

Social engineering: an exploration of how a bandstand and a street drinking fountain exemplify the intersection of ornate design and social reform in nineteenth-century London

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This article focuses on two seemingly disparate artefacts: a picture postcard sent in 1906 and a drinking fountain erected with much pomp and ceremony in 1859. The article sets out to show their connection with each other via a range of interwoven topics which throw light not just on the lives of the poor of nineteenth-century London but also on the mindset of those who governed and had concern for the city. Both artefacts interconnect with poverty, alcohol misuse, attitudes to class, shifting ideas of morality and social responsibility. Both intersect with ideals in design and philosophy. This article argues that they act as markers in changing attitudes towards the lives and behaviour of the poor and attempts to gauge how far they might be said to have been successful.

A picture postcard sent to ‘Auntie’ in 1906 portrays a bandstand on Peckham Rye. The format of the postcard, picture on one side and the back divided for message and address with its half-penny stamp, limits its production to between 1902 and 1906 (Fig.1).¹ Postcard collecting was highly popular at that time and the introduction of three or more postal deliveries a day meant postcards provided rapid communication perhaps demanding comparison with modern email. However, it is the picture which is of greater interest here since it depicts something which no longer exists, but which in its time merited a photo and a purchase, suggesting it was considered a thing of beauty or importance.



Figure 1: Postcard face (Peckham Rye Bandstand) and reverse (published by H. Finch, 79, Peckham Rye)

¹ *History of postcards* <<https://150yearsofpostcards.com/history>>; back divide introduced 1902. *Letter rates 1840-1968*, The Great Britain Philatelic Society.<http://www.gbpc.org.uk/information/rates/inland/letters-1840-1968.php>. [accessed 20 December 2019].

The bandstand in the picture was built for the 1862 exhibition (Fig.2) which aimed to emulate the success of the Great Exhibition, 1851.



Figure 2: Charles Thurston Thompson, *Horticultural Gardens, South Kensington, 1862*, showing the 'band house' under construction. Albumen print, 13.4 × 19.6 cm (Royal Collection Trust; © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020 <http://www.rct.uk/collection/RCIN_2932800>)

Alas, the exhibition was a flop; the buildings were demolished and the contents dispersed. The bandstands were purchased; one was re-erected in Peckham Rye Park in 1889 while its sister went to Southwark. Sadly, both were destroyed in the Second World War; Peckham's was bombed and Southwark's melted down for its metal.² The postcard remains to remind us of an object which marks a complex time in London's social history.

Only three years before the birth of the bandstand, the drinking fountain, the first in London, had been erected outside St Sepulchre's Church, High Holborn. Built of marble and granite with iron cups on iron chains, it cost £500, paid for by philanthropist Samuel Gurney MP (Figs. 3, 4). An opening speech by Mrs Wilson, the daughter of the Archbishop of Canterbury, suggested that while this 'pure and wholesome water' would provide for the material comfort of 'the poor and hardworking portion of the people' it would also help them from a moral standpoint 'as we know from what beginnings intemperance with its attendant miseries, so often arises'.³

² Historic England <<https://historicengland.org.uk/services-skills/education/educational-images/bandstand-peckham-rye-southwark>> [accessed 21 January 2020].

³ *Illustrated London News*, 30 April 1859.



Figure 3: St Sepulchre's Fountain at its opening, *Illustrated London News*, 30 April 1859, engraving, (courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives with kind permission from The Drinking Fountain Association)

Thus, the drinking fountain was to fulfil two purposes: to enhance health and to aid morals. Bandstands, as will be seen later, fulfilled the same dual role.



Figure 4: The remains of the drinking fountain outside St Sepulchre's, High Holborn (2020) photograph (author's own)

Recognition of the need to provide clean water was the direct result of painstaking research by John Snow, medical practitioner and epidemiologist, who traced the cause of cholera not, as had been thought, to foul air but to contaminated drinking water. Henry Mayhew describes overcrowding and insanitary conditions, the only source of drinking water for many poor people being from the sewers themselves.⁴ Cholera had killed a devastating total of 11,661 Londoners in 1853-4; 550 died in just ten days in Soho.⁵ The water in that outbreak had come from Broad Street pump, close to St Sepulchre's, from a source into which sewers leaked and newly erected graveyards drained. *Fun Magazine* later published an acerbic cartoon of death pumping its water to the poor (Fig.5).

