

# Inventory and Documentation of Historic Monuments in England: Recording the 'Minor Heritage'

by

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*This essay is the text of a paper presented on behalf of the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England at an international study course, Inventory and Documentation Techniques for the Architectural Heritage, sponsored and organised by the European Foundation for Heritage Skills, RCHME, and the Getty Information Institute. Delegates from seventeen countries, together with four observers from Germany, attended this course in September 1996; it opened in Oxford, dispersed to RCHME regional offices, and closed in London. The object of the course was to explore the use of rapid survey techniques, using the Core data index to historic buildings and monuments of the architectural heritage, published as Recommendation R (95) 3 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in January 1995. The paper on which this essay is based formed part of an introductory session at Rewley House, Oxford, considering philosophical and practical aspects of inventory activity.*

What is meant by the recording of 'minor heritage'? We might agree fairly quickly on a broad definition of 'major heritage' - cathedrals, palaces, cradles of the industrial revolution, all buildings of great and obvious intrinsic importance. Demanding though the study of these august arenas remains it should be generally accepted, in principle even if not in practice, that they alone are not sufficient for our endeavours. The minor defines itself negatively as that which is not intrinsically of great importance. What buildings of this class qualify as 'heritage'? In Britain heritage is an ill-used word. It often seems to be equated with anything old, particularly when it is being invoked against change, as it often unthinkingly is, or in favour of the re-presentation of history in a theme-park or Disney-ish manner.

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Yet, of course, cultural or historic significance is not purely a function of age, permanence, nor even sight-seeing potential. In considering what should be recorded as opposed to what should be preserved, broad-minded inclusiveness is essential. Recording in this context is not primarily about conservation, but about historic understanding, or at least bearing witness. 'Minor heritage' must therefore encompass not only context for 'major heritage', but also the ordinary built environment - the houses and apartments, schools, hospitals, factories and offices that surround and enclose us, conditioning our daily lives. Some of it may be old, much of it is not. Even though such buildings are perhaps not generally understood as historic, they indisputably are, since yesterday is history. Indeed, recent buildings are almost always less well understood in historic terms than is generally assumed to be the case. Further, they are more widely subject to change, often of a desirable nature, than are older buildings. Obviously, we cannot set out to record every building; selectivity is crucial. For present purposes, therefore, 'minor heritage' is definable without reference to chronology as that part of the quotidian which has special historic resonance - perhaps because of its proximity to 'major heritage', perhaps for its inherent cultural centrality or exemplary character, or perhaps for the cumulative impact of an aggregation of the ordinary.

