East End Underworld
Chapters in the Life of Arthur Harding

Edited by Raphael Samuel
First published in 1981, this book examines the life of Arthur Harding, a well-known figure in the East End underworld during the first half of the twentieth century. The first five chapters survey his life in the 'Jago' slum between 1887 and 1896, offering a different view of an often vilified district. The subsequent phases of his life as a cabinet-maker, street trader and wardrobe dealer reflect the changing fortunes of the East End from hand-to-mouth conditions in the late-nineteenth century to comparative security in the 1930s.

The reader is introduced to some of the major features of East End life — back-street enterprise, neighbourhood solidarity, politics and popular culture. Among the many themes that can be traced are the relationship between the underworld and the local working-class community; the collusive understanding established between villains and the police; the effects of the criminalisation of street betting; and the relationship between Jews, non-Jews and what the author terms 'half-jews' in a district of high immigration. Drawn from transcripts of recorded reminiscences, this book provides an important text for understanding the political economy of crime — extended by the authors extensive footnotes and a preface discussing the peculiar moral complexion of south-west Bethnal Green.
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Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments ix

1 Inside the Jago 1

2 Relatives 12

3 Home life 21

4 Out and about 32

5 Totting and busking 42

6 Bacon Street and Queen’s Buildings 53

7 Criminal apprenticeship 66

8 Gibraltar Gardens 84

9 Cabinet-making 93

10 The terrors of Brick Lane 106

11 Jews and half-Jews 125

12 Vendettas 146

13 Prison years, 1911–22 160

14 Gambling 175

15 Dealings with the police 187

16 Marriage 207

17 Wardrobe dealing 220

18 Domestic life and social change 236

19 The Gold Rush 248

20 A shop in Brick Lane 257

21 Politics and philosophy of life 262

A glossary of underworld talk 281

Notes 286

Index 345
Preface

Arthur Harding, born in 1886, is probably the last man alive to have been brought up in the 'Jago', the most famous criminal slum of late-Victorian London, and the subject of Arthur Morrison's still widely read fiction, *The Child of the Jago* (1896). Arthur is only a few years younger than Morrison's eponymous hero Dicky Perrott, and the first five chapters of this book offer an alternative view of a district which has been consistently vilified in London literature ever since it was pulled down in the 1890s. He grew up to become a familiar figure in the East End underworld, giving evidence before the Royal Commission on the Metropolitan Police in 1907, where he was described as the 'king' or 'captain' of the Brick Lane van-draggers - 'a most slippery and dangerous criminal' (according to the testimony of a local police inspector) '. . . the leader of a numerous band of thieves'. Graduating from pickpocketing and 'shoot-flying' in his early days to armed hold-ups and 'protection', he was a well-known local 'terror', 'looking after' the market stall-holders and the street bookies, and taking some part in race-course wars and struggles for territorial supremacy. In 1911 he served a five-year sentence for his part in the 'Vendetta Affair' and in 1915 was sentenced to a further five-year spell in jail.

In different phases of his life, Harding was a cabinet-maker, a street trader and a wardrobe dealer and these Chapters have been constructed to show the relationship of organized crime to the more hum-drum economy of southwest Bethnal Green. Through Arthur's life and that of his family one can follow the changing fortunes of East End people from the desperate hand-to-mouth conditions of the late nineteenth century to those neighbourly securities celebrated in Michael Young and Peter Willmott's *Family and*
Kinship in East London and Peter Townsend’s Family Life of Old People. These Chapters shed light on some of the main aspects of East End life – back-street enterprise; family industries; politics (Arthur was at one stage a supporter of Sir Oswald Mosley, and he helped to organize strike-breaking convoys in 1926); and popular culture. Among the many themes to which the reader is introduced are the relationship of the underworld and the local working-class community; the collusive understanding established between villains and the police; the effects of the criminalization of street betting; and the relationship of Jews, non-Jews and what Harding calls ‘half-Jews’ in the neighbourhood of Brick Lane.

