

Victoria Street – Virtues and Vices

Talk at 'Too Bold for Its Day: The Development of Victoria Street' exhibition, SW1 Gallery, 19/9/2006.

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Thank you for coming. Especially thank you for coming to those who heard me speak at the Archives a few months ago, who are obviously gluttons for punishment. I should warn you at the outset that, despite this talk having a different and perhaps more alluring title, it is mostly the same old stuff. So if you want to exit now and beat the rush to Wagamama or Zizzi's or La Tasca, I won't feel too offended. I mention that trio of eateries, not because I'm sponsored by them – my only sponsor, who insists that their logo appears on every Powerpoint slide, is my employer – but out of delight that they maintain the exotic, oriental and continental tradition that was part of Victoria Street in the period in which I am most interested – from the 1850s through to the 1920s.

I am thinking, first of all, of the short-lived Oriental Baths, erected in 1862 at the height of a new fashion for Turkish Baths in London, but pulled down only three years later to make way for the cut and cover excavations for the underground railway. But, closer to my own research interests, I'm thinking of all the hotels and mansion flats erected during the following fifty years, inhabited not only by residents and visitors from far-flung parts of the world but also, to cater for their affectation for things exotic, by armies of continental chefs and waiters. At Queen Anne's Mansions, a building about which I'll have more to say later, and which combined ugliness and affluence in equal measure, 237 inmates on Census Day, 1901, were looked after by 206 *resident* servants (as well as others who didn't live on the premises). Of the 37 waiters, 36 were foreign-born, nearly all from Austria and Germany. So were the 'caterer' and the hotel clerks.

But I am racing ahead of myself. The virtues and vices associated with Victoria Street are evident in the reasons why the street was built in the first place. New streets in mid nineteenth-century London were intended as agents of *improvement* – moral, sanitary, economic: to promote virtue and get rid of vice.

Before Victoria Street there was Tothill Street and York Street (Petty France) as a way of snaking westwards from Westminster. But it was not a very efficient route, especially as Thomas Cubitt and others began to develop the Grosvenor Estates in Pimlico and Belgravia; and it was not a very salubrious area, especially as plans proceeded to convert Buckingham House into Buckingham Palace. The area was sanitarily pretty awful – low-lying, subject to inundation, as Thomas Beames recounted in his book, *The Rookeries of London*, published in 1850: New Tothill Street lay 3½ inches below high-water mark, Palmer's Village 12½ inches below. Within the area there were notorious slums, such as the Devil's Acre, roughly along the line of Old Pye Street. So a new street would make Cubitt's new middle-class estates more accessible, and presumably raise their market values; it could be used to get rid of slums like the Devil's Acre; it could be instrumental in improving the area sanitarily and socially.

We can see this in the wonderful diversity of alternative plans prepared in the 1840s, charting different routes for a new street, but also different plans for squares and crescents and circuses in the area between the street and St James' Park. For example, there is William Bardwell's plan for an elegantly curved Great William Street – 4720 feet long and 100 feet wide; Bardwell and Taylor's plan approved by the committee of Westminster Improvement Company; and Henry Ashton's plan prepared under powers of the Westminster Improvement Acts of 1845 and 1847. Even this plan, which charts the finalised line of Victoria Street, is elaborated with various fantasy streets that never came into being.

And we can see the image of improvement again in the illustrations that appeared in the *Illustrated London News* in 1851 when the new street was formally opened – raised up several feet above the boggy land, angled half-way along so that it avoided the new Christ Church to its north, but could carve through at least part of the Devil's Acre to the south. And new frontages as far as the eye can see – a developer's paradise.

So Victoria Street was intended to promote virtue and eliminate some of the places where vice was imagined to exist. Except that it didn't quite work out that way. For a long time, it failed to capture the entrepreneurial imagination, and when it did, the long but not very deep frontages proved ideal for the building of blocks of mansion flats. But in 1850, living in flats was not what the English did; the Scots yes, and certainly the French, but that was hardly a recommendation. As Edith Wharton famously wrote more than half a century later (in *The Age of Innocence*), making fun of the attitudes of conservative New Yorkers in the 1870s, living "with all the rooms on one floor" "recalled scenes in French fiction, and architectural incentives to immorality such as the simple American had never dreamed of." In London, too, 'French flats' were a decidedly dodgy form of improvement.