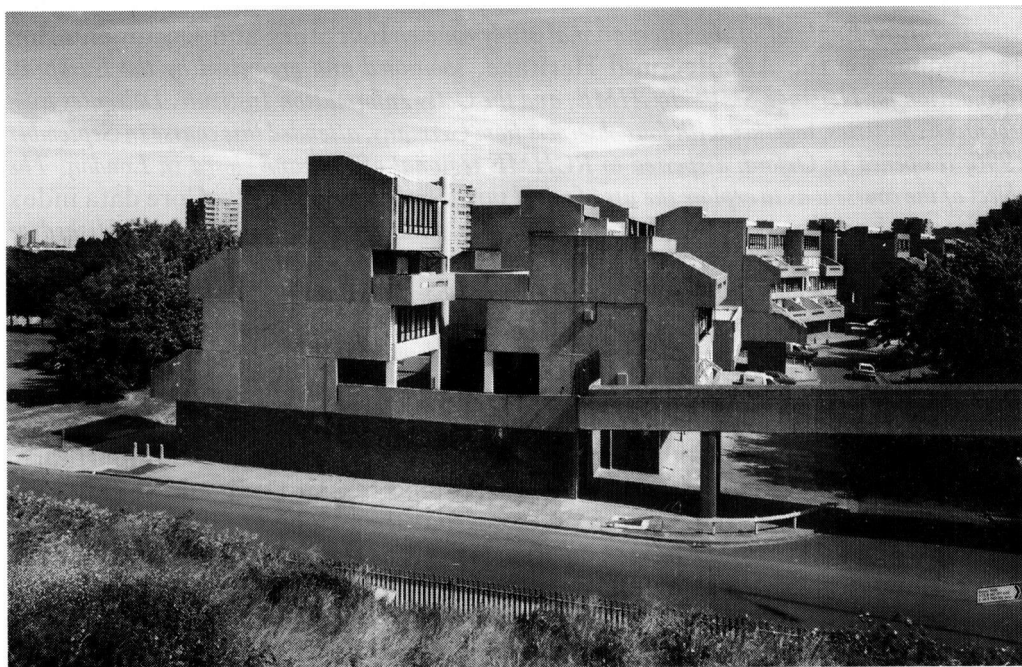


Fig. 1

Binsey Walk, Lakeside, Thamesmead South, Bexley, London. Part of the first phase of Thamesmead new town built in 1967-72 by the Greater London Council

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To illustrate the point, here are two examples chosen more or less at random, both from London. The subject is not purely urban; but it is probably in cities that the needs are greatest, the difficulties most acute, and the issues best understood. The perspective here is urban, it is indeed a view from London.

Thamesmead is a residential district in the outer fringes of south-east London. It was built from new on reclaimed marshland near the River Thames starting in 1967 (Fig. 1). It is an important example of town planning and new town development from that period. Stanley Kubrick used Thamesmead as the setting for some notably violent scenes in his 1972 film *A Clockwork Orange*, a choice of film set which might be seen as reflecting the falling away of support for the architectural idealism that underpinned the application of Modernist design to public housing. Thamesmead was then far from completed, and development has continued sporadically ever since, latterly under privatised management and through private rather than public investment (Fig. 2). In a small area Thamesmead provides a fascinating case study of late-twentieth-century domestic architecture, the recording of which is best done now.<sup>1</sup> Every major European city probably has such a district.

Heathrow Airport is perhaps the single most vital transport nexus in England; it is a genuinely public place (Fig. 3). Architecturally, it is generally banal if not



Fig. 2

Thamesbank Place, Thamesmead North, Bexley, London. Neo-vernacular brick and timber housing typical of later 1970s and 1980s development at Thamesmead

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Fig. 3

Terminal 2, Heathrow Airport, Hillingdon, London. The upper level interior, as remodelled in 1975-9, viewed from the north

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confused, scarcely rising above the worthy but dull. It has, however, undeniable cultural and historic importance. It is a huge complex, extraordinarily fluid in its forms, to the point of seeming organic. Its circulation and spatial segregation have been likened to those of a Renaissance court. As one might expect given this analogy, it is constantly being extended and refurbished. If its present appearance is not now recorded with an historic eye, it will not be possible to find it later.<sup>2</sup>

We have a duty to make the difficult subjective choices involved in selectively recording the ordinary, the typical and the contemporary. This is not an arcane academic enterprise aimed at the imagined interests of scholars of the twenty-second century. It relates very directly to the cultures in which we live now. It is ever more widely and positively accepted that history is manifest in the everyday and the local. Publications such as *History on Your Doorstep*,<sup>3</sup> a primer for the young 'urban detective', reflect an aspect of the state school curriculum in England for children aged five to fourteen that has been developed in recent years. The studies of geography and history are increasingly approached through local examples, with a growing emphasis on buildings as sources of information. As a publicly funded body in a democratic culture it is entirely appropriate if not essential that the

Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England should set an exemplary standard for such research in England. We should provide paradigms for the understanding of the *genius loci* through buildings. This is precisely what is done by the Survey of London, a section within the Royal Commission that undertakes topographically based studies of discrete parts of London, researching their history in great detail through buildings and documents, for synthesis in uniquely comprehensive and authoritative works of reference. The most recently published pair of volumes<sup>4</sup> was devoted to a part of East London that largely comprised short-lived and small-scale riverside industrial premises, large commercial docks, and slum dwellings succeeded by public housing built for the working-class population of the area. In 800 pages fewer than half a dozen 'major monuments' are discussed, yet the publication has been very well received. The books also include a detailed account of the nineteen-eighties rebuilding of the area that followed the collapse and closure of industry and docks, as is prominently marked on the cover of one of the volumes by a view of the tower of Canary Wharf, Europe's tallest building at the time of its completion in 1991.

