

## RESEARCH PAPER

# Stinking Foreshore to Tree Lined Avenue: Investigating the Riverine Lives Impacted by the Construction of the Thames Embankments in Victorian London

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Victorian London saw dramatic physical changes along the river Thames. Large enclosed Docks and Thames Embankments were constructed as the city struggled to cope with its ballooning population and prospering shipping industry. Whilst the Thames Embankments have been hailed as engineering triumphs, the fate of those whose livelihood relied on access to the river in central London (such as wharf workers, barge, ferry and lighter men, and others) is unknown.

In order to investigate the impact of the Embankment, a methodology has been developed which enables characterisation of a large swathe of urban riverside throughout the mid- to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, whilst also ensuring that the stories of individuals and communities are not lost. The approach combines and adapts established methodologies, such as Historic Landscape/Seascape Characterisation and Maritime Cultural Landscapes, to understand the nature and changes in the urban riverside landscape. This methodology forms the background for detailed research on smaller sites, such as a single street, housing block, or industrial site, in order to create 'Ethnographies of Place'. These small-scale 'Ethnographies' have the potential to tell stories about how the social and economic circumstances of individuals and communities changed as a result of the landscape changes associated with the Embankment construction. This paper presents the initial work to establish the methodology and preliminary conclusions based on key sources.

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## Introduction

Research into the later post-medieval archaeology of urban centres, beyond the focus of industrial archaeology, has not been given a high priority within the UK. In recent years interest in the period has increased, and a body of work is beginning to form in York (Giles and Jones, 2011; Rimmer, 2011) and Manchester (Nevell, 2008; Nevell, 2011) and increasingly in other cities through the use

of Buildings Archaeology. Despite research in Australia and the US since the late 1990s illustrating the significance of engaging with later archaeological periods beyond simply 'filling the gaps' in the historical record, the UK has proved reluctant to embrace 19<sup>th</sup> century archaeology within its borders until very recently. Archaeological material has been fundamental to the deconstruction of urban slum myths; the investigation of the lives of communities and groups overlooked by historical documents; and to the enrichment of our understanding of the development of modern cities.

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At present, very little is known about the 19<sup>th</sup> century waterfront communities to the west of the City of London, where previous research has been focused. This research will be the first to focus on the west London riverside communities. The research methodology is exploratory in its nature, enabling sources that may illuminate the lived experience of the waterfront communities to be assessed and investigated.

This paper presents preliminary work on developing an approach and methodology to study the complex and rapidly changing urban waterfront of central London in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and is part of my doctoral research. The approach combines wide-area-landscape archaeological approaches with more detailed research in order to understand wider topographical changes, as well as illuminating the lives of individuals and communities impacted upon by the dramatic alterations to the landscape. A maritime viewpoint, highlighting the importance of the river to waterside communities, will underpin this approach.

The research question falls within a number of the research framework objectives for London archaeology (MoLAS 2002) including those highlighting the need for interdisciplinary approaches to post-medieval archaeological research and, more specifically, the objective of 'identifying the consequences of infrastructural development at a local level'. On a thematic level, the research framework highlights the need for a better understanding of the relationship between landscape, river, and settlement, along with further research on the influence of central London on the lives of people in the immediate surrounding area. It also highlights the need for more research to be conducted on the character and composition of London communities through time and, where possible, the use of archaeological material to trace individual lives. In addition, this research sits well within the London research framework by taking a multidisciplinary approach to investigating the impact of riverscape changes on

changing communities. The draft Greater London Historic Environment Research Strategy (Rowsome, Baker and Stephenson 2011) highlights the need for synthetic research to draw on the wealth of site-specific developer-funded excavations and building recordings, with such approaches being specifically useful for understanding the evolution and character of the urban historic environment. The new research strategy presented in this paper also highlights the need for further work to be carried out on the examination of London's role as a port, the tidal Thames, as well as the social and economic history of early modern London.