At the Abbey end of Victoria Street, the Westminster Palace Hotel opened in 1861. Most nineteenth-century hotels were associated directly with travel – the coaching inns where Dickens' characters stayed or the new railway hotels that were built alongside London termini through the 1860s. But the Westminster Palace was free-standing, the prototype for late Victorian and Edwardian hotels like the Ritz, the Cecil, the Savoy and the Russell. Gustave Doré and Blanche Jerrold used it as a base in producing their famous illustrated essays on *London: A Pilgrimage*, published in 1872. No wonder one of Doré's most famous illustrations was of the remnants of the Devil's Acre, only a few hundred yards away, with the strangely open space on the left – witness to the undeveloped margins of Victoria Street just out of the picture – contrasting with the dense slums in the centre of the illustration.

At the western end of the street, there were already some experiments with living in flats – Mr Mackenzie's four storeys of flats over shops, featured in *The Builder* in 1853, and Carlisle Place and Morpeth Terrace, walk-up blocks of flats backing onto one another, followed in around 1859. But the wide open spaces on either side of much of the street are evident in the Weekly Despatch Map of London (1861) and in the first large-scale edition of the Ordnance Survey (1869), where you can see the old urban fringe land uses – the Stag Brewery, the Artillery Brewery, Vickers' Distillery, the almshouses of Palmer's Village and Emanuel Hospital, and the House of Correction, by now just for the detention of women and boys, on either side of a desert of vacant numbered lots.

By now the street had a new function – it was the way to Victoria Station, completed in 1862, on the site of the old Grosvenor Canal Basin, a convenient and cheap way of approaching the West End on the part of the West End and Crystal Palace Railway. Victoria Station has always been, and still is two stations – the relatively respectable London, Brighton & South Coast and the permanently bankrupt London, Chatham & Dover. Hence, in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), Jack Worthing's vain attempt to prove his respectability by tracing his lineage through the Brighton line – at least he hadn't been found in the left luggage office on the other side of the station – imagine if he had gone by the name of Jack Broadstairs!

My favourite view of Victoria Station is actually looking away from the station – a painting by Charles Ginner, entitled 'The Sunlit Square, Victoria Station', painted in 1913 (I'm afraid you have to travel to Southport to see it in the flesh). One critic comments that Ginner "chose to show the forecourt obliquely, from around a corner by the Grosvenor Hotel; a detective might have worked from just such a viewpoint" – inconspicuously hidden in the shadows watching the passers-by on their way to and from innocent and not-so-innocent meetings, whether en route from the mainline station to the underground – like the newly- and unhappily-wed Monica Widdowson, journeying from her husband's villa in Herne Hill to visit male friends in Bayswater in George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893) – or headed for the immediate vicinity of Vauxhall Bridge Road where, according to the local police inspector at the end of the 1890s:

"many of the houses, both those with apartments and those that call themselves hotels, are houses of accommodation; the women who use them mostly live away, many of them in Pimlico, but a certain number of 'flash women' are living in the Road" (Charles Booth Police Notebooks).

The Grosvenor Hotel, of course, was very different. *The Builder* magazine called it "almost a little town under one roof" – with separate ladies' and gentlemen's coffee rooms on the ground floor, a lift (a great innovation in 1860), two storeys of family suites, each with its own drawing room and dining room, five floors of regular bedrooms, and a top floor for servants. The architects of the hotel were James Knowles, father and son; but it is the son I am most interested in. Knowles junior was the architect of Albert Mansions (1867-70), one of the blocks of flats that began to fill the vacant reaches of Victoria Street at the end of the 1860s, in fact the stretch of Victoria Street on which Cardinal Place now fronts, and a tiny slither of the mansions survives next to the Victoria Palace theatre. Albert Mansions were really 19 separate 'houses', each with its own staircase serving one flat per floor. Among the first tenants were Alfred Lord Tennyson, John Stuart Mill and the 28 year-old Arthur Sullivan. Tennyson told Knowles that Victoria Street was "like a street in Hell". For Tennyson and Mill, of course, their flats were just pieds à terre for when they were in town. For Sullivan, getting his own flat was a sign of his upward social mobility.

