

Introduction

And away went the coach up Whitechapel, to the admiration of the whole population of that pretty densely populated quarter.

‘Not a wery nice neighbourhood, this, Sir,’ said Sam, with a touch of the hat, which always preceded his entering into conversation with his master.

‘It is not indeed, Sam,’ replied Mr. Pickwick, surveying the crowded and filthy street through which they were passing.

Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–37)¹

The East End, like the whole of London itself, can be said to be all things to all people; throughout its history it has been respected and reviled, lauded and feared, neglected and indulged, used and abused. The amount of change the East End has been subjected to through the centuries has made it an almost continuously shifting landscape of diverse industry, architecture, religion, politics and social class. This should make this particular part of the capital difficult to define (as one would define, say, the West End, which most would associate almost solely with

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entertainment and indulgence). The ever-changing East End should by rights avoid simplistic categorisation, yet the very name still conjures up stereotypes, some of which have prevailed for decades or even centuries.

Recently, with the regeneration of key locales within the area, particularly following the reinvention of Docklands as a world-class financial hub, the metamorphosis of key neighbourhoods like Spitalfields and Shoreditch into some of London's coolest quarters, and the gradual creep of the City into its territory (the neighbourhood around Aldgate East is known today by property developers as 'City Fringe'), this contradictory area is now favourably regarded for the richness of its modern culture. But many who actively seek out the distractions of the East End today would probably have given it a wide berth as little as thirty years ago. This author distinctly remembers the Spitalfields of the 1980s as a plethora of battered sweatshops, decaying houses and market detritus, with the homeless and the destitute a significant presence, the like of which was unimaginable around his home in the suburbs. Likewise, Wapping, neglected and mainly deserted following the closure of the docks more than a decade earlier, presented an unearthly warren of streets overshadowed by grim warehouses, with the air of an unsettling dystopia. Then as now, for many it was the numerous street markets – Petticoat Lane, Brick Lane and Club Row, to name the most famous – that continued to give the East End life, and thirty years ago these hubs of activity echoed with the cockney street-patter that was even then becoming a noticeably diminishing cliché.

And if it is clichés one is after, the East End of that time was abundant with them: sooty terraces of damp, mice-ridden homes with outdoor lavatories, the front doorsteps nevertheless kept spotless out of pride; the cheeky market trader whose business was not always as legitimate as he would have you believe; Pearly Kings and Queens in all their finery; small dark pubs, fiercely guarded by the locals as they revelled in the atmosphere of light ale fumes, cigarette smoke and the slightly discordant

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jangle of a piano; grubby-faced children playing in the streets, taking boisterous joy from whatever bits of disregarded rubbish they could turn into playthings; gnarled and destitute meths drinkers crowded round a constantly lit fire on a bombsite. All of this is dreadfully simplistic, of course, but these oft-evoked – and now predominantly extinct – perceptions were once the norm (and were probably accompanied by the irrepressible pub piano and a dozen rough-and-ready East Enders singing ‘Knees Up Mother Brown’).

But the other element of East End life that appears to linger in the collective memory, deservedly or not, is its criminality. Like the much-evoked hardship and poverty associated with London east of the City, so the subject of lawlessness refuses to go away. It is somewhat unfortunate that the East End has had a number of high-profile cases which have served to make criminal behaviour a frequent focal point to those who study its history; the legends of Jack the Ripper and the Kray twins continue to fire the public’s imagination, and other dramas such as the Siege of Sidney Street and the Battle of Cable Street remain recurrent reference points. Popular fiction has reinforced the East End’s villainous reputation through the works of Charles Dickens, Arthur Morrison and Sax Rohmer. Non-fiction, particularly reportage from the second half of the nineteenth century, kept the reading public abreast of all that was considered morally wanting in this apparently insalubrious quarter.

It was the latter material, particularly prevalent during the Whitechapel murders of 1888, when all eyes were peering into London’s underbelly, that cemented the East End’s reputation for crime and vice in the decades that followed. But whilst the motives for crimes like those perpetrated by the Ripper were less discernible, many examples of unlawful behaviour east of Aldgate Pump had immediately recognisable causes, often as a result of the district’s setting within the geography of the metropolis. Its proximity to the City boundaries and the docks provided many situations which could be exploited by the criminal-minded, whether it was

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through greed, need, or as a result of frictions and tensions such as those surrounding race, religion or politics. Some episodes, naturally, escape categorisation. Thus the criminal history of the East End of London is a rather large subject, for in between the major *causes célèbres* – and there have been many – sit a plethora of incidents which, despite having less impact in their day and having quickly been obscured by the mists of time, remain no less important in regard to what they tell us about lawlessness in the East End of London, and its causes.