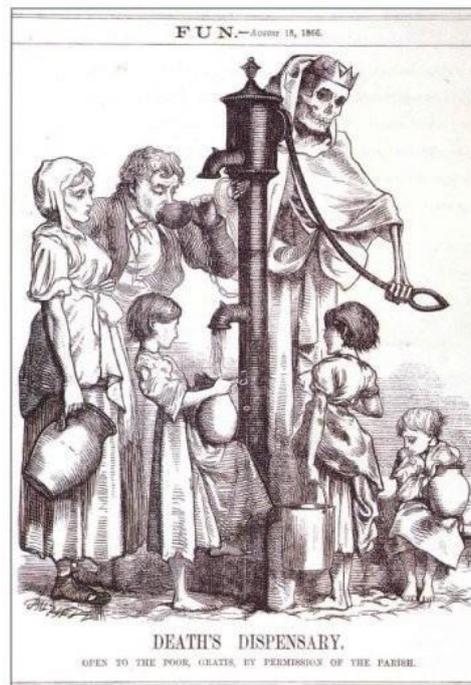


Figure 5: George Pinwell, *Death's Dispensary: Open to the poor, Gratis, by permission of the Parish*, woodcut illustration, *Fun Magazine*, 18 August 1866.

An astonishing rise in population (1,096,784 in 1801 to about 7,000,000 in 1910)⁶ meant more deaths and thus more graveyards. It also meant a rise in demand for housing. The fastidious better-off who, following use of mechanical toilets at the 1851 exhibition, wanted to establish such 'conveniences' in their own homes, contributed to the problem.⁷ Advertisements in the *South London Times* boast of 'houses with modern drainage'.⁸ Unfortunately, these new toilets were not necessarily attached to adequate sewage

⁴ Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 4 vols (London: George Woodfall and Son, 1851), I.

⁵ Jerry White, *London in the Nineteenth-century: A Human Awful Wonder of God* (London: Vintage Books, 2007), pp. 50-51.

⁶ *London 1800-1913: The Urban Contexts of Crimes Tried at the Old Bailey* <<https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/static/London>> [accessed 20 January 2020].

⁷ 827,000 are estimated to have used the water closets at the Great Exhibition, 1851: Steven Johnson, *The Ghost Map* (London: Riverside Books, 2006) p. 12.

⁸ *South London Times*, 20 September 1898 <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>> [accessed 15 December 2019].

systems and many drained straight into the Thames, which provided drinking water to the Southwark and Vauxhall Water Company. They, in turn, supplied many south London houses as did the Lambeth Company; however, Lambeth drew its water from lower down the Thames. The highest percentage of poverty, and cholera deaths, between 1832 and 1854 was found south of the Thames.⁹

Victorians had discovered the joys of statistics (the Royal Statistical Society was founded in Cambridge in 1834) and Snow was able to study survey results to establish patterns which he linked to the disease.¹⁰ These showed that south London cholera victims were largely drinkers of Southwark and Vauxhall water. He was also able to analyse the water and established the connection between the nature of the disease and its impact on water supplies.

The St Sepulchre's drinking fountain drew pure filtered water from The New River Company, which, on tasting, Mrs Wilson pronounced 'excellent'.¹¹ The Metropolitan Free Drinking Water Association was founded. Fountains proliferated across London, and indeed England, paid for by private subscription. The fountain was a marker on the road to a transformed sewage and drinking system. The need to curb drunkenness and promote another sort of purity is a different though connected matter, as Mrs Wilson's speech at St. Sepulchre's suggests.¹² Extensive patronage of a nearby gin-shop demonstrated the size of the problem.¹³

Drunkenness was a recurring concern throughout the nineteenth century. Reports of drunken behaviour in London indicate an increase from 973 incidents in 1800 to an annual occurrence mid-century of 30,749 cases, rising to more than 50,000 in the final decade.¹⁴ Offenders ranged in age from 15 to 89 years and included many women.¹⁵ Different policing and reporting methods and the rise in London's population surely impacted on these statistics but typically drunkenness concerned the better-off as a cause of working-class criminality and a financial problem. They lamented the money wasted, the loss to commerce and the cost of prisons and poorhouses.¹⁶ The Temperance Movement wanted heavy-handed government

⁹ John Sexby, *The Municipal Parks, Gardens, and Open Spaces of London: their history and associations* (London, 1898), p. 11.