Knowles was not only an architect but also editor of, first, *The Contemporary Review* and, later, his own journal, *The Nineteenth Century*. He retained an office in Albert Mansions until, in 1883, he became the long-term leasehold occupier of Queen Anne's Lodge, which a few years later came to be engulfed by the outwardly appalling bulk of

Queen Anne's Mansions, London's first high-rise block, latterly replaced by Basil Spence's almost equally forbidding Home Office.

Queen Anne's Mansions began life as a single 11-storey block, 130 feet high, on the corner of York Street and Queen Anne's Gate, erected by Henry Hankey between 1873 and 1877. *The Builder* reported on the "fine panoramic view" which, along with the "large and convenient lifts" and the provision of water tanks, New York style, on the building's roof, "caused these upper floors to be to a great extent preferred." From the beginning it attracted the epithet of 'Babel', but it was evidently a profitable development because in 1888 plans were published for a massive U-shaped extension of the mansions, now rising to 160 feet: 13 storeys. Knowles was furious, firing off letters to the Metropolitan Board of Works, the leading London newspapers, and the War Office, whose Wellington Barracks and, especially, the Guards' Chapel, would be condemned to perpetual shadow by the new building.

Knowles also planted a parliamentary question with his friend, David Plunket (later 1st Baron Rathmore), MP for Dublin University and First Commissioner of Works, whose responsibilities included the royal parks, not only suggesting the question he might like to receive, but also seeking advice on who might appropriately ask the question, and even providing the Commissioner with a model answer – he would surely have made an ideal twenty-first century spin doctor! But the Board of Works was hesitant to intervene until the building exceeded 100 feet in height at which point it could adjudicate on the structural safety and the security of the fire escapes of the monster building. By the time this height was achieved, in October 1889, the Board of Works had been replaced by the London County Council, which brought an action against the builders, Lucas Brothers, in the Westminster Police Court. The magistrate dismissed the action and awarded costs of five guineas to the builders. The LCC solicitor assured the members of the Building Act Committee that the magistrate was wrong, and that the LCC would win the case on appeal to a higher court, BUT he advised against an appeal, because it would be easier to get Parliament to pass new legislation on the height of buildings if it could be shown that the Council had no powers already. The LCC Solicitor was right. New building acts in 1890 and 1894 restricted the height of new buildings first to 90 feet, then to 80 feet to the parapet (with allowance for two further storeys built into a sloping roof – so about 100 feet overall). But Queen Anne's Mansions themselves survived until the 1970s.

MPs may have disapproved of the mansions, but it didn't stop them from enjoying its amenities. The ratebook compiled in April 1901 recorded the permanent residents in alphabetical order. They included no fewer than 7 MPs. There were also a countess, five 'Sirs', one 'Lady', one bishop, two other reverends, a general, two majors, three colonels and a lieutenant. Not to mention a constant procession of visiting dignitaries. The building functioned both as an apartment house for permanent residents and as a hotel. "There is accommodation for those who wish to stay a night and for those who propose to remain a lifetime. Some indeed have come for a week and stayed for 25 years..." declared the management in 1905.

In fact, the advertising of the building was one of its most delightful features. Knowingly postmodern – playing on the acknowledged ugliness of the building – but also playing on its height – with adverts made up of successive storeys of selling-points. The 1903 version tested the limited typography of *The Times* to the limit, simply repeating the

same basic messages: Hotel and Residential Flats, Furnished and Unfurnished Suites. But by 1906, both *The Times* and the management of the mansions had acquired a new sophistication, even acknowledging that “Although Queen Anne’s Mansions is an ugly building externally, luxury and comfort reign supreme internally ...”

The only, even slightly, flattering illustration of Queen Anne’s Mansions it is possible to find is by Joseph Pennell (1857-1926), the American artist who, with his wife, produced a life of Whistler, and who was commissioned to produce the illustrations for Henry James’ *English Hours* (1905).

