
This is the long-awaited book from two of the leading innovators in digital history. With *Old Bailey Online* and *London Lives*, Tim Hitchcock, Robert Shoemaker and their collaborators have opened up access to 240,000 manuscript and printed pages created in eighteenth-century London, primarily covering criminal justice, poor relief and medical treatment. These projects have also set the standard for digital history projects in their scale, use-ability and exploitation of exploitation of keyword searching. Hitchcock and Shoemaker have been careful not to impose their own interpretations on these resources. However, it seemed inevitable that they would want to use this material to make major arguments about the social history of eighteenth-century England.

The book tracks the twin development of the systems of criminal justice and poor relief in London. The authors’ central argument is that there was a fundamental shift from a discretionary system to an “increasingly bureaucratic and rules-based system, administered by a cadre of salaried officers and professional lawyers and justices.” (p.9). In criminal justice, officers began to work under greater judicial control, prosecution and defence counsels became more common, and transportation and imprisonment replaced corporal punishment. In poor relief, real costs tripled over the century and by c.1800 London was spending around £500,000 pounds a year on poor relief. An expanding parish-based bureaucracy increased expenditure on claims and removal, the new workhouses and medical care.

These outcomes were not intended by administrators, nor were they the realisation of government policy. Instead change occurred through the interactions between administrators on the one side, and the poor, infirm and the criminal on the other. For example, in vagrancy removal the introduction of printed forms and basic documentation became tools used by plebeians to claim better treatment. Much of the increased expenditure on removal was in fact spent on medical care, as paupers picked up by the system argued that they need treatment, rather than immediate removal. Time and again, new claimants emerged (unanticipated by overseers or reformers) each time a new provision was created. Unlike much recent social history, the authors make a casual argument about how those systems developed. In their view, this was not primarily discursive or ideological. Instead, change occurred in social relations; that is within the interactions between those groups involved in criminal justice and poor relief. In a sense this book represent a new materialism, where actions speak louder than words. It is also a demonstration of the law of unintended consequences.

The book begins in 1690 and proceeds chronologically through six substantive chapters, each examining periods of around 13 to 18 years. Following the contextual material of *Old Bailey Online*, the book makes a point of grounding its arguments in the demographic history of London. Life-cycles and living standards are important foundations for the arguments of the book. As well as the digitised material freely available online, there are 16 datasets that readers can download at [www.cambridge.org/9781107639942](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107639942) under the Resources tab. These include statistics for poor relief expenditure of selected parishes, a census of the inmates of St Martins Workhouse, trends in Old Bailey trials and escapes from prisons and hulks.

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Along the way, the authors make important insights into events that specialists may feel they know well. One striking example, is the campaign by reformers against parish nurses in the 1760s and 1770s. Jonas Hanway published statistics on infant mortality and attacked named individuals, such as Hannah Poole (a nurse employed by the parish of St Clement Danes), for the poor quality of their care. By re-examining the manuscript sources for St Clements Danes and comparing these to claims made in print sources, the authors defend Poole’s reputation. It emerges that she was probably the only nurse employed by the parish and cared for a particular vulnerable group: the illegitimate children of pauper mothers. They conclude that the real survival rate was no better or worse than that of the Foundling Hospital, which Hanway had held up for praise. Here the benefits of digitisation really pay off. Many important findings in the book result from using nominal record linkage, a technique that London Lives was created to facilitate. Users of the website can collect evidence on individuals across multiple sources (e.g. parish registers, bastardy examinations, coroners’ records). It is a shame, however, that an early finding of the London Lives project - that there was very little overlap between subjects of the poor relief and criminal justice systems – is not discussed in more depth.

The book’s subtitle promises a history of the ‘making of a modern city’. The authors’ interest in social practice certainly overlaps with recent trends in urban history. However, there is little use of spatial analysis, which is surprising given that a related digital resource - Locating London’s Past - aims to facilitate this with data from both Old Bailey Online and London Lives.² It is also a partial view of London’s development in this period. London Lives sticks to the Westminster parishes that the authors know best: particularly St Clement Danes and St Martins in the Fields. East London and Southwark are not studied in depth, a real shame as the parishes in the east grew significantly over the century. Some of the communities located there are discussed – such as silk weavers – but remain as ‘stage armies’ in the narrative.

If this book represents a new approach to social history, replicating it for other places could be a real challenge. That is because Hitchcock and Shoemaker have been lucky to build their own laboratory. Given the time and costs involved, how many others will be able to do the same? One is reminded of the ambition of social historians of the 1970s as they began to see the possibilities of computers and relational databases. Hitchcock and Shoemaker have been able to realise that promise in a way that Alan Macfarlane was never quite able to for Earls Colne. Let us hope that others follow with the same ambition and high standards.

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² Locating London’s Past (www.locatinglondon.org, version 1.0, 17 December 2011).