These Chapters have been drawn from tape-recorded reminiscences taken over a six-year period. The story of how they came to be constructed – and of the battle of wills entailed in the making of them – is contained in a companion volume (East End Underworld: South-West Bethnal Green) to which the interested reader is referred. The volumes can be read separately, but they are closely and indeed organically linked. The other volume situates Arthur’s life both in a local context – the moral and social peculiarities of south-west Bethnal Green – and, more generally, in the political economy of crime. It also contains passages in Arthur’s life which only emerged after these Chapters had been completed, and when I undertook a fresh phase of both recordings and research. The discussion of the narrative itself may help to alert readers not only to the value of this text – as a testimony to a way of life that had seemed to be beyond human recall – but also to some of the complexities concealed by the words on the page.

In the course of what has been a very long project I have incurred many debts. They are acknowledged in the preface to the companion volume.

Raphael Samuel
The words in this narrative are Arthur Harding's, but they have been drawn from a mass of tape recordings taken over a period of six years, from 1973 to 1979. The difficulties of such a text, and the problems involved in constituting it, are discussed in a companion volume: *The East End Underworld 1: South-West Bethnal Green*. In the course of what has been a very long project I have incurred many debts. They will be acknowledged in the companion volume, but I would like, here, to express my gratitude to the Nuffield Foundation, whose generous grant gave me the time off teaching to put this narrative together; and to John Mason, who did the great bulk of the library work for the corroborative footnotes attached to the text. The companion volume, a study of Bethnal Green from the early nineteenth century to the First World War, will be published later this year or next. It draws on a further cycle of recordings with Arthur Harding, but is mainly based on printed and manuscript sources, and the oral testimony of other survivors from these times. The contents are as follows:


Raphael Samuel
January 1981
1 Inside the Jago

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century there were some 6,000 people — men, women and children — who lived in the Nichol. The district was bounded by High Street Shoreditch and Hackney Road on the north and Spitalfields to the south. It was made up of many alleys and courts. The principal streets were Boundary Street, the main playing street, Old Nichol Street, New Nichol Street, Half Nichol Street, The Mount — where the old clothes dealers were — and the only street with shops — Church Street. Arthur Morrison in his novel called it 'The Jago'.

The Nichol was something like a ghetto. A stranger wouldn’t chance his arm there, but to anyone brought up in it every alley was familiar. The Nichol was a place on its own, you didn’t go into other territory. You could go into the cake shop and say, 'Got any broken biscuits, mister?', or into the pudding shop and ask for a pie-crust or say, 'Got any cold pudding?' and they’d say, 'How much have you got?' and you’d say, 'A halfpenny', and they’d say, 'All right, give us that', because they knew you. Everybody knew the children belonged to the Nichol and everybody was kind to the children. There was hardly any traffic — the children could go anywhere and have no fear of anything. The coal carts didn’t go fast. The chimney sweeps, they knew everybody. And so the result was that it was a close-knit community and everybody knew everybody.

The whole district bore an evil reputation and was regarded by the working-class people of Bethnal Green as so disreputable that they avoided contact with the people who lived in the Nichol. Some people would have liked to build a wall right round it, so that we wouldn’t have to come out. They put everything that was needed inside. They put the mission hall there — the Ragged School in Old Nichol Street. They put the
hospital there – the Mildmay Hospital in Austin Street; and they put the school there, the Nichol School, so the kids wouldn’t have to come out and be a nuisance. There was a police station in Church Street, opposite Turville Street, and there was Father Jay’s church, Holy Trinity, in Old Nichol Street. It was a big red brick church which was bombed out in the war. It stood right in the middle of the Nichol. At the door of the church you used to get jam puddings when you came out of school at midday – the housekeeper made roly-polys and the kids used to line up. A penny could buy a dinner but if you didn’t have one she would give it to you. Father Jay was a big, smiling man, a six-footer – I think he had been a boxer. At the end of Bethnal Green Road there was Macpherson’s, where you went in and got your bottle of medicine. It was a medical mission run by Scotch people. The Mildmay was Church of England, the Mission was more Nonconformist – I used to get a bit of clobber there when they had sales on. You went there on a Sunday to learn about the Christian religion.

In the Nichol there seemed to be a wall enclosing you. Boundary Street round to Virginia Road and Austin Street – beyond you was out of the Nichol. The people had to go shopping either in the Brick Lane, Church Street, or the High Street Shoreditch. The children went to school either at Rochelle Street or Castle Street School which was in Austin Street. In Virginia Road lived the mother of a young man named Baker who was hanged at Carlisle with two others named Rudge and Martin for the murder of two policemen, while escaping from Netherby Hall where they had committed a robbery. Mrs Baker never opened her shop again. Years later I learnt the name of the fourth man involved in the murder; he was never caught.