But in the same way that the East End defies simplistic categorisation in terms of its character, so it possesses unclear borders. One could well ask, ‘What and *where* is the East End?’ The boundaries tend to expand or contract depending on which authority one consults. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, for example, has the East End beginning at Aldgate Pump, at the confluence of Leadenhall and Fenchurch Streets: this is a fair assumption, for beyond lies Whitechapel, certainly the heart of the East End in many people’s minds. Gardiner’s Corner – once the site of a prominent department store² – at the busy junction where Whitechapel High Street, Commercial Street and Leman Street (and, once, also Commercial Road) intersect, has been another suggested starting point. From here, the immediately adjacent East End is Whitechapel, Spitalfields and Mile End, its southernmost point bordered by the natural boundary of the River Thames, taking in Wapping, Limehouse, Shadwell and Poplar. But where does it end? It is here that the East End becomes more than just a physical entity. Robert Sinclair emphatically stated that ‘I see no reason to use the phrase “East End” unless very exceptionally to indicate the sense of somebody’s mind.’³ This concept of ‘state of mind’ is a perceptive one: often the citizens of districts such as Hoxton and Dalston, or more distant locales like Plaistow or even Romford (the latter being most definitely in Essex), consider themselves East Enders. Indeed, such a label, despite the often-sullied reputation of the place, is often worn as a badge of honour, for being an East Ender sets one apart as tough, resourceful

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and unique to London, carrying with it a sort of independence. William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, alluded to such uniqueness when he commented that ‘one seems to be conscious of it in the streets. It may be in the faces of the people . . . or it may lie in the sounds one hears or in the character of the people.’⁴ That said, the concept of the East End denizen as a breed unto him or herself is yet another cliché – the place is too diverse to maintain such an ideal, especially today.

For our purposes, the East End shall be – as it has been defined by a number of commentators – bordered by the City to the west, the Thames to the south, the neighbourhoods of Bethnal Green and Shoreditch to the north, and where the River Lea drives through Bow to the east: a district which since 1965 has been the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.⁵ There is much history and turbulence here: civil disorder, dissent, industrial sabotage, theft (both petty and large-scale), house-breaking, gang warfare, racist violence, prostitution, violent assault and murder. Less commonly considered themes come in the form of child neglect and infanticide, illegal gambling, drunkenness and corruption.

From such rich seams of criminality come myths and legends: two in particular, the Jack the Ripper murders and the Kray twins, have stretched far beyond their original context, even becoming part of a wider entertainment industry. This is perhaps one of the reasons – over-exposure being another – why these two subjects are often given short shrift by writers who delve into the wider history of the East End. They are often looked down upon, not because they are unimportant, but almost as though any lengthy consideration of these two infamous cases might imbue any study of the wider context with an unwanted and crass populism. Here I must make my position clear: to look at East End crime with anything less than a token nod to these two contentious subjects would be missing the point, and I refuse to pass them off as tiresome and clichéd. They are as much a part of the criminality of the area as anything else, and merit wider consideration.

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The Ripper murders, born of the district's social conditions in the late nineteenth century, affected the area in significant ways, inspiring other incidents which combined to make the East End a major international focal point. The Ripper crimes highlighted social injustice and crushing squalor, becoming a means by which historians today can gain a much more detailed sense of life in London at the time. This is one of the Ripper's legacies, along with the belief that such focus inspired rapid improvement in the infrastructure and conditions of the East End. (The mystery of the murderer's identity and the long-running quest to name him once and for all, however, constitute a legacy that, for our purposes, shall be avoided.) The Krays, saddled with the same sensationalism today, are again an important part of the criminal milieu of their particular era, the ultimate conglomeration of generations of villains who went before them. Their unique thirst for power and recognition made them truly stand out, and when they were imprisoned for murder in 1969, they warranted front-page coverage in the national press. The ultimate manifestation of east London villainy, they are impossible to ignore, and like the Whitechapel murderer, find their place here, amidst the chaos, without prejudice or hype.