¹⁰ William Farr's *Weekly Returns 1854*, in Johnson, p. 102.

¹¹ 'St Sepulchre's Drinking Fountain', *Illustrated London News*, 30 April 1859 <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>> [accessed 15 January 2020].

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ 'To the principal gin-shop, in Holborn, there entered on the Monday, 2,880 men, 1,855 women, and 289 children', *The Christian Penny Magazine*, no. 213, 2 July 1836, p. 212.

¹⁴ British Newspaper search <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>> [accessed December 2019-January 2020].

¹⁵ *Lloyds Weekly Newspaper*, 25 September 1892: Report on the increase in convictions of women noting that 95 per cent of the 2,554 women appearing at Camberwell Magistrates' Court were victims of drink <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>> [accessed 28 December 2019].

¹⁶ *The Globe*, 21 August 1854 <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>> [accessed 15 December 2019].

action to curtail ‘this monstrous plague’ by banning sales of alcohol altogether.¹⁷ Others considered higher taxation would help.

However, Mayhew argued forcibly that ‘those in “high places” should look with charity on the frailties of their less fortunate brethren’.¹⁸ His plea for empathy with their ‘misery, ignorance, and vice’ perhaps contributed to the change in attitudes towards ‘the stain of drunkenness’.¹⁹ Scrutiny of the London press and *Hansard* across the century shows a gradual shift from a punitive to a more nuanced, creative approach. Whereas, initially, drink offences were dealt with by imprisonment, now drunks were seen as having health issues and sent to workhouse or hospital.²⁰ Politicians started imposing regulation to limit intoxication, transferring responsibility from individual drinker to the purveyors of alcohol. As early as 1840, it was suggested that landlords might be convicted for allowing drunkenness on their property.²¹ Ideas were mooted to control drinking hours, cut Sunday drinking altogether, or to limit the numbers of public-houses to one per 300 head of population.²² Some argued drunkenness was ‘eminently a political question’;²³ others, joining the parliamentary debate via newspapers, proclaimed it ‘our natural sin’ and insisted that men cannot be made sober by an act of parliament.²⁴ Others again, as with the cholera outbreaks, questioned whether governments should deal with social issues at all,²⁵ terming it ‘oppressive interference [...] in the enjoyments of the labouring classes’.²⁶

Support for government intervention split along party lines with the Conservatives reluctant to disturb the profits of the Licensed Victuallers.²⁷ Gladstone, believing drink was the curse of the working man, sought to use legislation to encourage sobriety. The 1872 Licensing Act was certainly a legislative attempt at controlling drinking, representing a shift in the government’s role as protector of the peace to one also responsible for health.

Eventually, echoing ideas intimated by Mrs Wilson twenty years earlier, the main focus shifted to the reasons why people drank too much. ‘We should not look at drunkenness as a cause of crime, rather at

¹⁷ *Islington Gazette*, Friday 7 Oct 1870 cites members of The United Kingdom Alliance, a key Quaker temperance organisation. <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>> [accessed 15 January 2020].

¹⁸ Henry Mayhew, vol. 1, Introduction.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ 1884, British Society for Study of Inebriety: Thora Hands, *Drinking in Victorian and Edwardian Britain: Beyond the Spectre of the Drunkard* (Strathclyde University, 2018), p. 2.

²¹ In *Morning Advertiser*, Thursday 9 June 1864 <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>> [accessed 15 December 2019].

²² *Hansard*, *Spirituous Liquors (Retail) Bill* (second reading) 17 April 1872, Vol. 210, Sir Robert Anstruther, MP and others.

²³ *Hansard*, *Intoxicating Liquors Bill*, 8 June 1864, Vol. 175, line 1938, Mr Lawson, MP.

²⁴ *The Tablet*, 12 September 1885 <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>> [accessed 30 December 2019].

²⁵ *Illustrated London News*, 9 October 1869.

²⁶ *Hansard*, *Select Committee on Inquiry into Drunkenness*, 1834, Buckingham J. Silk, MP <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1834/aug/05/committee-on-drunkenness> [accessed 8 February 2020].