## Background

Nineteenth century archaeological remains are routinely found during the hundreds of developer-led excavations, evaluations, and watching briefs carried out annually in London. Despite this rich archaeological record, opportunities for comparative analysis, thematic synthesis, or landscape assessments are limited due to financial constraints associated with commercial archaeology. Jeffries, Owens et al. (2009) present an assessment of the factors behind the evident disconnect between the large volume of excavated 19<sup>th</sup> century material in London and the lack of broad interpretation or integrated research on the remains. They suggest that the complexity, diversity, and sheer quantity of 19<sup>th</sup> century remains in London has hindered the development of historical archaeological research in the city, whilst a lack of appreciation for London's role in the industrial revolution has limited interest in the city's industrial heritage.

Whilst there is an extensive body of archaeological and historical research on the maritime nature of London, much of this has been focused on the east London docks (synthesised in Rule 2009) or the port's earlier Roman or Medieval incarnations (Milne 1985; Milne 2003). In addition, whilst a large volume of socio-historical research has investigated many aspects of Victorian London,

archaeological research has been limited to individual sites - usually as a result of developer-led archaeological work. A small number of archaeological research projects have taken a broader approach in order to undertake higher level interpretation in relation to 19<sup>th</sup> century archaeological remains (Crook 2011; Hicks and Jeffries 2004; Jeffries 2006; Jeffries, Owens, et al. 2009; Owens, Jeffries et al. 2010, Dwyer 2011; Anthony 2011). As highlighted by the research strategies mentioned above, there is huge potential for synthetic and multidisciplinary research to add to our understanding of 19<sup>th</sup> century communities in London.

Economic, technological, and political changes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had a varied impact on the physical nature of the London landscape, its population, and its role as the centre of an international Empire. London's growth and development depended on its access to the Thames, which enabled the movement of people and goods into, out of, and around the city. The river frontage was lined with wharves, docks, quays, ferry stairs, boat and shipbuilders, repairers and breakers, all of which would have employed thousands throughout the City and its suburbs. With the construction of the Victoria, Chelsea and Albert Embankments, this working landscape was cleared and replaced by new roads and tree-lined promenades in a move that can be likened to the Enclosures of Common Land which so dramatically affected life in rural Britain.

In addition to significant landscape changes brought about by major infrastructure projects (including the railways, sanitation improvements, and the Thames Embankment) the mid/late 19<sup>th</sup> century saw many social and economic changes for Londoners. The engineering genius and sanitary improvements achieved by the Embankment construction have overshadowed the implications of the wholesale removal of employment opportunities along the riverside, upon which many of the working classes depended.

My research is specifically interested in the impact of the Thames Embankment construction on the lives of riverside Londoners. However, there were many other changes that were taking place in London across the physical, social, cultural, and economic landscape of the Thames riverside in the pre- and post-Embankment period. These changes included growing industrialisation, the growth of professions, the expansion of the suburbs and the railway network, and an increase in the general population. In order to identify those changes that can be attributed specifically to the Embankment construction, it is necessary to fully understand in what ways these physical, social, cultural, and economic landscapes changed through the mid- to late 19<sup>th</sup> century. By investigating the physical, social, cultural and economic aspects of the riverscape changes, my research will bring both an archaeological and riverine focus to the historiography of 19<sup>th</sup> century London.

### **Methodology**

The following outlines the methodology developed for researching the complex and rapidly changing urban waterfront of central London in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The approach combines a number of methodologies developed previously by historical, maritime, and landscape archaeological researchers and heritage managers; the value of this paper lies in the unusual way in which each of the approaches might be combined in order to provide new insights into the waterfront/foreshore areas of a post-medieval urban area.

The methods taken for this research uses wide-area-landscape archaeological approaches in order to understand the topographic changes, as well as more detailed research which helps to illuminate the lives of individuals and communities impacted by the dramatic landscape changes. This approach is underpinned by a maritime viewpoint emphasising the importance of the river to waterside communities.

The following provides a brief introduction to each of the methodologies which have been identified as providing useful approaches for the study of the London waterfront, as both a wide-area-landscape and smaller areas.

### ***Landscape Study***

The proposed approach for the landscape study is based on a modified Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC) (Somerset County Council 2003), whereby the landscape of the study area will be characterised at specified intervals - in my case from the mid- to late 19<sup>th</sup> century rather than in its current form. It is important to ensure that the intervals selected relate to publication dates of historic mapping yet also capture the pace of waterfront development and change through the period under study.

