

# Houses for the Dead: The Provision of Mortuaries in London, 1843–1889

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Edwin Chadwick's supplementary sanitary report of 1843 claimed that around 20,000 deaths took place in London each year among families who occupied only a single room. For the period between death and burial, which could be a week or more, these families shared that room with a decomposing corpse. Chadwick recommended that public mortuaries should be provided, where corpses could be securely and decently lodged until they could be buried. This article examines the gradual process of establishing such buildings in London in the period between 1843 and the formation of the London County Council in 1889, and the limited success achieved in encouraging their use.

In 1843, Edwin Chadwick drew attention to the living conditions of many poor families in London and other towns and cities in the aftermath of a family death. Local medical officer John Liddle reported that in the Whitechapel area:

Nearly the whole of the labouring population there have only one room. The corpse is therefore kept in that room where the inmates sleep and have their meals . . . Bodies are almost always kept for a full week, frequently longer.<sup>1</sup>

Mr Jeffereys, an undertaker from the same district added:

I have known them to be kept three weeks: we every week see them kept until the bodies are nearly putrid: sometimes they have run away almost through the coffin, and the poor people, women and children, are living and sleeping in the same room at the same time.<sup>2</sup>

Those working in other parts of London recorded similar comments.<sup>3</sup> In this period, many medical men believed that 'miasma', something in the atmosphere caused by decaying organic matter, was a cause of sickness and death.<sup>4</sup> Chadwick agreed, holding that 'the emanations from human remains are of a nature to produce fatal disease'.<sup>5</sup> He recommended the provision of 'houses for the immediate reception, and respectful and appropriate care of the dead', where 'all classes of the community' could deposit the corpses of those who had died, until they could be buried.<sup>6</sup>

## The living and the dead

Chadwick's report was one of three major public health reports published in 1842 and 1843. His first sanitary report of 1842 had focused on those 'removable circumstances' that were affecting the health of the poorer classes, such as the accumulation of refuse, poor water supplies and defective drainage.<sup>7</sup> It deliberately steered away from the public health issues caused by the overcrowded urban burial grounds, as these were the subject of a separate parliamentary investigation under the chairmanship of William Mackinnon, which also reported in 1842.<sup>8</sup> Mackinnon's committee confirmed the shocking revelations of London surgeon George Alfred Walker, which had been published in 1839, including the desecration of urban graves to create space for further burials, and concluded that the condition of many urban graveyards was injurious to public health.<sup>9</sup> Chadwick's report of 1843 was commissioned by parliament to examine some of Mackinnon's findings in greater depth. Its subject matter included the dangers to health caused by urban burial grounds and by delayed burial; Chadwick investigated the reasons for such delays and, like Mackinnon, concluded that London's dead were killing the living.<sup>10</sup>

Both Mackinnon and Chadwick recommended the closure of urban graveyards, and this aspect of their reports has received considerable attention from historians,<sup>11</sup> but Chadwick's account of the lengthy retention of corpses in cramped living quarters has attracted far less interest. James Stevens Curl builds on the contents of both reports in his cross-disciplinary study of the Victorian celebration of death, but dwells for just a few pages on the identified need for mortuary facilities, where he expands upon Chadwick's description of the mechanisms used in continental mortuaries to alert keepers if a 'corpse' awoke (a model that was not adopted in England).<sup>12</sup> Approaching the topic from a different perspective, Ian Burney has linked the growth of mortuary provision with late nineteenth-century demands for the reform of the coroner's inquest, taking the court away from its traditional setting of the local tavern into a new court and mortuary complex. His focus is on the period after 1875, and many of the examples he gives are of buildings constructed after the formation of the London County Council in 1889.<sup>13</sup> Architectural historian Clare Graham has also provided an account of these court and mortuary complexes, focusing mainly on the period from 1889 and concentrating more on the court room than the mortuary, although she does provide the historical background to the desire to provide mortuary accommodation.<sup>14</sup> There remains a clear gap in the historiography, which this article seeks to address by providing a more detailed account of when and how London came to be provided with its first public mortuary facilities, and the difficulties faced by the authorities in encouraging their use.

If the dead were to be separated from the living, then mortuary accommodation would need to be available to the residents of almost every London parish. Chadwick estimated that as many as 20,000 deaths occurred each year among London families whose living and sleeping quarters comprised just a single room.<sup>15</sup> Tenement housing, where houses originally built for a single family were subdivided and the rooms let individually to separate families, was commonplace across the capital, owing to population pressure, a need for cheap housing, and a desire on the part of landlords to maximise their income.<sup>16</sup> Overcrowding in the Whitechapel area has been mentioned above, but even in the wealthy West End parishes, where aristocratic landowners had

created fashionable residential districts, there were pockets of land where ownership was fragmented, and steep rents resulted in overcrowding that was as bad as, or worse than, that seen in the eastern districts.<sup>17</sup>

Mortuary provision in London in the period before 1889 can be considered in three main phases, characterised by acknowledgement, appeasement and action. The first of these phases, between 1843 and 1866, saw the gradual acknowledgement of the need for such buildings among members of parish vestries and burial boards, but little was achieved. In the second phase, between 1866 and 1875, many London parishes took their first steps towards providing a mortuary for their inhabitants, but when objections were raised by local people, the most common reaction was one of appeasement, and the plans were often dropped. From 1875, an increased determination appears, with action being finally taken by many parishes that had previously shied away from confrontation. The number of mortuaries in London began to increase significantly, although they varied widely in the quality of accommodation that they offered, and were only lightly used by the poor.