²⁷ Hands, p. 3.

the cause of drunkenness' argues *Reynolds Newspaper* in 1878.²⁸ 'A working man' proclaimed the *Pall Mall Gazette* 'gets drunk because of [...] want of education [...] want of healthy amusement and want of home comforts [...] [and] want of pure liquor to drink.'²⁹ Quietly revolutionary within the patriarchal nineteenth-century upper-middle-class mindset, it suggested that to close pubs when dealing with problems of the working-classes was treating them like a foolish mother deals with children.³⁰ The point was also well made that the well-off also got drunk, in gentlemen's clubs, but this was not criticised or indeed very public as their servants shepherded them home.³¹ The pub was simply the club of the poor and provided relatively uncontaminated beverages.³²

No one seems to have questioned the right of the sanitary inspectors to walk into the homes of the poor.³³ But the fact that they did provides historians with 'blue books', reports of dreadful conditions in terms of overcrowding and inadequate water supply, drainage, or refuse collection experienced by many.³⁴ Soho was so overcrowded that it housed 432 people to the acre.³⁵

Charles Booth, social reformer, categorised working people enabling historians to know that an income of eighteen shillings a week was needed to keep a family from poverty.³⁶ He gave accounts of people unable to afford more than a single boot at a time.³⁷ An 1849 survey of sanitation in houses of the labouring classes found excrement piled up in the cellar in one in twenty London houses.³⁸ Edwin Chadwick, head of the *Metropolitan Commission of Sewers*, ordered that these cesspools be emptied: straight into the Thames.³⁹ William Farr, a doctor, developed weekly statistical returns of deaths by disease, parish, age and occupation.⁴⁰ He also tabulated deaths by elevation and thus contributed to the belief that cholera was miasma-based since those at higher levels where air was cleaner were less prone. Eventually he also added their drinking water suppliers which provided the starting point for Snow's research.⁴¹

The need for drinking fountains and the need for the poor to have somewhere to go to escape an 'empty

²⁸ *Reynolds Newspaper*, 10 November 1878 <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>> [accessed 28 December 2019].

²⁹ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 18 May 1871 <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>> [accessed 28 December 2019].

³⁰ *Reynolds Newspaper*, 10 November 1878.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *The Tablet*, 12 September 1885.

³³ Sarah Wise, *The Blackest Streets: Life and death of a Victorian Slum* (London: Vintage Books), p. 181.

³⁴ Government reports, often referred to as 'Blue Books'.

³⁵ Johnson, p. 18; <<http://lginform.local.gov.uk/reports/>> [accessed 23 January 2020].

³⁶ Wise, p. 174; Charles Booth, *Inquiry into Life and Labour in London* (1886-1903) <<https://booth.lse.ac.uk/notebooks>> [accessed 01 February 2020].

³⁷ Wise, p. 181.

³⁸ Johnson, p. 115.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*: William Farr, Compiler of Abstracts to the General Register Office as *Weekly Returns*.

⁴¹ Johnson, p. 100.

hearth, a damp floor, and a cold and comfortless lodging⁴² other than a public beer-house, had common roots with the inspiration behind the bandstand. One politician suggested that ‘the way to cope with [drunkenness] was by [...] raising the character of the working class.’⁴³ The seeds sown by the Public Walks Act (1833),⁴⁴ which acknowledged the negative impact of city life on country people, began to influence government action.

Peckham Rye Common had already been purchased by Camberwell Vestry to prevent it being built or otherwise encroached upon.⁴⁵ Camberwell’s aim, in line with emerging social philosophy, was to provide a distraction from drink and a place to go away from the grime and overcrowding of the London streets. Octavia Hill, co-founder of the Commons Preservation Society (1865) argued that open spaces ‘help to reform habits and morals by encouraging country tastes’.⁴⁶

It is a commonplace that industrialisation in nineteenth-century Britain created urbanisation, overcrowding, poverty and dirt while developing new uses for metals.⁴⁷ The catalogue for the Great Exhibition, 1851, demonstrates an imaginative range of metal products. Iron, in particular, provided not just a strong material but a malleable one, capable of being moulded into intricate patterns, many reflecting nature from which town-dwellers were now alienated. This alienation from nature was one of the reasons why parks were advocated by such as Hill’s Kyrle Society who argued for beauty in the lives of the poor.⁴⁸ Peckham Rye was one of the many open spaces preserved for posterity as a result.⁴⁹