The fundamental characteristic of HLC is the division of a landscape into 'Character Areas' based on land use. HLC was initially designed as a planning tool to describe the existing historic character of rural landscapes in order to understand the context and significance of historic places and landscapes. The methodology has been adapted for use in the major urban conurbations of Greater Manchester (GMAU 2009), South Yorkshire (Marchant, Ratcliffe, et al 2008), Merseyside (Farr and Lewis 2011) and the Black Country (Quigley 2007 and Quigley and Shaw 2010), providing useful methodological comparisons for London.

The HLC approach has been adapted for use in the coastal and marine environment through the Historic Seascape Characterisation (HSC) projects rolled out by English Heritage around the coastline. This approach, like HLC, captures the historic character of the coastal and marine environment deriving from human activity, including the inter-tidal zone and adjacent coastal landscapes (Cornwall County Council 2008). The approach provides a 'view from the sea' of the natural and built environment, adding a layer of human interpretation and cultural understanding to

buildings and landforms which may not have been identified through a land-focused HLC. The HSC approach begins to integrate not only physical land 'use' but also human perception and meaning within the landscape as relevant to coastal communities, touching on aspects of Westerdahl's Maritime Cultural Landscapes (Westerdahl 1992).

Cultural Landscapes can be defined as environments that have been created by people, often with associated material, social, or cognitive associations. These associations define how people physically create, use, and perceive an environment. Maritime Cultural Landscapes are often identified for use within an archaeological context, and have been defined as the resources related to maritime activity (whether on land or on the water) and can include natural topographic features, prevailing currents or winds, and structures such as harbours and jetties (Westerdahl, 1992).

This methodology aims to combine the wider definition of what constitutes a Maritime Cultural Landscape into the characterisation methodology of HLC and HSC - in order to identify material and social aspects of riverside and waterfront landscapes, specifically site remains and land/foreshore/river usage. In the identification of fundamental material remains such as jetties, wharves, piers, and docks, sources such as Historic Mapping and Charts, Trade Directories, and the Historic Environment Records (HER) (covering archaeological remains and Listed Buildings) will be critical. These sites will not only help us to identify physical landscape changes through time, but also provide physical points to associate river/foreshore-based activities.

Social aspects of the landscape will be incorporated to ensure that an understanding of how the riverside was used is represented within the Characterisation as established in the national methodology. These social aspects will be harder to identify, but useful indications can be found in sources like artistic imagery, such as paintings and

photography, illustrating landscape use and perceptions of landscape, and contemporary writing including newspapers and fiction. This social aspect has the potential to add significantly to our understanding of the nature of riverside activity and usage beyond the physical remains represented by cartography or the archaeological record. Only this combined approach can provide an integrated vision of how the river, foreshore and waterfront were used by the Thames-side communities in the pre- and post-Embankment periods, and the implications of those physical changes.

### ***Local Study***

Having characterised the changing topography of the riverside landscape, micro case studies - at the scale of a single street, housing block or industrial site - will be selected to investigate the impact in detail of the recorded physical landscape change on the waterside community.