I was born on 27 November 1886 at No. 4 Keeve’s Buildings, Boundary Street. We had one small room in a three-storeyed tenement which contained twelve rooms, let to twelve different families. Keeve’s Buildings were built as tenements, a sort of barracks. There was a street door, but it was always kept open: it was a great 3-inch thick door. There was a basement which was supposed to be for a wash-house, for washing dirty linen, but as it was in complete darkness it was only used by homeless people at night as a shelter from the
cold. The yard was only about 12 foot wide – just enough to put the dustbins in each side. Nobody was responsible for the cleaning of the place; they wouldn’t pay nobody. There was a wooden staircase, they weren’t buildings like we know them today. Each room had an ordinary panelled door (cost about 2s 6d if it cost that). Just an ordinary flimsy door that you could kick open. They had a lock and key, but there was scarcely any fear of anybody breaking into them. There was nothing of value to lose. They had a wooden wainscoting right round the wall, it was about 3 feet high – it had been painted once. I can remember that my father got some paint from somewhere and it caused a bit of trouble from the other people. They said we’d driven the bugs into their room. The water tap on each landing was three or four stairs below the level of the floor, in a sort of alcove, about 5 feet wide; and then two rooms on either side, two back rooms and two front rooms. The rent wasn’t very expensive at all – about 3s a week for a room.

The houses in Boundary Street were three storeys high. They only ran on one side of the street. The shops on Shoreditch High Street backed on to the other, especially Jeremiah Rotherham’s, where they unloaded goods and all the rest of it. Even today the left hand side of Boundary Street going down from Church Street is a blank. There’s no shops of any description – never has been any shops there.11

Half Nichol Street was of varied architecture, they didn’t comply with one set of rules. There was courts and alleyways as well. A court was a bit of a place where the architect and the builder had got into such a state that there was a part empty. There’d be houses all round the square. Originally the idea was to have a bit of a garden for people, but when space and land began to fetch good money the landlords sold the part of the gardens to developers and built these little alleyways and courts in it. They had to congest the buildings to a small dimension because they never had the space available. That’s what happened to Nichol Street and Half Nichol Street. New Nichol Street was a more up-to-date affair. The houses were only two storeys high and a bit more ornate, they put a round top to the windows.

My young sister Mary was born round New Nichol Street in Charlotte’s Buildings. That was where my aunt Liza had her
shop, and where her beerhouse stood. It was an ordinary thoroughfare, just wide enough for a horse and cart. The houses were built so close together that you could put a rope across the road and hang the washing on it. Everything was on a miniature scale, there was nothing huge about it.

In a court you’d get a small entrance and then it widened out where they built the cottages. Some had two front houses so you had a couple of rooms over an archway: the archway was built about 6 foot wide so you could get a barrow through, and the top rooms was where somebody lived. You went through it into the court, and depending on how big the square was, you’d get perhaps seven houses, about 8 foot to 10 foot wide. They weren’t very big.

Then there were the alleyways, they weren’t very pleasant places, they’d just been slung up. They were very dark. You’d have about six houses, three on each side, down an alleyway. Why they built them I don’t know, except there was so many people homeless, they had to build somewhere for them to live in.

The courts were just a breathing space, enough for a few barrows, donkey barrows and all that. Wherever there was any free space they stuck up sheds for the donkeys. There was plenty of costermongers about. A lot of these courts were used mainly for sticking up sheds, like they stick up garages today.

It was very crowded in the Nichol, every little space was built on. It appears that before the railway extended to Liverpool Street, some people would have two rooms – they could afford it and the rent was much lower. But when they started pulling the houses down along the route of the Great Eastern Railway, all those people were thrown out, evicted: they paid them 30s or something. Well, they had to have somewhere to live, and the landlords started letting out one-room tenements.

Turville Street ran from Church Street to Mead Street and ended near Castle Street School. The houses were mostly of the tenement type of three storeys. The Mildmay Medical Mission had its beginnings in Turville Street. This street with the French name owes its origin to the French silk weavers, because you could see the weavers’ rooms at the top of the houses. There were two half turnings which led to Mount
Inside the Jago

Street. At the corner of Turville Street and Old Nichol Street was a large corner shop which sold everything that the people of the Nichol might need. It was the only shop in Turville Street and was owned by my aunt Eliza. My uncles Arthur and Jim lived at the shop, or at the beerhouse on the other corner,\(^\text{13}\) which the family also owned. The cottages in the turnings were very old, two rooms and a scullery downstairs, one large room upstairs which was usually the bedroom for the family; the toilet was outside in a small garden. They did not have weavers' windows.