Trawling through the centuries of crime in east London, it was soon apparent to this author that choices would have to be made: naturally it would be impossible to report every burglary, street fight or petty felony that has taken place over a period of almost half a millennium. Fortunately, themes arise at various stages, be it periods of political unrest, rising trends in certain crimes, or notorious cases, all of which warrant considerable attention. In between those, like the mortar that holds together the bricks of a larger construction, come more minor cases, worthy of mention either for their audacity and uniqueness, or, in some cases, because they are so unusual or surreal. This book thus weaves its way through the criminal life of the East End chronologically, ensuring that it devotes appropriate time to the bigger cases and themes

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of the time, while acknowledging lesser deeds along the way. The criminal East End awaits our scrutiny.

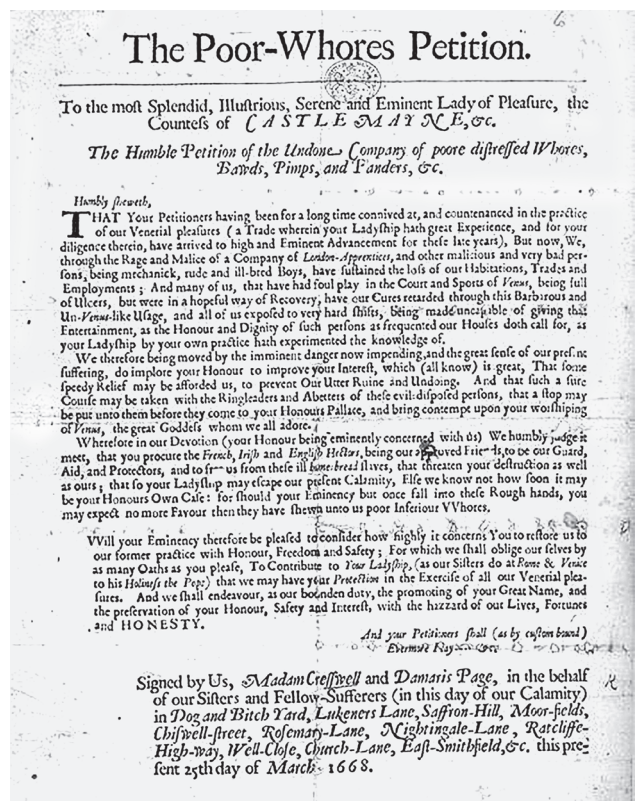
I must acknowledge the following people for their assistance, advice and support during the writing of this book, some of whom have been instrumental, past and present, in forging my further understanding of the East End and its criminality: firstly I must thank my commissioning editor at Yale, Heather McCallum, who was the driving force behind this project, who had confidence in me and who fought hard to help me cobble the initial proposal into shape, as well as showing great reserves of patience during its production: without her this book would not exist; also Stephen Halliday, for his initial enthusiasm for the project and words of encouragement and advice; and my wife Laura, for her support and incredible patience during the production of this book as I went through what the late Bill Fishman once called ‘the burden of writing’. Special mention must also go to Richard Jones, who has been helpful beyond words – his support and generosity regarding newspaper archives and his ability to ferret out some unique stories have contributed to this book significantly; Stefan Dickens and his team at the Bishopsgate Institute, who have been a tremendous resource, their skill in finding just what I have been looking for at the right time making a challenging job that bit easier; Malcolm Hamilton-Barr, Christopher Lloyd (now retired) and the staff of Tower Hamlets Library and Archives, who provided many years of invaluable research material which has informed not only this book but many of my former projects; similarly, the staff at the National Archives, London Metropolitan Archives and Hackney Archives. I would also like to thank, in no particular order, the following for their contributions, support and inspiration, no matter how great or small: Michael Adkins, Laurie Allen, the Altab Ali Foundation, David V. Barnett, Dave Barrington, Paul Begg, Jacob Blandy, Ross Bradshaw, June Brown, Neil Bell, Alfred and Brenda Bennett, John Chambers, the staff of the City of London Police Museum (particularly

