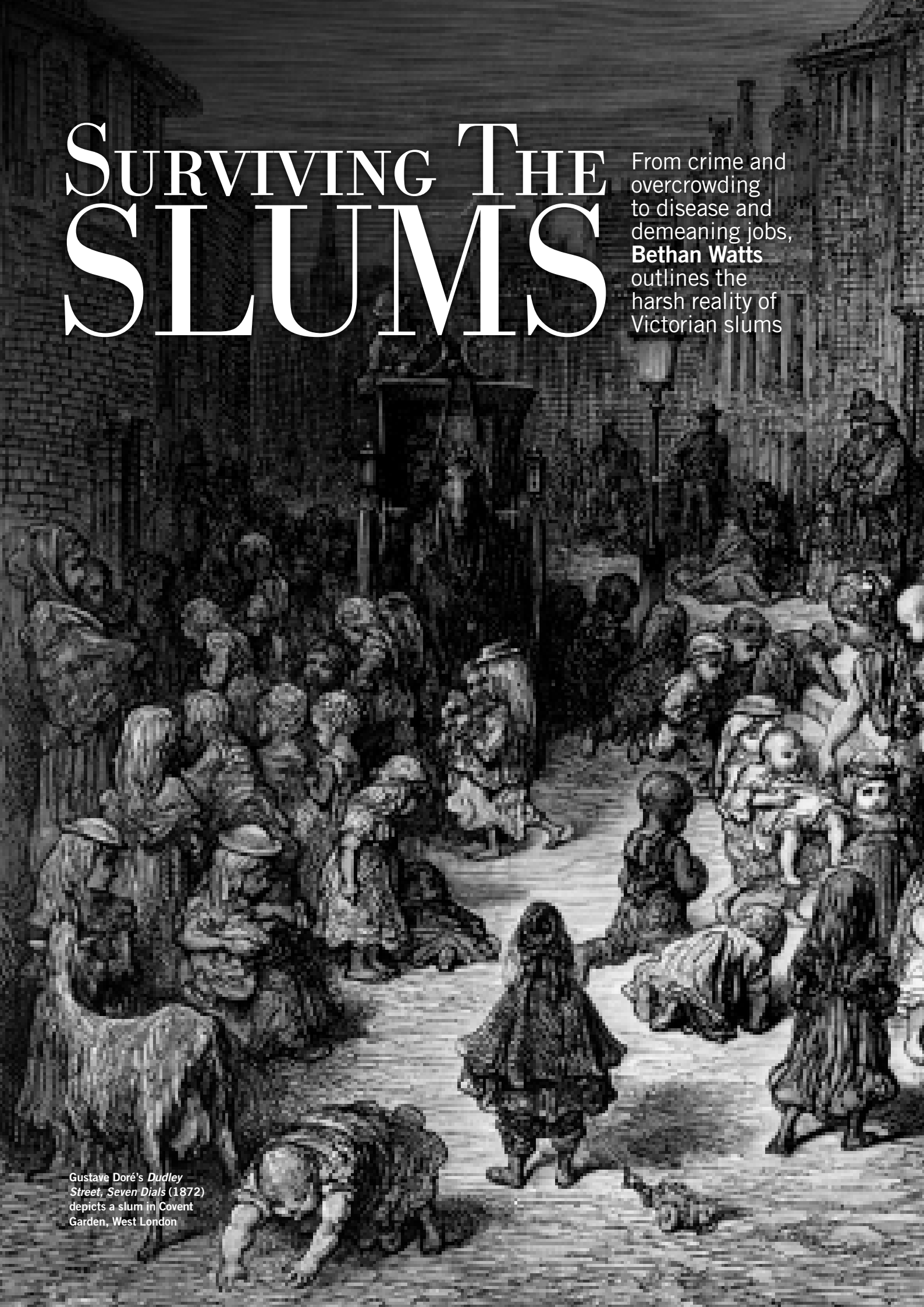
Surviving The SLUMS

From crime and overcrowding to disease and demeaning jobs, **Bethan Watts** outlines the harsh reality of Victorian slums



Gustave Doré's *Dudley Street, Seven Dials* (1872) depicts a slum in Covent Garden, West London

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Life in the Victorian slums was balanced on a knife-edge; one late rent payment or missed meal could have fatal results. Born against the backdrop of the Industrial Revolution, urban areas swelled with opportunists seeking employment in newly built factories, mills and warehouses. Beckoned by the promise of steady labour and good pay, families uprooted their rural lives and settled into suburbia. Yet as more people crowded into towns and cities, space quickly began to run out. Unable to house their new arrivals, cities spilled over with workers who became disillusioned with the promise of wealth and prosperity; instead, they slogged through labour for little reward, and their families were beginning to suffer for it. With houses unfit for the number of inhabitants who were squeezed within their creaking walls, Victorian paupers toppled onto streets and into makeshift hovels.