The purchase of the bandstand erected on Peckham Rye in 1889, initiated by Camberwell Vestry the year after its removal from Kensington,⁵⁰ was completed with donations to the Bandstand Committee and the London County Council.⁵¹ It exemplified the new thinking that open spaces, fresh air and music were all morally beneficial.⁵² As Captain Knox MP argued:

The poor of the metropolis [have] but few pleasures, and it conduced much to their health to be

⁴² James Silk Buckingham, *Evidence on Drunkenness: Presented to the House of Commons* (London: Benjamin Bagster, Depository of the British and Foreign Temperance Society, 1834), p.6.

⁴³ In *Morning Advertiser*, 9 June 1864 < <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/> > [accessed 15 December 2019].

⁴⁴ Hansard, HC public health debate 21 February 1833, vol. 15, Mr. Slaney, MP: ‘if due outlets were provided, the consumption of spirits would decrease, and mechanics, instead of sitting in alehouses, would rejoice in the opportunity of enjoying the open air.’ <<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-> [accessed 15 December 2019].

⁴⁵ Sexby recounts that in 1864, 32 vans of Wombwells’ Wild Beast Show occupied the common, so incensing locals that they demanded action from the vestry: *Municipal Parks*, p. 178.

⁴⁶ Robert Whelan, ‘Octavia Hill and the environmental movement’ *Civitas Review*, vol. 6, issue 1, April 2009, pp.1-8 (p.3).

⁴⁷ Hansard, HC Public Health debate, 21 February 1833, vol. 15, col. 1051, Mr. Slaney, MP: by 1833 the proportion of people working in towns had doubled <<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1833-02-21/debates>> [accessed 30 December 2019].

⁴⁸ Alice Corkran, ‘The Kyrle Society’ in *Merry England*, London, vol. 3, issue 15 (July 1984), pp. 153-162 (p. 154).

⁴⁹ Metropolitan Commons Act of 1866 allowed commons to be purchased from the lord of the manor.

⁵⁰ Sexby, Introduction, p. xix; p. 178.

⁵¹ *South London Press*, Saturday 1 June 1889 < <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/> > [accessed 28 December 2019].

⁵² Paul Rabbitts, *Bandstands: pavilions for music, entertainment and leisure* (Swindon: Historic England, 2018), Introduction, p. xxi.

drawn from the miserable streets in which they lived into the parks, and the bands administered to their pleasure.⁵³

Peckham's bandstand, one of the first in London, was popular. Contemporary reports claim:

The Wednesday evening band on Peckham Rye was a glorious success. All Peckham and his wife was there.⁵⁴

And, seven years later: 'Large crowds attend and judging by the applause the music was much enjoyed'.⁵⁵

John Sexby claims bandstand concerts attracted many thousands of all classes.⁵⁶ Even without formal class-based data, hats, which then distinguished males by class, presumably made his visual assessment relatively accurate.⁵⁷ Although Peckham's bandstand is remembered only through pictures such as that on our postcard, fortunately it was sufficiently impressive at the time to have been the model for the bandstand on Clapham Common. A drawing of the Peckham original (Fig.6) confirms they are both the same design.

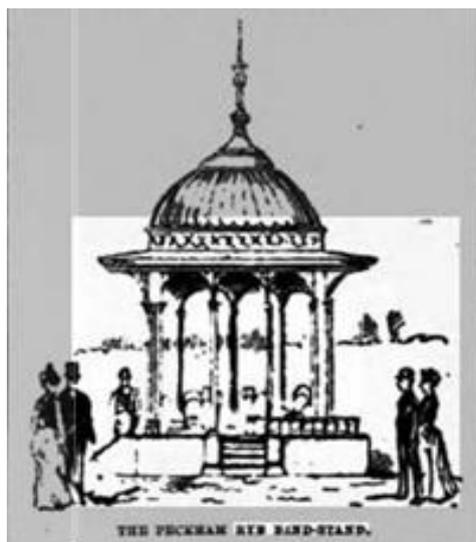


Figure 6: A drawing of Peckham Rye Bandstand illustrating an article commemorating its opening, *South London Press*, 1 June 1889 (Newspaper image © The British Library Board. With thanks to The British Newspaper Archive)

⁵³ Hansard, HC Civil Service Estimates, 1 June 1863, Volume 171 <<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1863-06-01/debates/>> [accessed 21 January 2020]

⁵⁴ *South London Press*, 11 August 1888.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 1 June 1895.