However, this sort of study, though exemplary, cannot be the model for all our urban recording, if only because of the practical consideration of costs; detailed documentary research is not cheap. Yet even where resources are so thinly spread that dealing with the major buildings is difficult, it is worth devoting some attention to 'minor heritage'; the moreso in that we are living in a fast-changing world where what was built twenty to thirty years ago is redundant - not only for not being built to last, but in many cases because the building types have been superseded. Cultural and political change may be a particularly potent force in eastern and central Europe, but technological and economic change affect us all.

To meet this need there has to be a middle ground between the primary school urban detective and the definitive work of scholarship. Where buildings are threatened with demolition there is in any case rarely the luxury of sufficient time to carry out detailed research. In recent years in England the Royal Commission has looked at a variety of ways of surveying urban areas on a topographical basis. The content of the *Core data index to historic buildings and monuments*, based on existing practices within member states of the Council of Europe, was agreed at a colloquy in Nantes in 1992 and subsequently published.<sup>5</sup> From the same colloquy a thoughtful consideration of one group of Royal Commission surveys has also been published.<sup>6</sup> This pointed to the difficulties of answering meaningful questions through a rigid or standardised form-based approach to recording, suggesting a need for methodological flexibility, and for the marriage of historical knowledge with the assessment of fabric; in other words, solid background reading should accompany the production of basic 'core data'. An area survey is just that; the whole is not the sum of the parts. The reduction of information to 'core data' on a series of forms or a database is an essential minimum, a starting point to provide a framework, but it is not, nor is it intended to be, more than the equivalent of a disassembled skeleton. Since 1992 the Royal Commission has undertaken a number of topographically based rapid surveys in response to a variety of threats, attempting to learn from

earlier experience, and seeking not only to identify individual buildings, but also to consider the relationships between them.<sup>7</sup>

In undertaking an area survey the starting points are not the questions we always ask - what was this building for? when was it built? why was it built in this way at that time? Rather we must ask questions like - what is the point of treating these buildings as a group? and how within practical constraints can this objective be realised? The rapid survey itself, that is photography with descriptive notation of core data, will often fail to provide answers to the meaty questions, but if wisely undertaken it should greatly increase the likelihood of obtaining a good

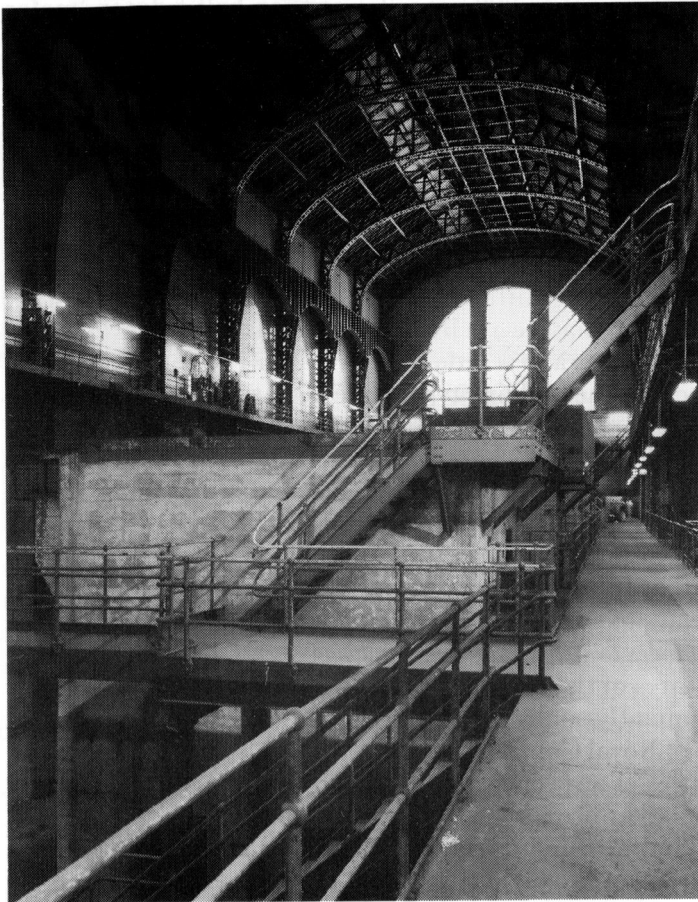


Fig. 4

Greenwich Generating Station, Greenwich, London. The disused steel-framed former engine room of this Thames-side power station, built in 1902-10 by the London County Council to provide electricity for the capital's tramways