But to revert to lower forms of cultural representation, advertising and flats were natural bedfellows; they went together like a horse and carriage – as in a famous postcard of Artillery Mansions (in Westminster Archives and reproduced in Isobel Watson, *Westminster and Pimlico Past* (1993)). Artillery Mansions was the last substantial new block of flats on Victoria Street itself, opened in 1895. I thought it would be worth turning over the delightfully re-touched card (the fountain has been ‘enhanced’ and an elegantly dressed woman in a carriage has also been added) to look at the message on the back – which shows that the card was written by a French employee – another continental waiter? – to his previous employers back in France.

When the building had opened in 1895, the management placed separate small ads in *The Times* to attract families, bachelors and ladies. Curiously, bachelors were offered single rooms from £20 per annum, unfurnished, whereas single rooms for ladies only cost £25. Perhaps this was a reflection of the anxiety about the numbers of supposedly high-class prostitutes and ‘kept women’ reputed to occupy the flats around Victoria Street. When Charles Booth produced his famous poverty map in 1889 he coloured Victoria Street ‘gold’ – wealthy. But this colouring ignored its moral reputation. Ten years later Booth set about updating his map with the help of his assistant, George Duckworth, who accompanied local police officers on walks through the districts for which they were responsible. Inspector Cousins reported of Ashley Gardens that, while it comprised large flats with rents as high as £300 per year, which clearly merited the yellow or gold colouring, “he thought more kept than married women were to be found there.” Duckworth acknowledged that “This is probably a great exaggeration, but Cousins has been called in to deal with several cases of one kind or another in queer ménages that he has found there and clearly had evidence that second establishments are not uncommon in Ashley Gardens.”

Two literary representations also hint at the area’s flexible morals. Another character in George Gissing’s *The Odd Women* (1893) was the rich, 38-year-old widow, Mrs Luke Widdowson, whom he situated in a Victoria Street flat. Gissing relished the opportunity to describe Mrs Widdowson and her flat in all its glorious nouveau-riche vulgarity:

Luxurious fashion ... distinguished Mrs Luke’s drawing-room. Costly and beautiful things superabounded; perfume soothed the air. Only since her bereavement had Mrs Widdowson been able to indulge this taste for modern exuberance in domestic adornment. [Mr Widdowson] left her an income of four thousand pounds. Thereupon began for Mrs Luke a life of feverish aspiration ... she resolved that her wealth should pave the way to a titled alliance ... her flat in Victoria Street attracted a heterogeneous cluster of pleasure-seekers and

fortune-hunters, among them one or two vagrant members of the younger aristocracy. She lived at the utmost pace compatible with technical virtue.

In the same year as Gissing's novel appeared (1893), George Bernard Shaw published his play, *The Philanderer*, which opens with the stage direction: "A lady and gentleman are making love to one another in the drawing room of a flat in Ashley Gardens in the Victoria district of London. It is past ten at night." A slightly postmodern touch is added by the fact that Shaw's leading lady, Mrs Patrick Campbell, herself lived in a flat in Ashley Gardens.

Retreating to the vicinity of Artillery Mansions, a brief word about the rather anonymous Marlborough Mansions, on the corner of Artillery Row, another building for which there is rich information in the archives. For this we have to thank Leonard T. Snell, previously a partner in the prominent estate agency, Robins, Snell and Terry, who specialised in flats (and published a weekly paper on the subject). Snell persuaded the buildings' owners that they should make him general manager, with no salary, but a commission on new rentals, a bedroom in the building, and free meals in the restaurant. Snell did not last long in the job, but long enough to leave some fascinating correspondence and copious promotional advertising and 'orders to view'.

By the early 1900s many of the flats on and around Victoria Street were managed by Consolidated London Properties Ltd and City & West End Properties Ltd, in practice the same company. They were responsible for Carlisle Mansions, Morpeth Mansions and Evelyn Mansions close to the cathedral, but also for Prince's Mansions, one of the longest single ranges of buildings on the north side of Victoria Street: 712 rooms exclusive of bathrooms, grouped into 75 flats, mostly of ten rooms – shown in elevation in *The Builder* for 1886; in a floor plan of part of the flats, recently unearthed in Westminster Archives; and in an advertising brochure produced by CLP Ltd and C & WEP Ltd in around 1910, which promoted 'wine cellars in basement' and, very important to maintain the right distance between servants and visitors, 'secondary staircases' for the use of servants.