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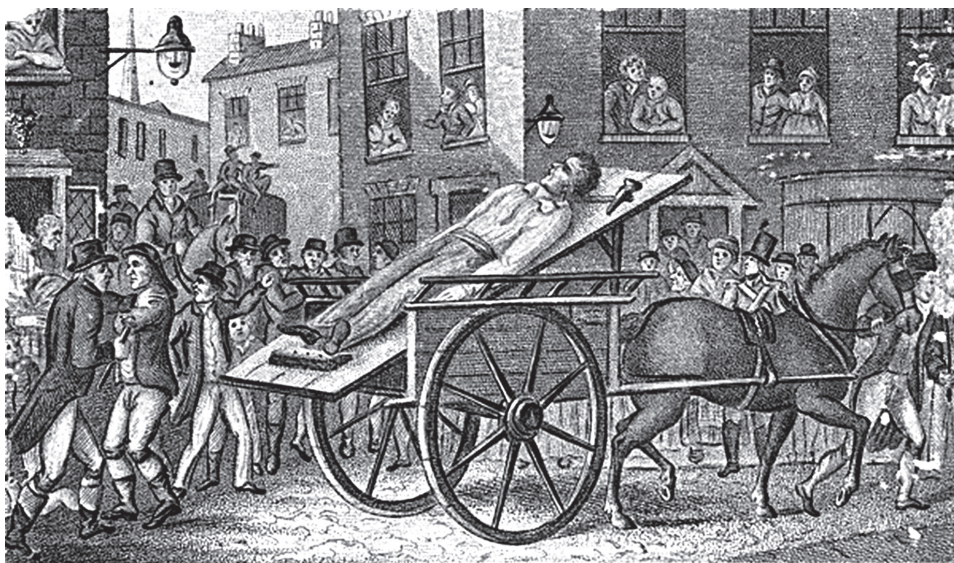
Catherine Coultard), Robert Clack, the *East London Advertiser*, Dennis Ellam, Jonathan Evans, the late Professor Bill Fishman, Philip Hutchinson, the late Ken Leech, Rachel Lichtenstein, Rachael Lonsdale, Marika Lysandrou, the Metropolitan Police History Society, David Moffatt, the late Adrian Phypers, Mark Ripper, Stephen Ryder, the late Chris Scott, Iain Sinclair, Toynbee Hall Archives, Jerry White and Scott Wood.



1. 'A Pirate Hanged at Execution Dock', an eighteenth-century engraving by Richard Dodd. In use for more than 400 years, the last executions took place there in 1830.



2. 'The Poor-Whores Petition' was a satirical swipe at the licentiousness of the royal court of Charles II following the Bawdy House Riots of 1668.



The public Exhibition of the Body of Williams

3. A contemporary engraving depicting the burial of John Williams. Suspected of the Ratcliffe Highway murders, Williams committed suicide in prison and was buried at the crossroads of Cable Street and Cannon Street Road.