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understanding of any buildings, including major ones, that might be the subject of further study. It is a means to an end, not an end in itself. The web of familiarity that is generated through an overall survey is an essential base for subsequent selective intensive recording and appropriately focused documentary research. A single building studied out of its context will surely be less well understood than one studied in relation to its surroundings. The barrenness of the area rapid survey carried out in isolation, where our usual primary questions are left frustratingly unresolved, can be worked around in different ways.

One way is to plan selective further recording from the outset, either thematically

tically or topographically based. In 1994 the Royal Commission undertook a project relating to the Thames Estuary, an area under intense scrutiny by planners looking for space for London to grow towards continental Europe.<sup>8</sup> The riverside east of London has numerous derelict sites of former industrial and military importance. The first exercise we carried out was a survey from the river of the area in question, a photographic panorama of both river banks along about thirty kilometres in 374 views. These photographs, supported by basic identifying information, gave a clear picture of what was actually there in 1994.<sup>9</sup> This was the starting point for a number of relatively more intensive surveys. One of these related to power stations, a feature of the area.<sup>10</sup> From the earliest days of London's electricity industry in the eighteen-eighties there have been power stations along the Thames, so sited for the easy supply of coal and cooling water. Some of those surviving are early examples of the building type, as for example that at Greenwich, built to supply the London County Council tramways in 1902-10, and still partially used to power the London Underground (Fig. 4). Many much more recent buildings have fallen redundant with the changing economics and technology of power supply. Thus, huge monuments from the nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties, as at West Thurrock



Fig. 5

West Thurrock Power Station, Essex. Designed for the Central Electricity Generating Board in the late 1950s, built in 1962-5, and closed in 1994. In a significant and architecturally Modernist break with the 'brick cathedral' tradition that concealed the power station plant, the boilers were exposed to the elements

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(Fig. 5), are being removed. No-one would argue for their preservation, but limited recording is surely valuable. This work was largely a matter of external and aerial photography, with selective internal recording, which did not involve measured survey. Much of the work comprised collating and copying records held elsewhere. A particular problem in this context was simply identifying who held the paper records that would be of value to anyone undertaking deeper study. In large measure they seemed to have gone to the four winds with privatisation. This difficulty in dealing with modern industrial sites is probably general and international. As nationalised or private industries collapse, records are frequently dispersed. Their historical value is overlooked because they are current, so they become neglected or lost. It is assumed, often wrongly, that the information the records hold is too well known or of too little interest to warrant their retention.

Another aspect of the Thames Estuary project was a survey of Woolwich Arsenal.<sup>11</sup> Until 1995 this large riverside defence site was all but completely inaccessible. An important military depot since the seventeenth century it contains buildings of most periods from the late seventeenth century onwards. The Arsenal grew to become Britain's most important arms manufacturing site in the nineteenth century. Historically it is extremely important, from the standpoints of military significance, technological innovation, and numbers employed. The end of the Cold War made this and many other long-established defence sites around Britain finally redundant. The Woolwich complex contains fifty-three buildings of which eighteen are 'Listed' or legally protected as having special historic or architectural interest. However, they are all interdependent parts of a single story. Some may be refurbished for museum and other heritage uses, others may be demolished. The Royal Commission's survey included sufficient documentary research and analysis of fabric to allow at least a paragraph account of each building, for example a rolling mill of c. 1868, much altered, but a rare survival (Fig. 6). This inventory was supplemented by deeper analytical surveys of six of the most important and complex buildings, including the Brass Foundry of 1716 and the Grand Store, warehousing of 1805-13. The reports have been repeatedly cited as useful by those working to plan a future for a site that is crucial to the regeneration of a particularly impoverished district.