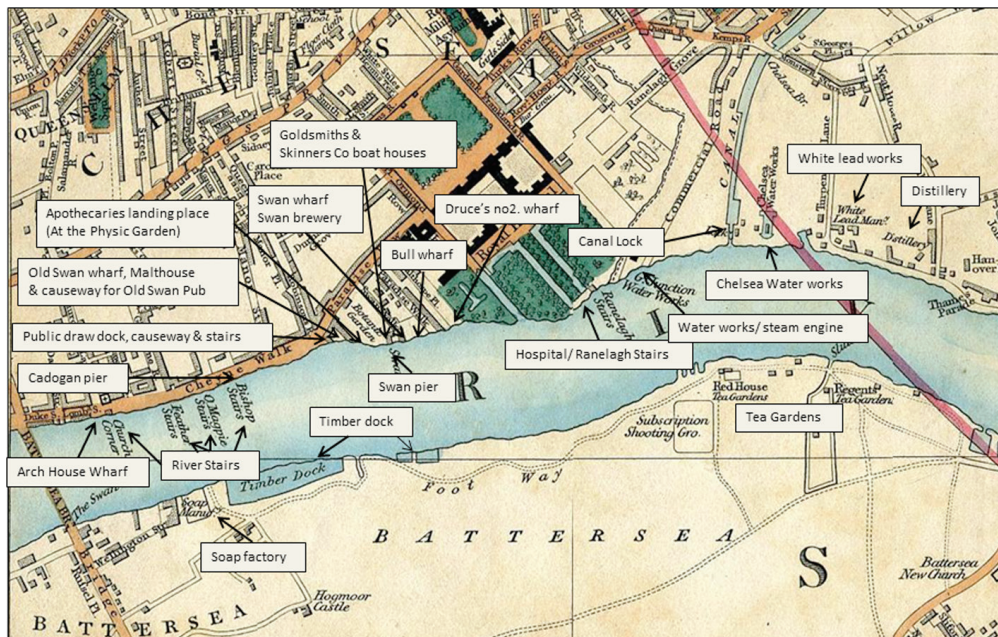
The case study methodology draws on Mayne and Lawrence's 'Ethnography of Place' approach (Mayne and Lawrence 1998; Mayne and Lawrence 1999), with Yamin's 'inside out' approach to historical narratives (Yamin 2001a), to create a picture of waterside community life, focusing on this particular community's experience of landscape change. Through these case studies I aim to provide an insight into how the waterside communities changed socially and economically as a result of the landscape changes in addition to the ways in which they managed and reacted to the changing waterfront.

The approach to investigating past urban communities advocated by Mayne and Lawrence (Mayne and Lawrence 1998; Mayne and Lawrence 1999) combines what they describe as 'mundane and fractured data', with an aspect of 'historical imagination', so as to provide a more accurate historical context for archaeological sites than might be achieved through historical or archaeological research alone. Their use of the term 'historical imagination' combines the use of

archaeological, ethnographic, and historical data with the wider known archaeological and historical context, to create narratives and interpretations based on facts. Their approach attempts to recreate cultural landscapes of the past through the assessment of a wide range of sources, including documentary, oral, visual, and archaeological. Mayne and Lawrence (1998; 1999) argue that by integrating material culture, space and documents, a more meaningful context can be identified within which the experiences of past communities can be 'seen'. This approach is particularly relevant when dealing with communities whose histories were often recorded by outsiders, such as the urban poor whose 'lives' were recorded by newspapers, moral improvers, social commentators, government inspectors, and fiction writers, but rarely by themselves.

Rebecca Yamin has long advocated the use of Henry Glassie's 'Inside-Out' approach to ethnographic study, where narratives are told by communities themselves, and link material culture to oral history, folklore, and folklife (Yamin 2001a, Glassie 1982). In an archaeological context, Yamin has used this approach to weave narratives which are founded on archaeological material culture and spaces, and build upon data with documentary, pictorial and oral histories, and a level of literary imagination. Her work at Five Points, New York has brought the lives of individuals and families alive (Yamin 1998 and Yamin 2001b) and illustrates the value of micro case studies to the interpretation of wider landscape and community changes.

The later post-medieval period in British cities offers a wealth of sources that can be combined in the use of small-scale case studies. Many cities, including London, have tens if not hundreds of inner city excavations taking place annually and many of these assemblages are under-studied. In addition to archaeological material there is a huge variety of documentary sources which are easily available online and through local studies