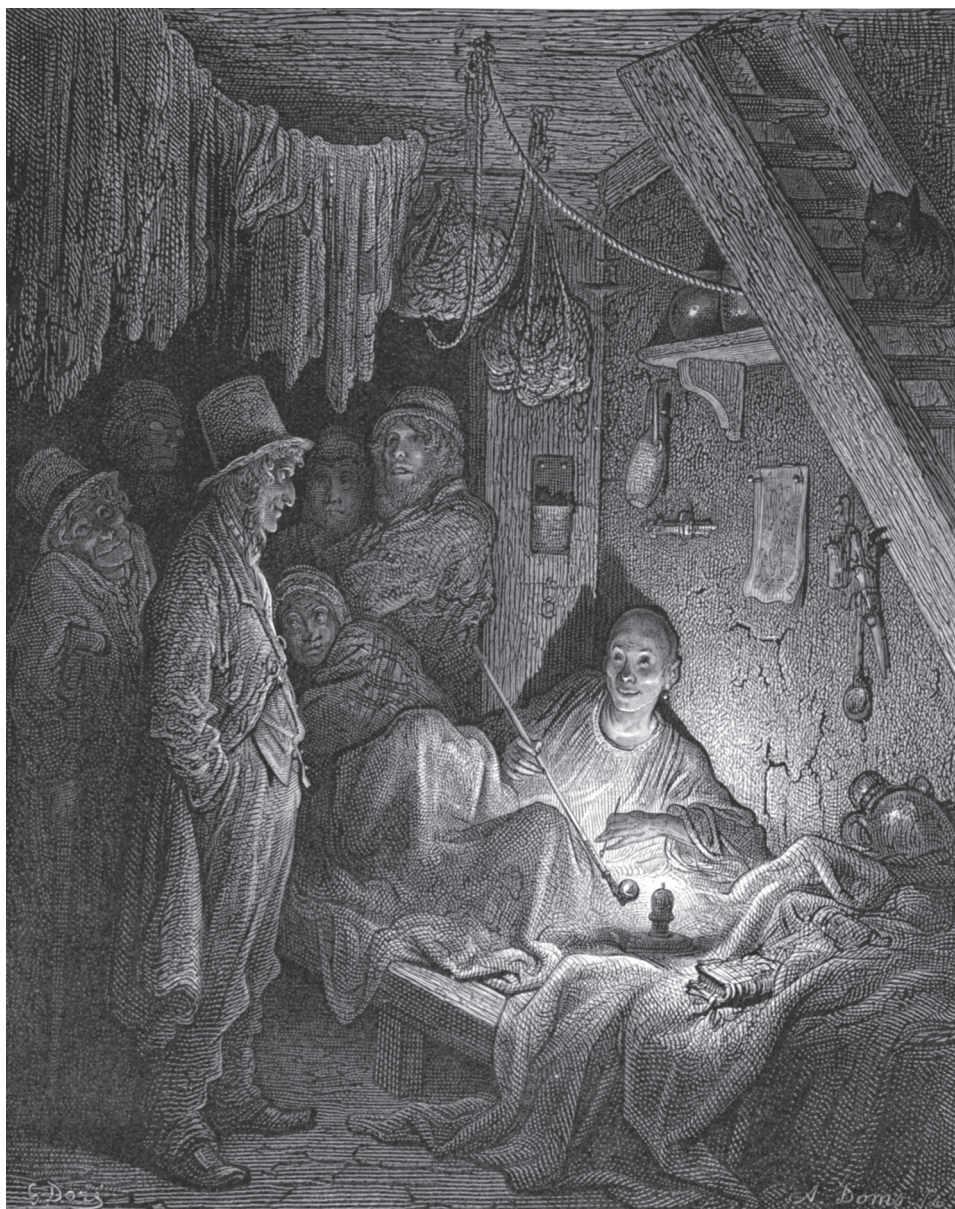
4. Isaac 'Ikey' Solomon, an early East End anti-hero. His exploits were published in several pamphlets, much to the enjoyment of the reading public.



5. 'Spring-heeled Jack', the 'Terror of London', defies the police in one of the many depictions of this quasi-supernatural menace which graced the pages of the penny dreadfuls in the mid-nineteenth century and beyond.



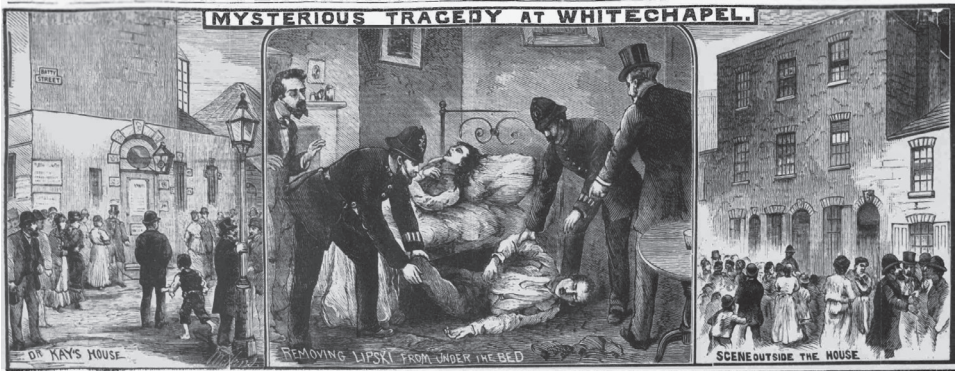
6. The urban and rural characteristics of the developing East End can be clearly seen in Langley and Belche's map of 1822. The open spaces were often the haunts of highwaymen and footpads.



7. Gustave Doré's evocative engraving of a Limehouse opium den, from Blanchard Jerrold's 1872 study *London: A Pilgrimage*.



8. A lurid illustration from the *Illustrated Police News* of the discovery of the dismembered body of Harriett Lane, murdered by Henry Wainwright in 1874.