A comparable exercise to that undertaken at Woolwich Arsenal was an architectural inventory of London Zoo that led to publication.<sup>12</sup> The starting point for this survey was a threat to close the Regent's Park Zoo, for lack of secure funding. Founded in 1826, and thus the world's first zoological gardens, the site had grown and developed continuously since then to contain 113 structures. Fortunately the Zoo has been saved from closure, but the Royal Commission's survey took place at a crucial turning point in its history. Again the work is being used by those planning the site's future. It also has a broader appeal to many amongst the wider public who feel an affection for London Zoo as a place. The Zoo holds a fascinating collection of buildings, amongst which there are twelve 'Listed' buildings, some of which are superb examples of exhibition architecture. These reflect not only the wider development of architectural style since the early nineteenth century, but also the development of attitudes to the display and welfare of animals. The Giraffe



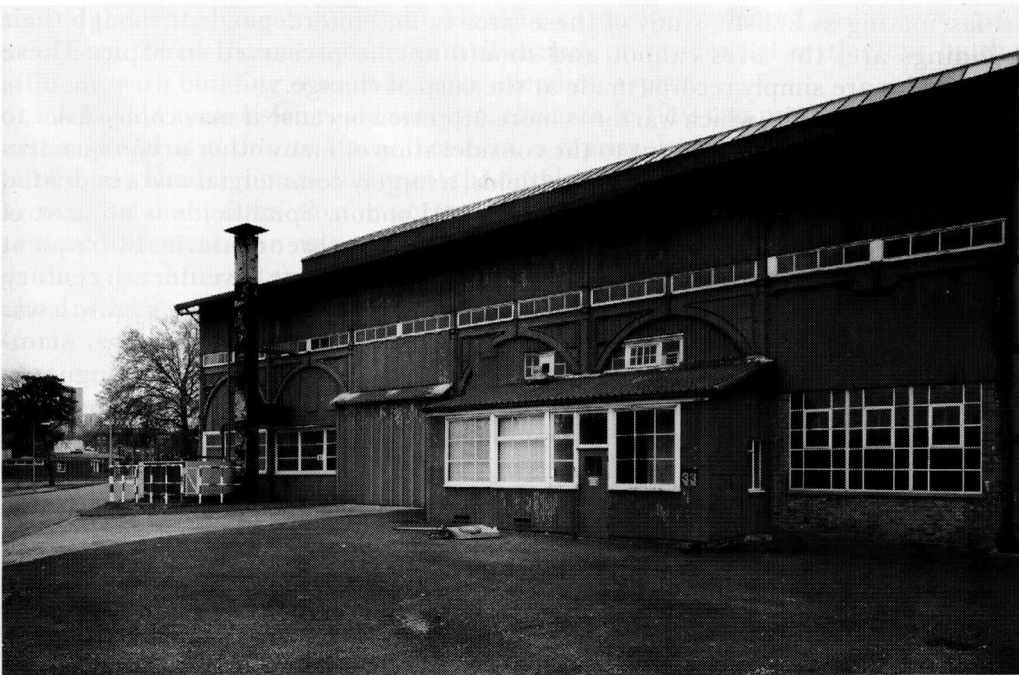


Fig. 6

Former Rolling Mill (Building 33), Royal Arsenal, Woolwich, London. Part of the Royal Gun Factory, built c. 1868, and used in the making of large naval guns from coiled wrought-iron bars  
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House of 1836-7 is a utilitarian Tuscan shed designed by Decimus Burton, the Zoo's first architect. By contrast the Penguin Pool, built in 1933-4 to Constructivist designs by Berthold Lubetkin's partnership Tecton, is an icon of Modernist architecture in England and a building that speaks volumes about the relationship between animals, scientists and architects. Less well known is the dramatically engineered remodelling of the African Aviary from 1989-90, which kept the exhibitionist impulse alive even in the Zoo's darkest days. The Royal Commission's book comprised an inventory of all the structures of the Zoo, based on detailed site survey and photography with selective documentary research. Previously the Zoo's more famous buildings had been considered only in terms of architectural style, without reference to their neighbours. We looked at them as parts of a continuously developing site, the buildings of which were in a sort of dialogue.