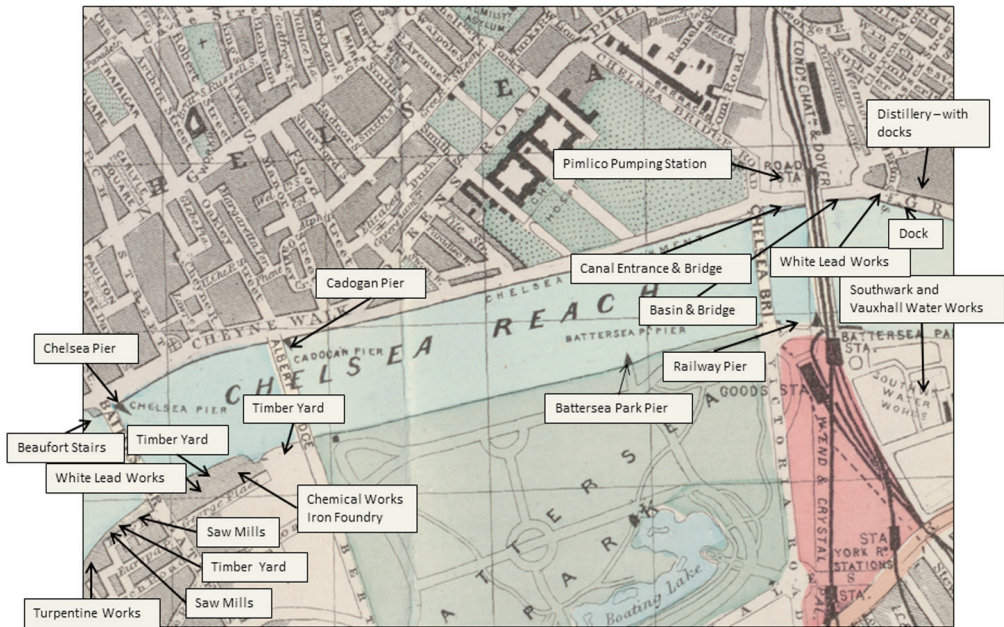
**Figure 1:** Chelsea 1837–1843 (Base Map Cary's New Plan of London 1837; all rights reserved, copyright David Hale/MAPCO: Map And Plan Collection Online 2006–2013; <http://mapco.net>)

libraries and archives providing wider context within which to understand the values and usage of material culture and household movements. Jeffries, Owens, et al. (2009 and 2010) have demonstrated the validity of this ethnographic approach to Victorian London with their study of households in Limehouse, Westminster, and Sydenham.

The value of combining two proven methodologies, large area characterisation and micro-histories for this particular research lies in their potential to provide a physical, economic, and social context for any interpretation as well as new insights to an area and community about which very little has been previously published. Within the context of this research the combination of archaeological material with a variety of historical sources will enable narratives of the individual to be created. These narratives will then allow us to link the physical manifestations of the upper and middle class Victorian social improvement movement with those whose lives it aimed to improve.

### Preliminary Conclusions

Early research has focused on establishing and testing the methodologies outlined above, using the Chelsea waterfront (at the far west of the study area) as a pilot. Initial work here combined cartographic and documentary sources available online with archaeological information from the Greater London HER and Thames Discovery Program to assess the physical landscape change in this area. Preliminary results have indicated that the Chelsea waterfront positioned between Battersea Bridge and the Royal Chelsea Hospital was a thriving river orientated community. Whilst only 1.2km long, this area by the 1840s was home to five wharves, five river stairs, two piers, a causeway for the Old Swan Pub, a landing place at the Physic Garden, the Goldsmiths and Skinners Companies boat houses, and a public draw dock and causeway at the east end of Cheyne Walk (Figure 1). By 1880 all these sites had gone, with the exception of the steamer piers Cadogan Pier and Chelsea



**Figure 2:** Chelsea 1880-1883 (Base Map Smith & Son Indicator Map of London 1880; all rights reserved, copyright Harvard University Library)

Pier (Figure 2), and the waterfront had been transformed into the Chelsea Embankment.

Other landscape changes made visible through the historic mapping and documentary research include the increasing numbers of industrial sites located to the west of Battersea Bridge (on the south bank of the Thames) and to the east of Grosvenor Bridge (on the north bank) with factories, a boat yard, timber docks, saw mills, a white lead works, and distillery which were all present by the 1850s. The boat yard and docks on the south bank had gone by the 1860s when the Battersea Park foreshore was reclaimed and embanked. The two areas of industry continued into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, gradually reducing in size as housing encroached.