Turk Street was at the top of Brick Lane. There weren't many shops, but there was an old clothes market on Sundays. The old girl, old Mother Morgan, she had a shop in Turk Street,\(^\text{14}\) selling old clothes, next to the 'Duke of York';\(^\text{15}\) she made a packet of money, and bought property round in Essex Street, Hoxton, furnished rooms. The Morgans were Romanies. Them and the Smiths and the Harpers, another mob from the Nichol, they were all hawkers, going round with a little pony and cart, or barrows. There was another family of Morgans, a different one, who had a couple of cows, in the dairy, off of Nichol Street. Even when I was grown up and married they had two cows in Bethnal Green, they used to milk 'em there – my wife used to go every night to buy hot cow's milk from the dairy.

The high heaven of everything in the Nichol was Church Street where all the shops were. The whole place was crooked, even those who kept shops. Church Street, now called Redchurch Street, starts from High Street Shoreditch. The 'White Horse' pub stands on one corner, and on the other corner was a big men's and boys' tailor shop, known as Lynn's. This tailor's shop extended to Boundary Street where I was born. On each side of Church Street there were food shops, used mostly by the people of the Nichol. The first was a fish and chip shop right opposite Boundary Street; the people would send the children for 'a penny bit and haporth' – one penny bit of fish and a halfpenny worth of chips or fried potatoes.\(^\text{16}\) This was the usual dinner and supper meal.

Next to the fish shop was a small timber yard,\(^\text{17}\) where the one-room cabinet-maker bought his timber: mostly white wood, very easy to work with. On the corner of Ebor Street
which led to Bethnal Green Road was a pub outside of which stood a street bookmaker waiting for punters to bet their fancy on horses; also a paper boy selling the *Star* which cost ½d like most of the papers. I remember there was another racing paper like the *Star* — it was called the *Echo* at ½d. On the next corner stood a small coffee shop, cup of tea, two slices of bread and margarine: 2 pence, old currency. Cup of tea 1d, bread and bloater 3d. Lunch 4d: meat, two veg’s and a piece of jam tart.

Just along the street stood Burdett’s fish shop. Blobaters, smoked haddocks, kippers and most cheap herrings like mackerel, eels, etc. This shop was famous all over the Nichol and Bethnal Green. Old Charles Burdett, whose family owned the shop, was often to be seen on a fine day sitting outside the shop; his age was some sixty years or more although in the 1890s it was a rare sight to see an elderly person in the Nichol, unless they were in the workhouse uniform. In his youth old Charles had been a burglar. While engaged in his profession he was discovered by a vigilant policeman and in attempting to escape he fired at his pursuer. The police constable was not hit, the burglar was caught and came up for trial at the Old Bailey and the judge said to him: ‘As the PC’s life was spared so shall yours be, you will go to penal servitude for life.’ Old Charlie paid his debt to society and after some twenty years was released on licence. May I say that old Charlie never got into any further trouble and was a lovable old chap who was well liked by all the children in the Nichol.

Opposite the shop was a small Salvation Army chapel, on a fine day it was not unusual to see a bonnie Salvation Army lassie sitting by his side. Passing along Church Street there was another pub in the middle of the street called the ‘Crown’ which is still there. This pub was well known for being the meeting place for the bird fanciers who would bring their birds down to the pub at weekends with a big silk handkerchief over the cage: then the competition for best singing birds would start and last for many hours.

On the corner of the next street, Camlet Street, was a wardrobe dealer’s shop which sold second-hand clothing of all kinds, from babies’ first garments to men and women’s clothing, there were several shops of this description. Passing along
you come to Club Row which is much wider than the other streets. At the Bethnal Green end of Club Row stood the ‘Knave of Clubs’ pub, and on the other corner was MacPherson’s the dispensary for the sick poor — they could obtain medicine for their illnesses or get a letter for hospital.