To promote Prince's Mansions, the company used what must be the most evocative image of Victoria Street to survive – Bedford Lemere's photograph of 1899. So crisp and correct that we can read the signs posted in windows: in the windows of the ground-floor flat nearest the camera there is a poster soliciting 'Voluntary Contributions', there are advertisements for 'suites to let', and there are horse buses, cabs and carters' vans, though not so many as, yet, to make crossing the street difficult. Architectural critics complained that the buildings were too high for the width of the street to count as a proper boulevard, yet one can imagine a Pissarro or a Caillebotte discreetly observing passers-by on the street from the vantage point of an upper-floor balcony, much as they did in Paris.

Who, apart from MPs and kept women, actually lived in these flats? The most notable occupant of Queen's Mansions, which lay east of Prince's Mansions and faced the Army & Navy Stores, was Sir Arthur Sullivan, who moved there from Albert Mansions in 1881, occupying a flat which, Andrew Goodman tells us (in *Gilbert & Sullivan's London* (2000)), was "filled with bric-a-brac from all over the world – Persian carpets, silk wall hangings and tapestries, oriental lamps and lanterns, antique Egyptian screens, divans, palms and other potted plants and a parrot." There must have been

an awful lot of bric-a-brac to fill a flat rated in 1891 with a rateable value of £149 (when the whole of Queen Anne's Mansions was rated for £5000 and a typical two-room Peabody flat was rated for less than £10). Sullivan was also a domestic telephone subscriber at least as early as 1883, another indication of his and the street's relentless modernity.

But the residents of Victoria Street also included large numbers of military officers and colonial officials, which brings me back to consider the street as a site of empire. Flats in general had more than their fair share of people born overseas or recently returned from the colonies – they were a convenient place for people on furlough. In Victoria Street's case, this attraction was reinforced by the number of professional offices – of charities, missionary societies, surveyors and engineers – either in purpose-built offices such as Westminster Chambers (across the street from the Westminster Palace Hotel), or in residential flats converted into offices. Part of the ground floor of Prince's Mansions was occupied from the beginning by the Primrose League. In 1869 the occupants of Westminster Chambers included such exotica as the Nova Scotia and New Brunswick (Intercolonial) Railways Co (limited), the Westphalian Silver, Lead and Copper Mining Co. (lim.), the Central American Ass. (lim.) and the Nietheroy (Brazil) Gas Co. (limited). No doubt many of these companies barely merited a filing cabinet to themselves, let alone a whole office, and some of them sound as if they had as much substance as the South Central Pacific and Mexican Railway in Trollope's *The Way We Live Now*. But their proliferation on Victoria Street reflected the need to lobby parliament and attract the attention of government.

Another sign of both commercialization and empire was the presence of the Army & Navy Stores, established in 1871 as a co-operative store for military officers and their families. Membership was at first restricted to army and navy officers, to peers and privy councillors, and to a variety of government and colonial officials. A commentator in the 1880s described the impact of the store on the street: "rows of carriages and cabs, two or three deep" drawn up in front of the store:

The establishment is not only an emporium, but a lounge, a place of gossip and pleasure as well as of business. ... The place, in fact, discharges not a few of the purposes of a club for ladies and gentlemen; it gratifies the prevailing passion for combining pleasure and business, and gives the customers of the store the satisfaction of knowing that at the same time they meet their friends they are getting their wares – whether it be an ormolu clock or a jar of pickles – at a cheaper rate and of a better quality than they could elsewhere (T.H.S. Escott, *England: its People, Polity and Pursuits* (1891)).

It was not until 1922 that the store acquired a street frontage with plate-glass windows that made it look more like a department store than a private club. But its impact on Victoria Street and the surrounding area was substantial. In the streets behind the store, warehouses stocked goods that were distributed around the Empire in response to orders from the store's mail order catalogues, and garment factories made and altered many of the items of clothing stocked in the store.

