose Mylett (December 1888), Alice McKenzie (July 1889), the torso of an unknown woman (found in September 1889) and Frances Coles (February 1891). But it is still not certain if he was the one who killed these women.

Why didn’t the police catch Jack the Ripper?

This image from the satirical magazine *Punch* showed the police as ‘blind’ men who did not know how to solve the crimes. The Metropolitan Police at the time were poorly paid and worked long hours, and if they were not local, finding their way around the maze-like streets of the East End was difficult. They were not helped by the fact that local people were not always keen to co-operate with the police.

Criminal activity in the area usually consisted of petty offences involving public disorder or drunkenness, but the reputation of the East End was so bad that policemen would only enter the area in pairs. Districts were divided into timed beats with fixed routes, which meant that in theory a policeman was never more than 15 minutes from an incident or a cry for help.

Much time during the Jack the Ripper investigation was spent following leads, logging hundreds of hoax letters, and experimenting unsuccessfully with bloodhounds to track the murderer. Forensic science did not exist so police could do little more than interview witnesses, note down the evidence given at coroner’s inquests and flood the area with officers in the hope of catching him in the act.

Suspects were identified in Britain and abroad, but police found no evidence to reveal the identity of the killer.

Some of the suspects included members of the large local Jewish community, as well as surgeons, medical students, hairdressers and butchers.
How did the Jack the Ripper story end?

New technology like the telegraph meant that news of the brutal murders broke across the world quickly, and with several daily editions of newspapers, stories could be updated continuously. The press identified their own suspects, interviewed witnesses, published the latest theories, and competed for the most sensational stories to sell the most copies. Radical papers like the Star attacked the police for not catching the murderer and campaigned for social reform, while traditional papers like the Times advocated the need for law and order.

Jack the Ripper was never caught, but the murders he committed had far-reaching consequences. The murders have become urban myths, known all over the world even today, and have shaped the way the East End is imagined.

The writer George Bernard Shaw commented that Jack the Ripper had done more to spotlight the terrible conditions in the East End than any social reformer.

Some improvements to the area followed the Ripper’s crimes. Flower and Dean Street and Dorset Street were demolished and replaced by model dwellings. Skilled workers rented decent accommodation in artisans’ dwellings built by charitable organisations. The common lodging houses declined, and so did prostitution and crime. Poverty and overcrowding persisted, however, and in 1901 Dorset Street was still being described as ‘the worst street in London’.

The name ‘Jack the Ripper’ came from a letter sent to the Central News Agency, signed in red – it may or may not have been from the killer, but the name stuck.

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