The north side of Church Street began from Fox’s the chemist who sold every kind of medicines and cures for every kind of illness, also furniture polish and varnish, and the dangerous liquid called methylated spirits which tasted like whisky. Next to the chemist stood Weber’s the pork butcher. This cook shop was the best in the locality and was very popular with the Nichol inhabitants who were able to buy very good cooked food at very cheap prices. Next was a doctor’s shop, Dr Rogers. He was a very tall man; he wore a high silk hat and morning coat and always dressed in black. His fees were 6d if you went to see him; 2s 6d for a visit to your home. These fees included medicine or pills. A newsagent was next to the doctor’s surgery. On the corner of Mount Street was the pub called the ‘Black Dog’. Mount Street was the end of the Nichol and ran as far as Virginia Road.

Passing along Church Street towards Shoreditch we pass more food shops. On the corner of Turville Street was a pub called the ‘Dolphin’ — this was right opposite the old police station. From Turville Street to Club Row there were shops — a barber’s shop, dining rooms, a baker’s, and the undertakers on the corner of Club Row. On the other side of Club Row was a large grocer’s shop selling very cheap tea, sugar, etc. There were several wardrobe shops selling cheap second-hand ladies’ and gents’ clothes, especially children’s clothes.

We have now reached Camlet Street where there was a corner shop named Butcher’s. Here, the children would buy a large bag of broken biscuits for ½d or 1d. Cake was sold at about 2d per pound. This shop was a God-send to the hungry children of the district. Next to Butcher’s was the pudding shop; hot pies a penny each, jam roly-poly pudding penny a portion.21 This shop also sold a kind of leg of beef soup for 1½d a jug full.

Still in Church Street, and opposite the ‘Crown’ and Charlie Burdett’s — was a building that had once been a doss-house, but was now used by the Salvation Army.22 The people of the
Nichol who attended the services were able to take home large jugs of good soup instead of jugs of beer. Next to the soup kitchen was a rag-and-bone shop where the kids would take old rags and get a few coppers for food.

You could say that Shoreditch High Street was our Champs Elysées. It was a prosperous market place with stalls and shops on both sides of the street; they catered for a large population of many thousands. It used to be a big market even on a week day, right up to about 1910. There were many pubs on both sides of the street. On the left-hand side going towards Liverpool Street Station was St Leonard’s Church whose bells ring out the famous chimes of Bow Bells which can be heard all over the East End. A few yards from the church was a pub called ‘The Gun’; from this pub in 1888 the terribly mutilated body of Mary Kelly, the last known victim of Jack the Ripper, was buried.

There were no stalls on this side of Shoreditch High Street, but shops and pubs, and also the ‘London’ music hall which had two performances six days a week. All the most famous artists appeared there twice nightly. Marie Lloyd and others would often patronise the refreshments bars. Next to this famous music hall was the firm of Jeremiah Rotherham, which today is one of the largest wholesale drapers in the East End. Several shops further along led to Church Street. A large pub on the corner was the beginning of the largest store in the East End. It was called Hopkins and Peggs and occupied the whole length of the front from Church Street to Bethnal Green Road. The large staff all wore black dresses and the gents wore morning coats and striped trousers and slept on the premises.

On the right-hand side of Shoreditch High Street – going towards Liverpool Street Station – was the ‘Kings Arms’ pub. Then there was a large billiard saloon, and outside this was the beginning of the market stalls. First in pride of place was a large fruit stall belonging to a family called the Bellinghams. The family were noted for the fine fruit they sold. Somebody told me that when Shoreditch Borough Council did away with the stalls in Shoreditch High Street she committed suicide. Next to the fruit stall stood one of the noted jellied eel stalls belonging to the Mitchells. These eel stalls were well patronised by the crowds of ordinary people who could
always be found along Shoreditch High Street up to midnight. From the Nichol there was only the courtway to get to the High Street, what they called the Bonnet Box Court, because of the ladies' hat shop on the corner – the Bonnet Box. And there was a passage called Boundary Passage – it is still there – which used to be the getaway when they snatched the parcels from Hill's the tobacco people. It's on some of the maps. It is just a narrow place, and Hill's used to be on the corner of New Inn Yard. The lads used to wait up there and when a fellow came out with a big parcel of tobacco, they used to snatch the parcel and run through the passage.