Families were forced to share their homes with strangers who risked exposure on the streets. In Edinburgh in 1869, the average number of household inhabitants was 16, and it was estimated that 14,000 families had been squeezed into just 2,000 rooms, 900 of which were underground basements. Dosshouses – or tenements – could be rented for a fee of 10s a week in exchange for a bed, yet there was no certainty of a private room, or even a private bed. One dosshouse in Spitalfields in the East End of London sheltered 300 men and women, who were forced to share beds with the opposite sex.

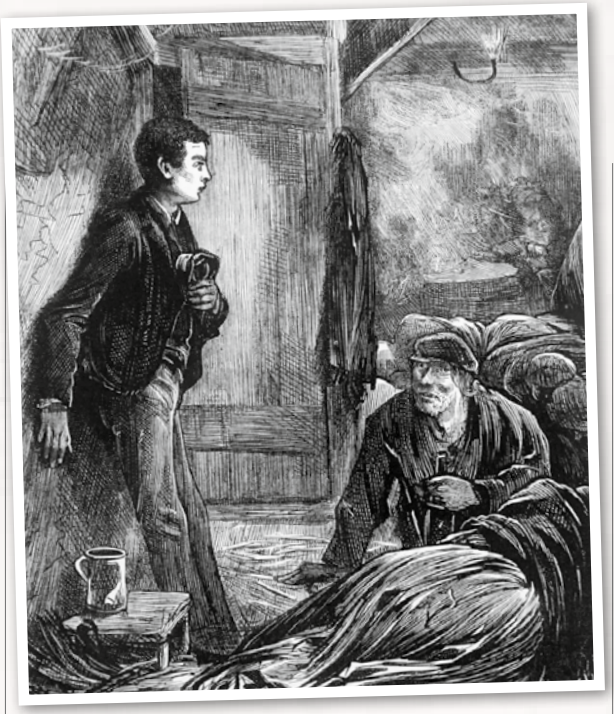
Fit For A Dog To Die In

The most deprived slums in London were in Clerkenwell in the centre, Lambeth in the south and Whitechapel in the east, which were described in 1869 as "waterless, drainless, floorless and almost roofless". One commentator called them "lairs into which a starving dog might creep to die, but nothing ▶

▶ more". As well as lacking in privacy, slum dwellings were also without heating, running water and waste disposal. A single room would be used as a bedroom, kitchen, sickroom, bathroom, birthing chamber and even a makeshift morgue, where corpses lay in rest as mourning families continued their daily routines. "It's impossible for these people to be clean in their dwellings, clothes or persons," wrote journalist Isabella Bird in her book *Notes on Old Edinburgh* (Edmonston and Douglas, 1869, and available from the Internet Archive at **tinyurl.com/arch-bird-edin**), after witnessing three prostitutes forced to entertain their customers in a dirty, windowless room shared by a family with young children. In another room, six adults shared a mattress on the dirt floor.

Even food could be insanitary. In her *Book of Household Management* (SO Beeton, 1861, and available from the Internet Archive at **tinyurl.com/arch-beeton**), Isabella Beeton encouraged paupers to reduce food waste, even at the detriment of their health. "If flies have touched [meat]," she instructed, "the part must be cut off", but the rest still eaten. Foods favoured for their low cost included 'broxy' meat (rotten offcuts marinated to disguise putrefaction), offal and paste-like gruel.

Despite this, cookery books were written for the poor, including *A Plain Cookery Book for the Working Classes* by Queen Victoria's head chef Charles Elmé Francatelli (Routledge, Warne and Routledge, 1852, and available from Project Gutenberg at **gutenberg.org/ebooks/22114**).



Inside a 19th-century dosshouse

Some occupations came with the perk of accommodation and board, such as domestic service which attracted hordes of young women and girls. Maids earned around £1 per week, a decent wage but still grossly underpaid. Costermongers and travelling salespeople could expect to make the same, their professions laborious but respectable. Children were forced into employment to support their families, crawling between machinery as 'scavengers' gathering waste material, or climbing chimneys as sweeps.