Initial assessment of the community living in and around the Chelsea waterfront between 1841 and the post-Embankment period to 1891 is less easy to characterise. Census records highlight the presence of courtyards, walks, and alleyways not surveyed or labelled on any of the historic mapping, which were often the homes of the

poorer working classes. The Census records show that in Chelsea (like much of London in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) solicitors, barristers, and the independently wealthy lived next door to or around the corner from labourers, tailors, dressmakers, skilled and unskilled workers.

The small area of streets bordered by Paradise Row (later Queens Road West and now Royal Hospital Road), the Royal Chelsea Hospital and the River highlights the complexities and difficulties of tracking changing populations at this time. By the 1840s the west end of Paradise Row was served by the public draw dock, causeway and stairs, and the road itself provided access to the north side of the Physic Garden, Swan Walk, Paradise Walk and Calthorpe Place. The southern end of these roads fronted the river, serving wharves, the Old Swan brewery and Physic Garden prior to their removal during the construction of the Embankment. The Census records from 1841 to 1891 for these roads provide an insight into the community living in this small area as well as a starting point from which additional histori-

cal, archaeological, and pictorial data can be combined. A discussion of the communities as seen through the mapping and census records is presented below to highlight some of the trends and questions which arise from such a preliminary study.

Between 1841 and 1871, the inhabitants of Paradise Row/Queens Road West are typically professionals including clerks, accountants, merchants, engineers, chemists, bakers, grocers, watchmakers, and drapers with the occasional independently wealthy householder. By 1871 there appears to be an increase in the number of people living on Queens Road West, some of which is accounted for by new housing, but also by more families sharing houses, a trend seen elsewhere in London. Swan Walk, overlooking the Physic Gardens and home to the Swan brewery, was home to families headed by brewers, a timber merchant, and a clerk. Paradise Walk and Paradise Walk Lower led down to Paradise Wharf and were home to the working classes, including labourers, sweeps, domestic servants, charwomen, costermongers, washerwomen, bricklayers, and a concentration of lightermen and dock workers. Residents of Bull Walk are recorded as pauper/washerwoman, cowkeeper, coal porters, labourers, charwomen, washerwomen, and a few lightermen. Calthorpe Place close to the Hospital housed Army pensioners, tailors, gardeners, smiths, and wheelwrights around 1851. However, by 1871 the residents of Calthorpe Place were in professions similar to Paradise Walk, including porters, needlewomen, errand boys, charwomen, general dealers, coal porters, labourers, tailors, and an out-of-work waterman.

By the time of the 1881 Census the physical landscape of this small area had changed dramatically with the completion of the Chelsea Embankment. These changes included new houses on the north side of Chelsea Embankment road (facing the river) the construction of Tite Street to the east of Paradise Walk, and the replacement of the public dock and wharfage at the east end of Cheyne Walk by new housing. Bull Walk and Calthorpe

Place had gone, presumably cleared for the new Embankment housing, and Tite Street respectively. The Census records indicate that with this landscape change came population change, with wealthy households living on Swan Walk, Chelsea Embankment road, and Tite Street. Occupations recorded in these households include a geologist surveyor, solicitors, insurance agents, a timber merchant, an army Captain and Major, a baronet, barristers, artists, a ship builder and owner, an East India Company merchant, and a Lord of the Privy Council. Each of these households employed live-in staff, with one family of five employing 19 staff. Paradise Walk had been significantly reduced in size, but its inhabitants continued in the tradition of the preceding decades by working as labourers, laundry women, shop boys, car men, factory workers, bricklayers, sweeps, a wood chopper, dustmen, a hawker, and coal porters. There were also a large number of domestic servants such as cooks, nurses, charwomen, grooms, gardeners, and maids.

By 1889 Charles Booth had characterised Queens Road West as being primarily occupied by those considered to be 'Fairly comfortable. Good ordinary earnings'. The side streets of Swan Walk and Tite Street were occupied by those classed as 'Middle-class. Well-to-do' but these roads sandwiched Paradise Walk, which was occupied by those classed as 'Poor. 18s to 21s a week for a moderate family'. The occupants of housing on the new Chelsea Embankment were characterised by Booth as 'Upper-middle and Upper classes. Wealthy', reflecting the data observed in the 1881 and 1891 Census.