London Zoo and Woolwich Arsenal are unusual and atypical single-function specialized sites where an area and a theme coincide. On such sites a thorough inventory can reveal much about the whole ensemble and the relationships between buildings that isolated study of the best buildings will not. Such inventories can be fleshed out with limited documentary research because the source material, however voluminous, is unlikely to be as diffuse as would be the case otherwise. Of course,

as fascinating as holistic study of these sites is, and interdependent though their buildings are, the sites cannot and should not be preserved in aspic. These inventories are simply records made at the cusp of change.

A final example, which warrants more attention because it may come closer to being in some respects relevant to the consideration of many other urban quarters throughout Europe, comes from Spitalfields, a largely commercial and residential district lying immediately east of the City of London. Spitalfields is an area of great historic interest that has been characterised over three centuries by frequent changes of habitation and use. Initially developed in the late seventeenth century,

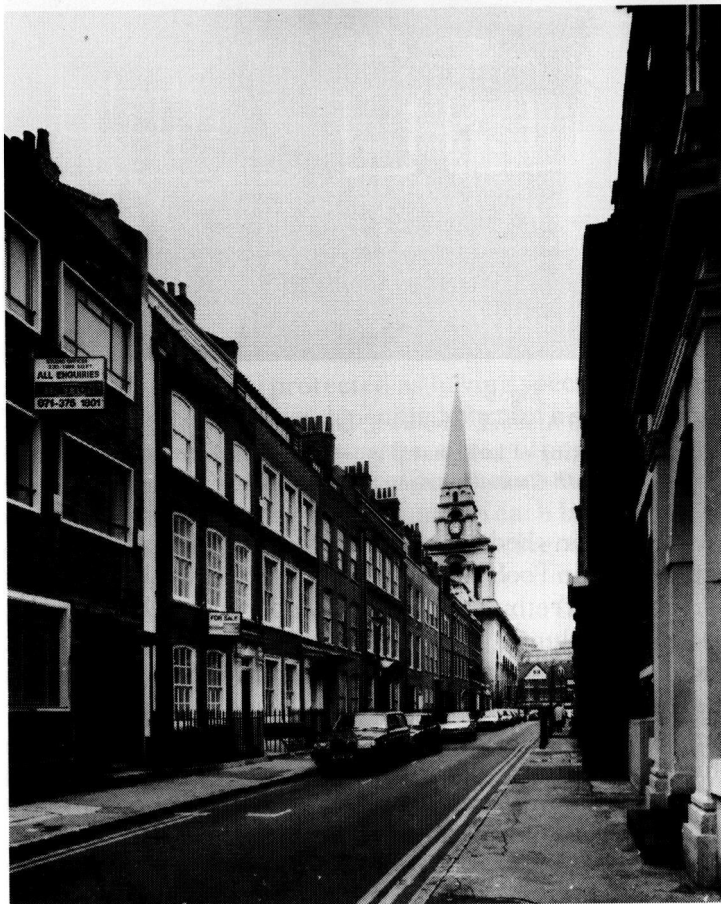


Fig. 7

Fournier Street, Spitalfields, Tower Hamlets, London. View towards Christ Church, Spitalfields, showing much of the south side of one of the least altered of the area's early-eighteenth-century streets. Continuously-glazed attics are an indication of former silk weavers' workshops

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the area's growth was particularly stimulated by Huguenot immigrants, refugees fleeing religious persecution following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. They formed the core of the local silk-weaving industrial community. Following the decline of this industry in the nineteenth century, Spitalfields became a largely Jewish community, and more recently it has been settled by Bengali immigrants. All these groups have maintained strong cultural and religious traditions. Throughout, the working of textiles or the 'rag trade' has been a dominant feature of the local economy. In the nineteen-eighties a development boom that reflected the success of the City as a financial centre

caused the City fringes of Spitalfields to be extensively adapted and redeveloped as offices. There has also been gentrification, or residential settlement by the affluent, with building conservation as a leading aspect.