Death Of A Child Sweep

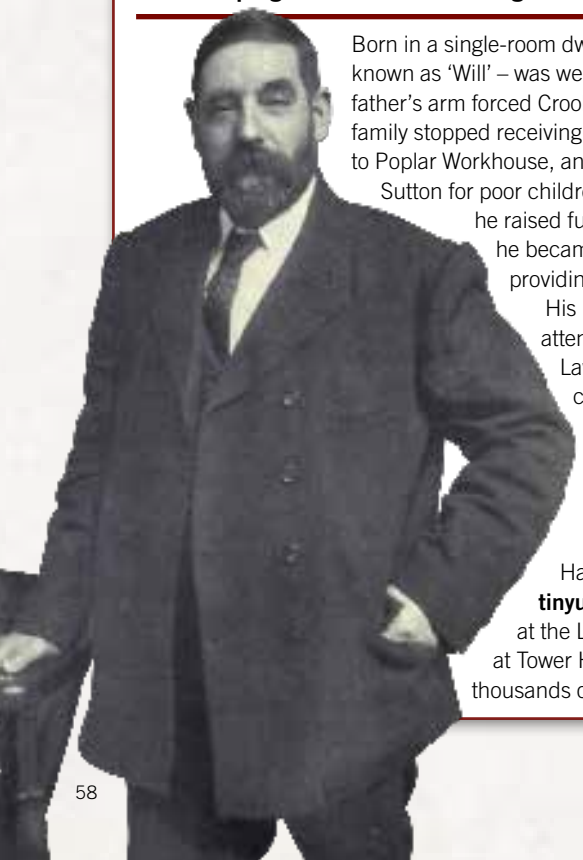
The death of 11-year-old sweep George Brewster in 1875, following the 1842 report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Children's Employment, forced Parliament to overhaul child labour. Spearheaded by the likes of Dickens, numerous laws were passed that limited the employment of children, including the 1847 Ten Hours Act and the 1874 Factory Act, which together legislated a maximum number of hours that children, young people and women could work.

Adults too worked dangerous jobs for a pittance. The workhouse was a last resort, a hellish place considered worse than life on the streets. Thomas Wright's *The Great Army of London Poor* (T Woolmer, 1882, online at The Dictionary of Victorian London: **victorianlondon.org/publications6/greatarmy.htm**) reports one man saying, "None by God and ourselves know how hard [we] lived to keep out of it." Instead, paupers turned to unsanitary jobs such as bone-grubbing, mudlarking and sewer-flushing, which found workers knee-deep in human and animal waste in search of items to sell.

Another dehumanising job forced upon paupers – especially women – was prostitution. Making just 3d per customer (the equivalent of a small loaf), sex workers faced discrimination, abuse and a myriad of diseases. One told journalist Henry Mayhew in 1850 that she "could not get out of that life… you

William 'Will' Crooks 1852–1921

This campaigner and MP never forgot his humble roots



Born in a single-room dwelling in Poplar, East London, William Crooks – known as 'Will' – was well acquainted with poverty. The amputation of his father's arm forced Crooks to become a milkman aged eight, but when the family stopped receiving poor relief in 1861, he and his siblings were sent to Poplar Workhouse, and then to the South Metropolitan District School in Sutton for poor children. In 1889 Crooks was working on the docks when he raised funds for and co-led a strike for fairer wages. In 1897 he became the chairman of the Poplar Board of Guardians, providing insight into workhouse operations.

His 1906 inquiry into Poplar Workhouse brought attention to its squalid conditions, spurring the Poor Law Commission into action. Crooks continued to campaign for social reform, advocating for work unions, old-age pensions, and improved provisions for schoolchildren and the mentally unwell. He became the first Labour mayor of Poplar in 1901, and MP for Woolwich in 1903.

The online version of the Parliamentary archive Hansard has transcripts of Crooks' contributions (see **tinyurl.com/hansard-crooks**). He died on 5 June 1921 at the London Hospital, Whitechapel, and was buried at Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park, his funeral attracting thousands of working-class mourners.

GETTY IMAGES | *FROM WORKHOUSE TO WESTMINSTER: THE LIFE STORY OF WILL CROOKS, MP* BY GEORGE HAW (CASSELL AND COMPANY, 1907)

get used in there, and you are life-ruined". Mayhew's exposé *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851–1862) illuminated the horrendous employment conditions of countless paupers.

Driven To Crime

Crime often yielded lucrative results. From body snatching to theft, cash was exchanged beneath pub tables and in shadowy alleyways. It was estimated that between 1830 and 1860, children were responsible for half of all recorded thefts, led by conmen such as Isaac 'Ikey' Solomon, who inspired Dickens' Fagin. Gangs such as the Scuttlers of Manchester and the Peaky Blinders of Birmingham fought social injustice through illegal practices like gambling and fraud. With little to lose, criminals purposely shattered windows, defaced churches, and smashed machinery, the prospect of a bed and a meal in prison more appealing than a life on the street. Mayhew wrote of a 19 year old who had been arrested 14 times, while politician Will Crooks described labourers destroying workhouse property out of a sense of sheer injustice.