9. The *Illustrated Police News*'s depiction of events surrounding the discovery of the body of Miriam Angel, allegedly murdered by Israel Lipski in her room in Batty Street, June 1887.

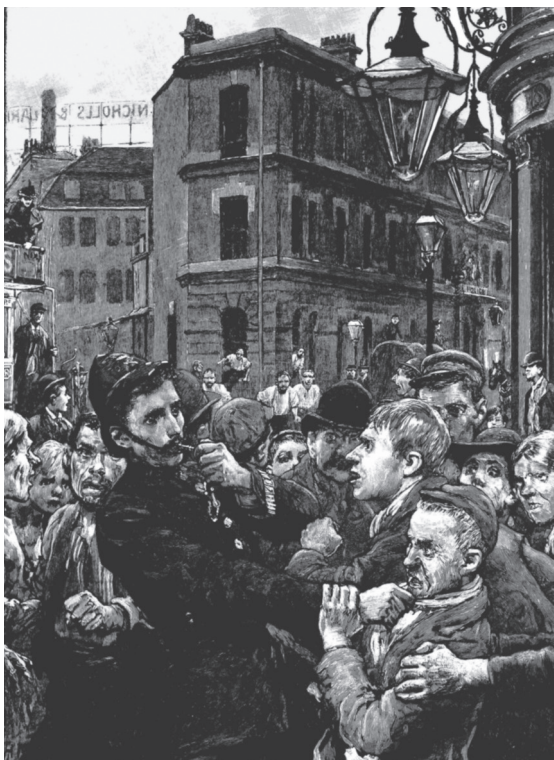


10. 'The Nemesis of Neglect', the ghoulish metaphor for crime and decay in London, illustrated in *Punch*, 29 September 1888, at the height of the Whitechapel murders.



11. Detective Inspector Frederick Abberline, the enigmatic officer who has since become synonymous with the investigation into the Ripper murders. Despite a long career, no confirmed photograph of him has been found. This portrait is from *Toby* magazine, September 1888.

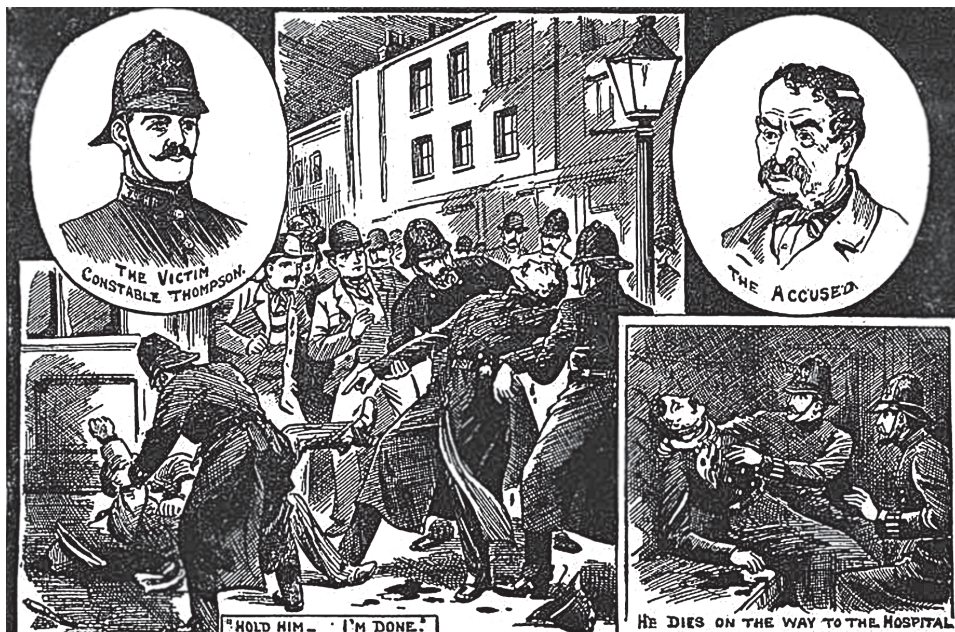
12. Mary Jane Kelly leading 'Jack the Ripper' into her room in Miller's Court, Dorset Street. Published in November 1888 in the *Penny Illustrated Paper*, this illustration is the first depiction of the 'gentleman Jack' so prevalent in the media today.