The store offered a choice of at least two eating-places – the Nelson and Wellington Rooms. In Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925, set on a single day in 1923), Elizabeth (the Dalloways' daughter) and Miss Kilman (her dowdy lower middle-class tutor) took

tea in the cafeteria of the Army & Navy Stores. Miss Kilman displayed a childlike passion for cake – “sugared cakes”, “the pink one”, “chocolate éclair” – an evident display of her inferior status. When she finally got up to leave, “she lost her way, and was hemmed in by trunks specially prepared for taking to India; next got among the accouchement sets and baby linen; through all the commodities of the world, perishable and permanent, hams, drugs, flowers, stationery, variously smelling, now sweet, now sour, she lurched.”

This treasure chest of commodities was also displayed cartographically on the insurance atlases of the period, on which materials especially liable to combustion were highlighted. In 1901 the Goad insurance plan for the store indicated ‘general fancy show rooms’ on the ground floor, ‘grocery and provisions’ and ‘drugs’ on the first floor, then ‘drapery’, ‘books’ and ‘trunks’, ending with ‘tailoring’ on the fifth floor. Most of the fourth floor was occupied by ‘refreshment rooms’. Miss Kilman’s route, from refreshments past trunks, drapery, grocery and drugs, was not just an invention on Woolf’s part, but reflected the real layout of the store.

EM Forster’s observation early in *Howards End* (1910) – “We are not concerned with the very poor. They are unthinkable, and only to be approached by the statistician or the poet” – could also be applied to *Mrs Dalloway*. But in our survey of Victoria Street we must return at least to the Leonard Bast and Septimus Smiths to consider the other kind of flat that came to dominate large swathes of the neighbourhood – model dwellings for the virtuous poor. In 1862 William Gibbs erected Rochester Buildings, another incursion into the Devil’s Acre on the south side of Old Pye Street. They appear in Gustave Doré’s engraving. They were designed by Henry Darbishire, who was to become the regular architect for the Peabody Trust through the 1860s and 1870s. In 1877, following Gibbs’ death, his widow sold the estate to the Peabody Trust for £25,000. There was some anxiety over this purchase, because “a few of the tenants in the buildings were in the receipt of outdoor parish relief”, unlike Peabody’s target clientele of the regularly employed but low paid. But the Trust knew a bargain when it saw one – the estate was valued at over £42,000 and included some vacant land, as well as existing buildings which had potential for enlargement and improvement. In 1885-86, five new blocks were added, while one of Gibbs’ original blocks was demolished at the same time.

Peabody’s first venture in the area had been as early as 1869 when they opened their Brewer’s Green Estate. The Trust’s Annual Report, a month later, reported that the estate accommodated 389 individuals living in 235 rooms, and that there was a long waiting list for vacancies. It was also the first Peabody estate to be sold by the trustees – soon after World War I – apparently in response to criticisms from Westminster’s medical health officer that the buildings no longer provided properly sanitary accommodation. In effect, it was replaced by the Trust’s Horseferry Road Estate, opened in 1922. From the late 1880s, the Brewer’s Green estate abutted on a very elegant block of mansion flats – Iddesleigh Mansions. An illustration of the mansions in *The Builder* (1888) elegantly ignores this juxtaposition. But the physical juxtaposition symbolizes the interdependence of rich and poor around Victoria Street. The residents of mansion flats needed an army of respectable working-class people to meet their needs – not so much resident domestic servants as skilled artisans and tradesmen, and model dwellings provided the ideal environment for such people and their families.

One other, much larger, Peabody estate also deserves a mention – built as a slum-clearance estate under the terms of the Cross Act of 1875 (named after Home Secretary, Richard Cross), which authorised the Metropolitan Board of Works to purchase and clear whole areas of slum housing. But the Board was not allowed to undertake the rebuilding and rehousing. Instead, it was expected to sell the cleared sites to housing agencies, such as the Peabody Trust, who would erect dwellings for at least as many people as had lived there before. This inevitably meant building upwards if the inhabitants were to be rehoused in a sanitary and not-overcrowded fashion. It also meant a delay between clearance and rebuilding, such that in practice few of the slum residents became tenants of the model dwellings. Instead, they were forced to crowd into adjacent streets which, if not already, soon became slums in their own right.