Even murder could be profitable. Amelia Dyer, 'the Ogress of Reading', was hanged in 1896 after killing 300–400 infants under the guise of fostering, exchanging their life insurance for cash. So too did Britain's first female serial killer Mary Ann Cotton, executed in 1873 and thought to have killed 15 of her children and stepchildren, three husbands, and her own mother. In 1882 alone more than 544 corpses washed up on the foreshore of the Thames, with half believed to be linked to murders motivated by fraud.

Slum tourism is nothing new – even then 'slummers' would visit the poor to bestow food and small gifts

The costermonger in this photo, taken c1877, sells coke in winter and silver sand for polishing in summer

The mystery of disembodied limbs on Tottenham Court Road in 1884 and the Thames Torso Murders of 1887–1889 left cities across Britain on high alert, but it would take the murders of five women in Whitechapel in 1888 to force judicial reform. The Jack the Ripper case had reverberating effects across the country, changing the way that the police and the law responded to murder and rape, as well as how they treated crime scenes. Emphasis was placed on penalising criminals, funding penal institutions, and overhauling the judicial system as a whole.

Parliament had to face the effects of unemployment, which snaked through the Victorian slums. Canvassing the Government, reformists such as Seebohm Rowntree and Louisa Twining advocated for fairer working conditions and wages, revealing that only one-third of the working population made ▶

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Victorian prostitutes dance to drum up trade in Drury Lane, West London

enough money to survive. Beatrice Webb campaigned for pensions and sick pay, particularly for those injured in service, as did Charles Booth, who served on the Royal Commission on the Aged Poor (1893–1895), leading directly to the 1908 Old Age Pensions Act. Booth's London poverty maps project (1886–1903) had highlighted areas of destitution, with slums making up a quarter of London. During Queen Victoria's reign, Poor Law provision went from £1.25 million to £7 million, injecting much-needed cash into pauper provision across Britain.

Disease – And A Great Stink

Yet the slums continued to fester. As overcrowding reached new heights, sanitation deteriorated further. One of the biggest killers in the 19th century was disease, which was resistant to inadequate medicine and spread by poor hygiene; scarlet fever, measles and whooping cough were some of the most prolific. London's Great Stink of 1858, attributed to poor sanitation, saw quicklime and carbolic acid poured into the Thames in an attempt to quell the spread of disease, leading pioneers like Florence Nightingale to publish treatises on the importance of cleanliness in the fight against the 'miasma' that she, along with most Victorians at that time, believed carried diseases. Although Dr John Snow had published his essay *On the Mode of Communication of Cholera* in 1849, which he updated in 1855 after tracing a London outbreak to a communal water pump exposed to sewage, germ theory was not widely accepted until the 1880s. However, the overcrowding and insanitary conditions of slum living was seen to spread disease.

As the Victorian era came to its close, Britons emerged from the slums blinking in the light of progress. Education Acts in the early 1900s raised the school-leaving age to 14, helping children to escape slum life. The prospects of paupers were beginning to improve, driven by the efforts of those who called the slums home. These people had loved, had laboured and had lost, and were consigned to the margins of history. The characteristics that made them human were erased, their struggles mistaken for stagnation. Yet their stories reveal the true identities of those who lived, worked and died in the Victorian slums; that ultimately they were just like us.

BETHAN WATTS is a historian and author. Her latest book *The Dark and Dingy Underworld of the Victorian Slums* is available from Pen & Sword (RRP £25)

Resources

Take your research further

BOOKS

London Labour and the London Poor
Henry Mayhew
1851–1862
Investigative journalist Henry Mayhew explored the working conditions and daily routines of London's 'street folk', from stall owners and mudlarks, to pedlars and prostitutes. He collated his findings in a four-volume 'cyclopaedia', which is freely available from Project Gutenberg at **tinyurl.com/guten-mayhew**.

Tracing Your Pauper Ancestors
Robert Burlison
Pen & Sword, 2009
Burlison tackles the shadowy and oft-hidden lives of Victorian paupers in this handy guide, identifying useful resources.

WEBSITES

BRITISH NEWSPAPER ARCHIVE
w **britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk**
Millions of 19th-century newspapers have been digitised in this online archive. Search by date or location to reveal crime reports, local news and other fascinating articles about both the richest and poorest echelons of society.

CHARLES BOOTH'S POVERTY MAPS
w **booth.lse.ac.uk/map**
View the reformist's original notes (made 1886–1903) on the slums of London in these maps, charting the city's neighbourhoods and the levels of poverty he observed.

VOICES OF THE VICTORIAN POOR
w **www.victorianpoor.org**
Here you can search an online database of more than 3,500 letters written by, and about, British paupers from 1834–1900. You can also find petitions to the Poor Law Commission, union minutes and workhouse records, which can be accessed via an interactive map of the UK.

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