13. A lone police officer copes with East End disorder in a press illustration from 1890. Commercial Street police station can be seen in the background.



14. The respected and reviled Inspector Frederick Wensley takes charge: an undated photograph from Wensley's scrapbook.



15. The *Illustrated Police News*'s portrayal of the dramatic death of PC Ernest Thompson in December 1900.



16. The dramatic closing scenes of the Siege of Sidney Street, as fire services struggle to contain the blaze in the house containing the anarchist fugitives.



17. Anti-German feeling in the East End during the first years of the Great War gave way to violence, criminal damage and looting across the area in May 1915.



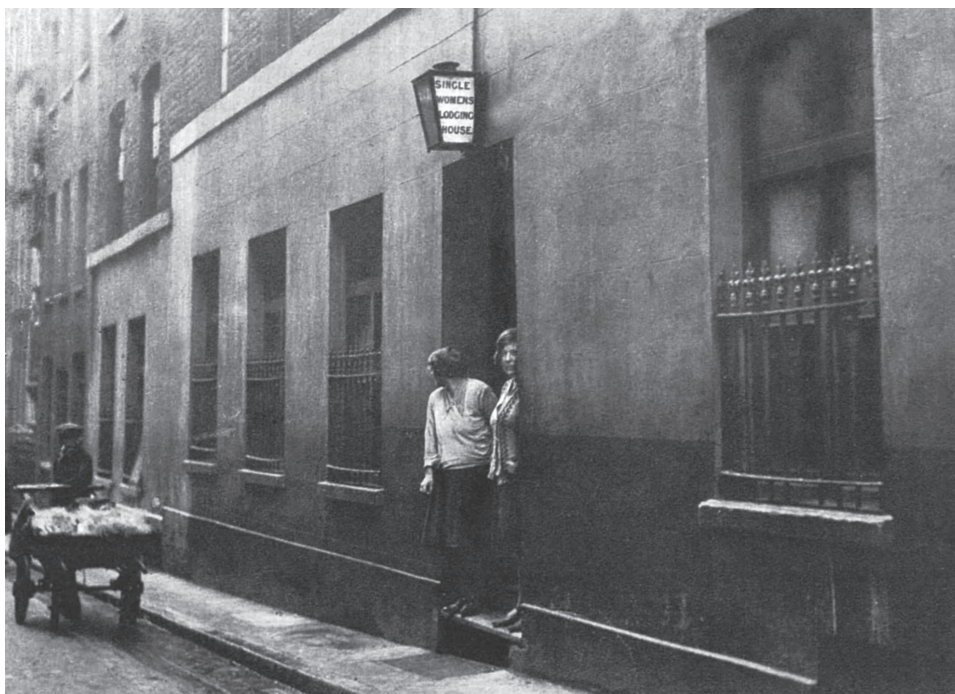
18. Oswald Mosley in full militaristic pomp, surrounded by saluting supporters, in east London on 3 October 1936. The following day, the people of the East End would take their stance against him.



19. Behind the barricades: the Battle of Cable Street in full swing, 4 October 1936. Graffiti on the shutters of one shop front pleads, 'Don't touch, worker's shop'.



20. Jack Spot, one-time 'king of the underworld,' parading a knife injury inflicted upon him in 1956.



21. A women-only doss-house at 56 Flower and Dean Street in the 1930s. No. 56 had formerly been known as the 'White House' and had once allowed men and women to cohabit, making it little more than a brothel.



22. Children at play around the slums of Wapping in the 1950s.



23. Two dock-workers take a peaceful break at the London Docks in the 1950s. During this period, labour on the river was often controlled by gangs like the Watney Streeters, a situation that often resulted in confrontation and violence.



24. Reginald and Ronald Kray with Judy Garland and her husband Mark Heron at a London club in 1963. The Kray twins' courtship of celebrity made them prominent media figures throughout the 1960s.



25. The Carpenter's Arms in Cheshire Street, Bethnal Green, commandeered by the Kray twins in 1967. On the pavement to the right, Tommy 'Ginger' Marks was gunned down in January 1965.



28. Thousands of Bangladeshis took to the East End streets in protest at the increase in racial violence after Altab Ali was murdered in May 1978.



29. Following the 'poor doors' and anti-Ripper Museum protests in 2014, Class War took their fight against the gentrification of the East End to Shoreditch.