⁵⁶ p. 178.

⁵⁷ Diane Crane, *Fashion and its Social Agendas: Class, Gender and Identity in Clothing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 1.

Victorians emulated classical, renaissance and medieval design but Peckham bandstand, designed by Captain Frances Fowke,⁵⁸ who had spent time in India, seems influenced by Indian *chhatris* (Fig.7). Cast by Potter and Sons in Glasgow,⁵⁹ it was the first to exploit the malleability and strength of cast-iron popularised by the 1851 exhibition.⁶⁰

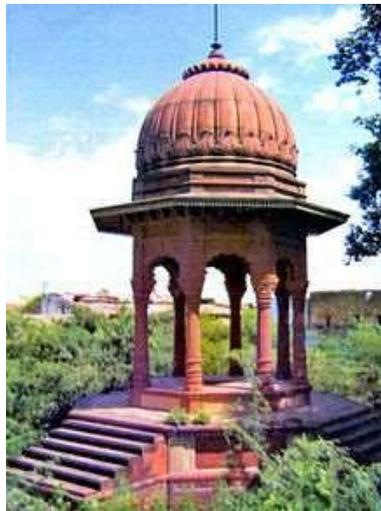


Figure 7: L. R. Burdak, Memorial *chhatra* of Jat Rana Udaybhanu Singh Maharaj at Dholpur, Rajasthan, India (2008) photograph (Permission is granted to copy, distribute and/or modify this document under the terms of the GNU Free Documentation License)

London is full of examples of decorative ironwork, much of it highly painted. It was used in railway stations, entrances to public lavatories, market halls, and, of course, drinking fountains and bandstands. Clapham bandstand's ironwork is intricate (Fig.8). Recently renovated, the similarity with decorative work at Smithfield market is evident (Fig.9).



Figure 8: Victorian ironwork base, bandstand, Clapham, London (2020) photograph (author's own)

⁵⁸ Architect of the International Exhibition and responsible for V&A and Natural History Museums. Colin Harding, *Francis Fowke, captain, architect and relentless inventor* 20 March 2013, Science and Media Museum <<https://blog.scienceandmediamuseum.org.uk/>> [accessed 3 January 2020].

⁵⁹ Paul Rabbitts, *Bandstands* (2018) p. 40 (though elsewhere (p. 219) he attributes it to George Smith at The Sun Foundry).

⁶⁰Hazel Conway, 'The Royal Horticultural Society Bandstand Mystery: Or, What Happened to the First Cast-Iron Bandstands?' *Garden History*, vol. 29, no. 2 (Winter, 2001), pp. 214-216 (p. 215).



Figure 9: Victorian ironwork at Smithfield Market, designed by Sir Horace Jones, 1866-68 (2020) photograph (author's own)

Seen against trees, the idea that foliage-like ornamentation brings countryside into an urban landscape is convincing (Fig.10).



Figure 10: Clapham Common and bandstand (2020) photograph (author's own)

'Light and tasteful' described the Peckham bandstand.⁶¹ With a zinc-covered wooden dome,⁶² it reportedly had excellent acoustics.⁶³ Others were more ornate but, though equally prolific, bandstands did not follow the extravagant fantasy of some drinking fountain design. Even with some of the original decoration now lost, St Sepulchre's fountain is a relatively simple structure compared with those which rapidly followed such as those by MacFarlanes of Glasgow who pushed ironwork decoration to its limit (Fig.11).

⁶¹ Conway, p. 754.

⁶² Conway, p. 215.

⁶³ *South London Press*, 18 July 1889, p. 6



Figure 11: Walter MacFarlane drinking fountain, Renton, design no. 8, photograph
(Images used via Creative Commons License, Lairich Rig.)