A Royal Commission rapid survey of the area in 1993 was prompted by concern within the local authority. It was, however, a reprise. In 1957 the Survey of London published a thoroughgoing history of the development of Spitalfields,<sup>13</sup> with detailed accounts of many of its most important buildings. No historical record is definitive or final, the more so in an area so characterised by flux. In an approach that was deliberately different from that of the Survey of London the new survey comprised photography of all of the area's streets using roll film, as opposed to the Royal Commission's usual practice of large-format photography, resulting in about 400 photographs of fifty-four streets, taking in four conservation areas and 160 listed buildings, of which thirty-nine were designated as being 'at-risk' at the time. The photographs include views of every building of even passing distinction. Interiors, though there are many of great interest, were ignored. This approach was adopted in order to concentrate on the streetscape, that is on the grouping of buildings and the features on and around them that convey much about the public life of an area and which are so quick to change. It is an avowedly superficial record, concentrating on the changing face of an area. The record has value in part because the area had changed a great deal since 1957, as had public perceptions as to what constitutes historic fabric. Further, as the City regroups for further renewal it cannot be long before Spitalfields will be transformed again. To accompany the photographs a written report summarised the history and character of each street, identifying all the buildings photographed.<sup>14</sup>

The photographic survey of Spitalfields was in large measure documentation of 'minor heritage'. A view looking along Fournier Street towards Nicholas Hawksmoor's great Christ Church, Spitalfields, shows that behind this major early-eighteenth-century Baroque monument much good housing of the same period survives (Fig. 7). Many of the area's largest and grandest early-eighteenth-century master-weavers' houses are on Fournier Street, and some of these have in recent years been painstakingly conserved and 'gentrified'. At the other end of Fournier Street is the London Jamme Masjid, a mosque serving the Bengali community in a building of 1743 that was originally a French Calvinist church, the Neuve Eglise, and which, in 1898, was converted to be a major synagogue, the Machzicke Hadass. In front of Christ Church there is a commercial district, dominated by the buildings of the former Spitalfields Fruit and Vegetable Market, which closed as such in 1991. Elsewhere narrow alleys and passages are enclosed by nineteenth-century warehouses and workshops, but the street pattern reflects earlier settlement. The warehouses themselves are certainly vulnerable to redevelopment. Another view shows interwar London County Council housing of a neo-Georgian character standing opposite the Soup Kitchen for the Jewish Poor of 1902, now empty and a 'Listed' building, and disused market-barrow stores (Fig. 8). Much that is ephemeral is found on shopfronts and streetcorners. Signage is a particularly fragile feature, as represented by a view of the paper-bag manufacturing premises whose business



Fig. 8 (above)

Brune Street, Spitalfields, Tower Hamlets, London. On the right is Carter House, part of the London County Council's Holland Estate of 1927-36. The former Soup Kitchen for the Jewish Poor of 1902 is in the middle of the group opposite. In the foreground there are market-barrow stores

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Fig. 9 (left)

45-6 Crispin Street, Spitalfields, Tower Hamlets, London. The painted advertising on the ground floor of Donovan Bros premises is by Alfred Keil

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depended on the nearby fruit and vegetable market (Fig. 9). Saleboards are also a telling and transient feature. In contrast the market known as Petticoat Lane thrives (Fig. 10). On the edge of the City there is a lonely guardian of a development site in the shape of an early electric lamp standard of 1903 (Fig. 11). This and other views to the west show the massive nineteenth-eighties office blocks of Broadgate looming over the smaller-scale commercial buildings of Spitalfields. In Artillery Lane nineteenth-eighties steel and glass provide a firm visual stop to the mixed brick and stucco of the eighteenth century onwards (Fig. 12). There is continuity too as the former fruit and vegetable market buildings of 1886-93 and later, on a site that has been used as a market since at least 1682, have been adapted with new shop units and stalls catering to alternative tastes. The new market owes its success in part to the ambience generated by the fact that Spitalfields and adjoining areas