Interestingly Denny (2012: 118) describes the alleys and courts around Paradise Row (which by this time was in fact called Queens Road West) as having deteriorated into lodgings used by thieves and prostitutes by around 1890, which does not correlate with information held in the Census and may be another example of Mayne's mythical 'slums'. According to Denny (2012: 118) by 1906 the buildings of Paradise Row (Queens Road West) were thought of as slums - occupied by



the working-class, laundries and unskilled labourers - earmarked for clearance (Denny 2012: 114) as part of the redevelopment and widening of Royal Hospital Road.

### Discussion

This preliminary survey of the Queens Road West/Paradise Walk area of Chelsea supports the hypothesis that the Embankment construction did have a significant impact on employment opportunities along the riverfront, with knock-on effects for the composition of the riverside communities. It is clear that the back streets, such as Paradise Walk, that provided access to wharfage on the riverfront became housing for the working and poorer classes, whilst those which overlooked the Physic Garden (Swan Walk) and the Royal Chelsea Hospital (Tite Street) attracted the middle upper classes. The wharfage and southern sections of Paradise Walk, Bull Walk, and Calthorpe Place were replaced by housing for the wealthy upper classes when the Embankment was constructed.

The broad characteristics of population change seen through this initial assessment suggests that the cycle of deterioration, dereliction, demolition, and gentrification experienced by established communities impacted by new infrastructure seen here (and paralleled in modern cities) is an established pattern seen in urban areas over the past 150 years, at least. The stereotypical greedy landlord or property developer taking advantage of the poor may have a significant role to play here, and highlights an intriguing avenue of research regarding the cycles of urban deterioration and regeneration in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as its parallels with modern urban planning.

Neither cartography nor Census records alone are sufficient to grasp the subtleties of population, community, or economic change during the later 19<sup>th</sup> century. These records can also not be relied upon to provide adequate details as to the daily lives and conditions of the working communities in the area. These questions may be better answered through the inclusion of further

documentary sources, photographic records, and archaeological assemblages.

The initial observations made above raise a number of questions which will answer how the Embankment impacted riverside communities. Further investigation of individual riverside workers identified in the Census records will establish how their lives changed post-Embankment. Did they relocate and continue working in river/water related trades, perhaps to the new docks in East London, or to the coastal ports? Or did they remain in the Chelsea area but re-train to work in new professions? The growing industrial areas to the east and west of Chelsea and Battersea raise equally compelling questions about employment: did the factories employ locals or did they attract new immigrants to the area? Did any of the river workers, for example, take up employment at the factories after the construction of the Embankment and closure of the wharves? The period under discussion also saw expansion of the suburbs and railways, introducing the idea of commuting to work by rail or omnibus for the first time. However, until more research is dedicated to establishing the details of individuals' movements through the period, it will not become clear whether or not riverside workers were a part of this move to the suburbs, or indeed the trend to live further away from the workplace.

Denny's description of the Chelsea slums in the late 1890s also needs addressing given its contradiction to information in the Census. If true, it does however raise the question of what factors led to the environment of unemployment, extreme poverty, and deterioration of the area into the 'slums' earmarked for demolition in 1906.

Whilst the work here does not present the results of either a full landscape characterisation nor a full ethnography of place, the use of a small number of sources for the pilot study in Chelsea has demonstrated the potential for both landscape and micro history studies of historic ports, as well as the value of combining these two approaches. The insights that the combined approach

has gleaned through the use of only cartographic and documentary sources highlights the potential for the addition of other varied sources to tell the stories of previously unknown riverside and port communities. The methodology proposed here, which combines a range of historical and historic environment sources, provides an approach to begin to tackle the details of these changes, and understand riverside communities within the complexities of wider landscape change.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors Dominic Perring, Gustav Milne and Joe Flatman for their support in developing my research and input into this paper and the two reviewers for interesting and helpful comments.

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**How to cite this article:** Steyne, H 2013 Stinking Foreshore to Tree Lined Avenue: Investigating the Riverine Lives Impacted by the Construction of the Thames Embankments in Victorian London. *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*, 23(1): 13, pp.1-11, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/pia.429>

**Published:** 13 September 2013

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