There were complaints about the over-use of ornamentation on fountains. Burdett-Coutts' 1862 elaborate neo-Gothic fountain in Victoria Park, Bow, cost £1500.⁶⁴ Though 'Temperance is a bridle of gold' was engraved on its bronze cups, stressing its philanthropic credentials, and Dickens junior termed it beautiful,⁶⁵ *Building News* called it 'a monumental and costly erection' and described another, in Hyde Park, as 'a pretentious Gothic structure profuse in [...] questionable ornament.'⁶⁶ Matthew Ridley MP asked, considering 'the enormous distress which prevailed throughout the country, whether the proposed expenditure [ornamenting a fountain] was decent or becoming?'⁶⁷ *The Graphic* demanded 'less of expensive ornament and more of practical utility,'⁶⁸ and illustrated the difficulty children experienced in reaching the water (Fig.12).⁶⁹

⁶⁴ *Official Report of Drinking Fountains and Cattle Troughs Association, 1859-1884* (Entry: Victoria Park no 2), London Metropolitan Archives.

⁶⁵ Charles Dickens, Jr., *Dictionary of London*, (London, 1879) <<https://www.victorianlondon.org/dickens/dickens-d.htm>> [accessed 20 January 2020].

⁶⁶ *Building News*, April 21, 1871 <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>> [accessed 28 December 2019].

⁶⁷ Hansard, 1 June 1863, Volume 171.

⁶⁸ *The Graphic*, July 23, 1881, p. 336.

⁶⁹ Temperatures at this time reached over 90° F: *The Graphic*, 23 July 1881, p. 90.



Figure 12: C.J. Stanisland, Engraving in *The Graphic*, 23 July 1881
(Courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives with kind permission from The Drinking Fountain Association)

Ruskin slated all machine-made cast-ironwork as ‘deceitful, false, vulgar’.⁷⁰ However, supporters of ornamentation took a view that ‘A nice drinking fountain is likely to withdraw many a thirsty soul from a nasty bar’.⁷¹ It would seem there was a moral value in ornamentation. As Hill insisted, ‘the poor need beauty in their lives’.⁷² Increasingly, it was believed that colour and beauty improved morality.

Moral improvement played a huge role in Victorian philanthropic thinking. The concept of ‘rational recreation’ permeated middle- and upper-class philosophy. To improve the lower orders in the interest of abstinence, edification and respectability, art galleries, museums and libraries were opened; parks and bandstands were supported. There was a moral value in fresh air. There was a moral value in open spaces. And there was a moral value in music. Stanley Jevons, writing in 1883, advocates the cultivation of music, especially in parks, as part of working-class recreation. ‘It is well to have places where people may take the air; but it is better still to attract them every summer evening into the healthy, airy park by the strains of music’.⁷³ Increasingly health and morals seem to have been conflated with the middle- and upper-classes considering themselves the arbiters of working-class morals. Hill, who created tenements for poor people she ousted from insanitary slums, insisted on ultra-disciplined behaviour from her tenants.⁷⁴ Simplistically, it seems industrial engineering and social engineering needed to advance together. ‘Physical regeneration

⁷⁰ Rabbitts, *Bandstands*, p. 102.

⁷¹ *Illustrated London News*, August 7, 1869, p. 54.

⁷² Whelan, p. 3.

⁷³ W. S. Jevons, *Methods of Social Reform and other papers* (London: Macmillan, 1883).

⁷⁴ White, p. 431.

[...] is a [...] pre-condition of moral improvement.⁷⁵

Did drinking fountains and bandstands achieve the aims of the philanthropists who paid for them? Their success might be measured by popularity, proliferation and the achievement of moral reform. Certainly they were well-used and replicated. The opening of the St Sepulchre's drinking fountain attracted enormous crowds (Fig.13).