The children of the Nichol would hang about the High Street seeing if they could fiddle something off the stalls. If they could pinch anything, they'd pinch it. If they had anything over they'd sell it to the neighbours. A tin of blacking, that'd be 2d – they'd sell it very likely for ½d. They'd steal fruit – anything to eat. But the ones from the criminal families would always have a wee bit of a bag with 'em. A pair of shoes, hanging up outside the bootshop, was easy to cut down. So they got into the habit of only hanging one shoe out. They'd bring back what they could lay their hands on, wrapped in a roll of paper – anything that was worth money. When the stallholders saw them they'd say, ‘What you doing there?’, perhaps the child would reply, ‘Come on, it's only a couple of specks.’ A cockney's a very sensible person. What's he going to run after a kid for? To give him a slap? Everybody would be setting about him if he did. The stallholder would be serving the customer, he'd be in the front, and the kids would be round the back; one would get the fruit from under the cover and put it in a bag; the other would walk away with it. Twos and threes used to do it together, sometimes more than that. If an owner had three or four kids hanging round his stall, he'd got to keep an eye on what was happening under them, to know what was going on. Girls and all used to be at it. They were very nimble. Anything they could lay their hands on. There were no stores like Woolworth's in those days; if you wanted to pinch anything you had to go for the stalls.

Opposite the 'London' music hall in Shoreditch High Street was the famous pub the 'Jane Shore', where my Dad worked, for 2s daily from 6 a.m. until midnight. The large
entrance hall to the bars had big mosaic pictures on the walls and floors. They portrayed the various incidents in the life of the unfortunate mistress Jane Shore. The pub was built over the spot where, tradition says, the body of Jane Shore was found. The small children would play in the corridor. From the 'Jane Shore' to New Inn Yard was a line of penny shows like in a fairground, and there were many freaks and laughable shows. At the corner of New Inn Yard was a large tobacco shop owned by Hill's Tobacco Co. In the doorway was a large wooden statue of a Red Indian with a naked light for a cigarette, so that a customer could light his pipe. During the lunch interval the crowds were very dense, made up of the white-collar brigade, listening to the pedlars of various medicines which would cure all ills.

By Holywell Lane, which faced Bethnal Green Road, you could see a large shop which sold mens' and boys' clothes, called Alexander's. Men's suits sold at 18s which was a week's wages for the lower paid people; boys suits from 6s 11d to 7s 6d. From Holywell Lane to the 'Royal Standard' theatre in Norton Folgate you would pass three pubs next to each other; then you would see 'Shoreditch's Hat Shop', renowned for the splendid hats they sold to the music hall artists and the actors from the 'Royal Standard'. It was owned by a German, I think, a big well-dressed man. He must have made a packet – all the comedians used to buy their hats there.

Outside the hat shop, in the road, stood a large figure of wood, representing the figurehead of an old-time wooden fighting ship. It was painted in vivid colours. My father, when not working, was often to be found outside the hat shop, doing odd jobs for the owner. Next to the hat shop stood a 'Pearce and Plenty' tea shop. Cup of tea a halfpenny, slice of bread and marge a halfpenny, and one could buy a three-course lunch for 4d. Over the shop was a bagatelle room for customers to enjoy games. Next to the Pearce and Plenty dining rooms was the 'Royal Standard' theatre. In this famous theatre some of the great melodramas of the age were dramatised for the people of the East End. Prices for admission were very popular: 1s, 9d, 6d, were good seats and the gallery was well patronised at 3d admission. One could buy drinks – beer and spirits were at popular prices. Next to the theatre was
yet another pub on the corner of a street. Across the main road was Great Eastern Street, which was opposite Commercial Street.

The trams ran up to Liverpool Street Station along Shoreditch High Street. They ran along rails and were drawn by a pair of horses; the speed was about 10 or 12 miles an hour. Some of them came from Tottenham. The buses, also horse-drawn, ran from Walthamstow along the Lea Bridge Road. The driver, sitting on top, was well dressed in heavy top coat and hard hat, with a very long whip which was never used. The bus had no fixed stopping places like today but stopped when signalled.

After crossing Great Eastern Street you continued your walk towards Liverpool Street for a drink in ‘Dirty Dick’s’, at the corner of Middlesex Street, commonly known as Petticoat Lane. There were twenty-two pubs along Shoreditch High Street, between St Leonard’s Church and Liverpool Street Station.