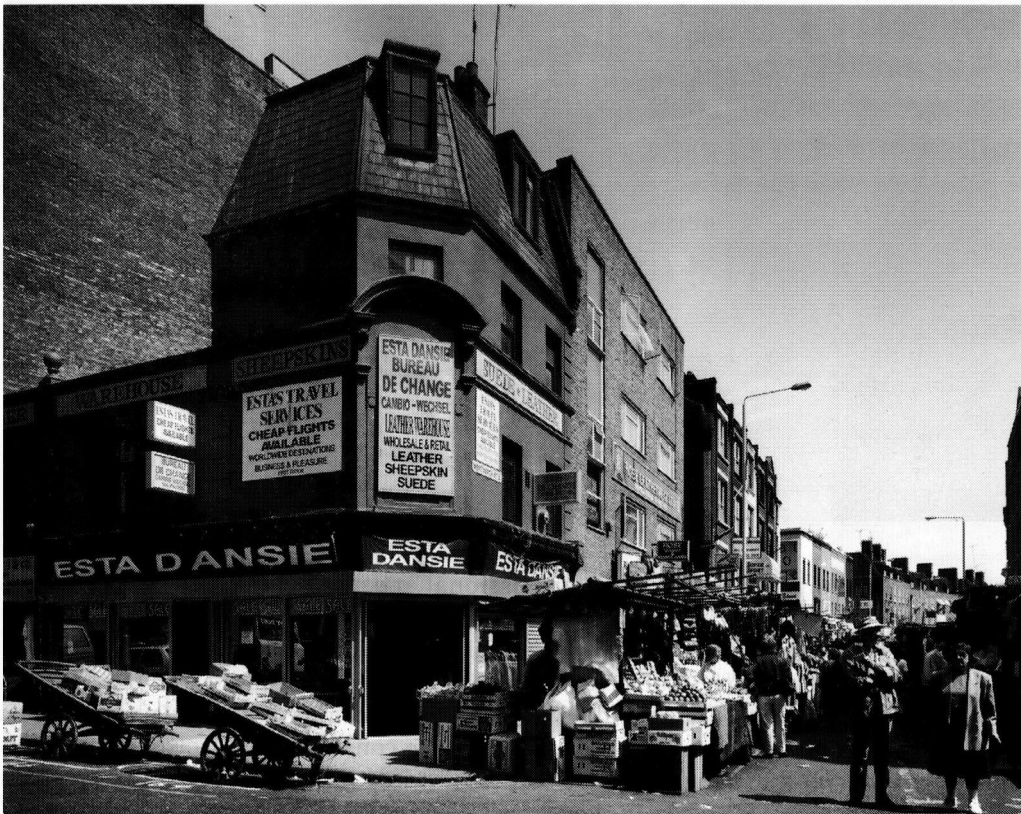


Fig. 10

Wentworth Street, Spitalfields, Tower Hamlets, London. Along the southern boundary of Spitalfields is the market known as Petticoat Lane, the name surviving from the site of the larger market that was formerly centred on what has become Middlesex Street

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Fig. 11  
 Electric Lamp  
 Standard, Brushfield  
 Street, Spitalfields,  
 Tower Hamlets,  
 London. Erected in  
 1903 for Stepney  
 Borough Electricity  
 Supply  
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are home to about half of Britain's professional artists, including such prominent exponents of 'minor heritage' as Gilbert and George.

It is necessary to end with a word of caution. Our ability to make sense of the photographs taken in the Spitalfields survey was heavily dependent on the existence of the 1957 Survey of London volume. Even so, completion of a basic written record to accompany the photographic survey was a time consuming exercise. As much as such recording is vital, it is nevertheless difficult to achieve worthwhile rapid surveys of complex urban areas which result in more than disassembled skeletons of information unless ground-breaking work has already been done, or resources allow for follow-up.

As fossil hunters we have first to identify the bones to know what the animal was like. This much is essential and obvious. However, for a proper understanding the bones must be assembled in meaningful relationships and fleshed out through



Fig. 12

Artillery Lane, Spitalfields, Tower Hamlets, London. Laid out on its present line in 1682 for development of the Old Artillery Ground, this street retains buildings that were houses, a chapel, workshops and warehouses. Bishop's Court, an office block of 1982, terminates the view. Other buildings have recently been converted to office use in overspill from the City

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intelligent surmise. In some cases it may be sufficient, at least for the time being, simply to collect the bones, some bones being better than no bones, but even then it should be done with a view to later assessment.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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7. The examples presented in this essay come from in and around London. The Royal Commission has also recently undertaken area rapid surveys in other parts of England, for example Devizes, Wilts, and Newark, Notts. We have also carried out numerous typologically based rapid surveys in recent years, on the coal industry, hospitals, farmsteads, prisons, workhouses and London's town halls.
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