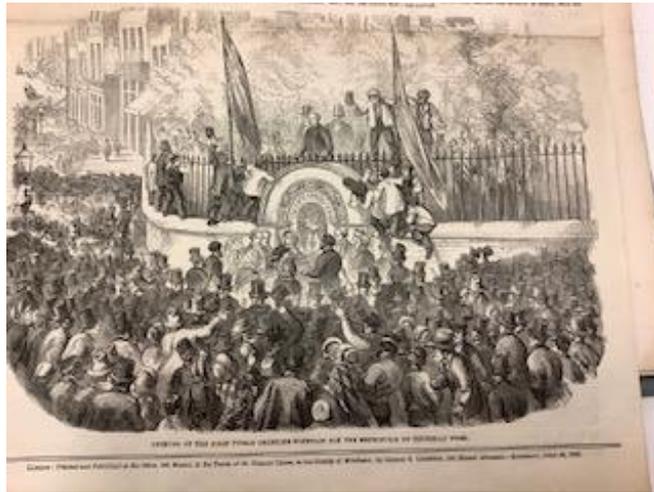


Figure 13: Mrs Wilson opens the drinking fountain at St Sepulchre's Church, High Holborn. Engraving, *London Illustrated News*, 30 April 1859 (Courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives with kind permission from The Drinking Fountain Association)

It was the subject of numerous newspaper articles. Subsequently fountains proliferated: within 11 years 140 were available to the public throughout London. Dickens junior claimed 'some 300,000 people take advantage of the fountains on a summer's day...'⁷⁶ Bandstands also proliferated: London had at least 49 by the First World War.⁷⁷ Success of bandstands in stimulating moral reform, seemingly the chief aim of many philanthropists, is harder to gauge. Jevons speaks of 'the exhilaration and elevation of mind produced by true music' adding 'What some seek at the cost of health, [...] from alcohol, [...] they might obtain innocuously from music.'⁷⁸ Moral and mental health seem to converge. Corkran cites a 'very ragged woman' who claims music 'like makes me forget there's trouble'.⁷⁹ Drunken behaviour at concerts is seemingly absent. *The Observer* in 1879 reports 'a large but quite orderly crowd gathered round [...] to appreciate the "concord of sweet sounds"'.⁸⁰ There was some fear that, it being Sunday, music would detract from church attendance, and another report suggests those living adjacent to the common were less pleased, but behaviour was not unruly. In 1891 we learn 'the great crowd behaved well'.⁸¹

⁷⁵ *Metropolitan Public Gardens Association* statement, 1881; Whelan, p. 3.

⁷⁶ Charles Dickens Jr.

⁷⁷ Paul Rabbitts, *Database of Bandstands – lost and existing*, September 2017 <PaulRabbitts.co.uk> [accessed 12 December 2019].

⁷⁸ Jevons, p. 11.

⁷⁹ Corkran, p. 158.

⁸⁰ *Buchan Observer and East Aberdeenshire Advertiser*, 10 September 1889.

⁸¹ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 29 June 1891.

Disappointingly, in 1883, Jevons believed ‘crime and [...] drunkenness show no apparent diminution’ despite various initiatives to combat them. He argued forcibly that only holistic and sustained action would have any impact on social reform.⁸² However, Pugh, historian, suggests there are grounds for believing law and order was improved in the 1890s compared with the 1830s but also posits the new police-forces, compulsory education and increasing influence of women as contributing to this.⁸³ Other initiatives (art galleries, museums, exhibitions) similarly aimed at providing morally improving recreational activity for the working-classes, could also claim success.⁸⁴

Throughout the century select committees and acts of Parliament were introduced to improve the organisation of society and relieve poverty. These did not seek to abolish the lower-orders; this was not about social mobility. Although the middle-classes may have pursued gentrification, the belief that God ordained man’s place in the world, ‘the rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate’,⁸⁵ was strong. But ornately-engineered drinking fountains and bandstands were small markers in the progress towards workers’ health, sobriety and possibly improved behaviour. By the time the postcard was sent, Londoners, if more regulated than a century earlier, could enjoy cleaner drinking water, better housing, open spaces and parks filled with music.

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⁸² Jevons, p. 6: ‘What is needed among social reformers is a long pull, and a strong pull, and especially a pull altogether.’

⁸³ Martin Pugh, *State and Society: A Social and Political History of Britain since 1870* (London, 2008), p. 79.

⁸⁴ Jevons, p. 12: ‘not one person in a million among visitors to the Crystal Palace exhibition is charged with drunken and disorderly conduct.’

⁸⁵ Frances Alexander. Lines from ‘All things bright and beautiful’, Hymn 9 in *Hymns for Little Children* (Dublin, 1848): ‘The rich man in his castle / the poor man at his gate / God made them high or lowly and ordered their estate.’

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