The Old Pye Street Improvement Scheme (1877) proposed to displace 1333 persons including 459 currently living in 18 registered lodging houses. In practice, Peabody provided rehousing for up to 1700 people (at the then acceptable density of two persons per room), but all in blocks of flats, none in lodging houses. Inevitably, therefore, the character of the area's population changed in favour of families and children. The new buildings were opened in July 1882 – 396 dwellings, 861 rooms, 3 bathrooms, 90 laundries and 180 lavatories. Unlike more expensive dwellings, such as those provided by the Improved Industrial Dwellings Company, for example in Coburg Buildings, which were self-contained, Peabody's were 'associated dwellings', sharing sculleries and toilets. The rents ranged from 2s9d per week for one room to 7s6d for four rooms, but most flats contained either two or three rooms and cost around 5 shillings per week.

The contrast between respectable model dwellings and unrespectable slums is neatly illustrated by Charles Booth's intrepid visitors in 1899, who recorded Vandon Street (between Victoria Street and St James's Park) as "very low class"; some rough girls skipping in the roadway". By contrast, they enumerated the Peabody estate only a hundred yards away, "in the courts of which the numbers of clean and healthy children were noticeable." On the other (south) side of Victoria Street, Booth's investigators reported on Chadwick Street: "2 and 3 storey houses; black and grimy; open doors, dirty children and bad-faced women; all the normal signs of physical neglect and moral degradation." Inspector Cousins "appeared to think that thieving and prostitution were the chief occupations of the people." Whenever they passed the public house on the corner of Great Peter Street and Chadwick Street, there were "groups of vulgar, fat, slatternly, lowest standard women gossiping round, some doubtlessly from Chadwick St. itself."

Apart from the casual assumption of guilt – "some doubtlessly from Chadwick St. itself" – perhaps the most intriguing phrase in this description is "open doors". Leaving your front door open was not a sign of sociability or confidence in your neighbours, but of promiscuity. And if you invited a promiscuous use of your own physical space, *doubtless* you were also promiscuous with your and other people's bodies and possessions.

It is more than time that we left Victoria Street. To do so, we must return to the role of the street as traffic artery. Victoria Street is famous as the site of one of George Frederick Train's experiments with horse-drawn trams in 1861; but the essence of public transport on Victoria Street has always been the bus. In *Mrs Dalloway*,

Clarissa's daughter, Elizabeth, leaves her Army & Navy tea party with Miss Kilman and waits for a bus to take her up Whitehall and along the Strand:

Buses swooped, settled, were off – garish caravans, glistening with red and yellow varnish. But which should she get on to? She had no preferences. Of course, she would not push her way. ... Suddenly Elizabeth stepped forward and most competently boarded the omnibus, in front of everybody. She took a seat on top. The impetuous creature – a pirate – started forward, sprang away; she had to hold the rail to steady herself, for a pirate it was, reckless, unscrupulous, bearing down ruthlessly, circumventing dangerously, boldly snatching a passenger, or ignoring a passenger, squeezing eel-like and arrogant in between, and then rushing insolently all sails spread up Whitehall.

The pirate buses that Virginia Woolf described here are a nice example of early free enterprise – of independent operators competing with the London General Omnibus Company in an unregulated market. In 1924 the London Traffic Act introduced regulations putting an end to this kind of competition. But in *Mrs Dalloway* it is for ever June 1923. Are pirates virtuous or vicious? I'll leave you to judge!

Victoria Street was the height of modernity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was the place for new lifestyles, living in flats rather than houses. It was the place for the new economy, based on services and consumption as much as manufacturing, and centred on London as 'heart of the empire'. It was a home for new technologies. It offered a habitat for new women. For all the bad press it received in the twentieth century it had many virtues, not the least of which was the way in which it accommodated and exemplified some good old Victorian vices.