### **Acknowledgement: 1842–1866**

The Public Health Act of 1848 enabled local boards of health in the provinces to provide mortuaries, but the size of the capital and the multiplicity of administrative bodies that it contained resulted in London's exemption from the act's provisions.<sup>18</sup> London parishes varied widely in size and wealth, with the most populous being larger than many provincial cities. Each had its own interests and mode of governance, but there were also interdependencies. This complexity, and the lack of any overall local governing body for the metropolitan area, created difficulties in framing legislation.<sup>19</sup> In 1850, a Metropolitan Burials Act enabled mortuaries to be erected in the capital, but the power to provide them was placed within a central authority, which would also take charge of all burials. However the act proved unworkable and was repealed before any mortuaries were built.<sup>20</sup> The replacement Metropolitan Burials Act of 1852 returned autonomy to the parishes, allowing vestries to establish burial boards to acquire new burial grounds, and permitting those boards or the local poor law officials (under the direction of the vestry) to provide mortuaries.<sup>21</sup> The 1852 act also provided for the closure of London graveyards by the Crown on public health grounds. Residents, concerned at the health risks that the Mackinnon report had outlined, petitioned the Home Office in large numbers, and by December 1853 fresh interments had been prohibited in all or part of over two hundred burial grounds and church vaults.<sup>22</sup> Parishes had no choice but to provide new burial grounds as a matter of urgency. In contrast, there was little or no popular clamour for them to build mortuaries.

The first London parish to provide a mortuary was St Anne, Soho. In August 1854, the Westminster coroner expressed his disgust to St Anne's burial board at having been compelled, with his jury, to view a body 'in a far advanced state of decomposition' lying in a house containing 20 residents. The jury appended to their verdict of accidental death a request for the burial board to consider 'providing a receptacle for dead Bodies', and although this had no legal force, the burial board immediately decided that the old parish watch-house, adjacent to the church, would make a

suitable 'receptacle'.<sup>23</sup> Obtaining possession of the site, which the Metropolitan Police were using as a residence for police sergeant Hinton, proved problematic, but it was eventually surrendered by the police to the parish in March 1856. It was extended and converted at a total cost of £203.15s., and opened on 8 September 1856.<sup>24</sup>

For many years this remained the only mortuary to have opened under the terms of the 1852 act.<sup>25</sup> Limited mortuary facilities, known as 'dead-houses', were also available within institutions, including hospitals, prisons, asylums and workhouses, for the short-term storage of those who had died there.<sup>26</sup> On occasions, other bodies might be taken there by agreement, such as in 1867, when the master of the St Marylebone workhouse agreed to receive the bodies of some 40 skaters who had died when the ice over a lake in Regent's Park suddenly gave way.<sup>27</sup> London's first non-institutional mortuaries were constructed within the railway arches at Waterloo by the London Necropolis and National Mausoleum Company, which opened a cemetery for Londoners at Woking in 1854, and accepted bodies at their mortuaries before the day of the funeral.<sup>28</sup> By 1862, the Great Northern Cemetery Company was advertising the availability of a similar facility within its station complex at King's Cross, for use prior to the burial of the deceased at its cemetery at Colney Hatch.<sup>29</sup>

There were practical and cultural reasons why corpses were retained for lengthy periods. First, families went to great lengths to avoid the stigma and loss of identity occasioned by burial in a common grave, but funerals were expensive, and it could take time to accumulate sufficient cash to cover the costs.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, many families could only gather together on Sundays, so if the death occurred towards the end of the week, the funeral was 'sometimes postponed till the Sunday week after'.<sup>31</sup> Difficulty in distinguishing between death and coma prior to the onset of decomposition also gave rise to fears of premature interment, and a consequent desire to remain close to a relative in case they awoke.<sup>32</sup> Julie-Marie Strange has highlighted the importance of burial customs as 'forums for expressing grief and sympathy with the bereaved, whilst reaffirming a sense of social inclusion'.<sup>33</sup> The retention of a corpse at home allowed neighbours and friends to provide consolation to the bereaved through visits, initially to help to lay out the corpse, and subsequently to view the body.<sup>34</sup> The importance of such customs led the Earl of Shaftesbury to speak in parliament against the proposal of the London Necropolis and National Mausoleum Company to provide a mortuary at Waterloo as 'a deep wound to the feelings of individuals and a gross violation of public decency'.<sup>35</sup>

The Metropolitan Burials Act of 1852 provided no powers to compel people to surrender a corpse, and if persuasion was likely to be difficult, there was little justification for a parish to incur any significant expenditure, a point made by both parish and poor law authorities in St James, Westminster in 1863 when their medical officer, Edwin Lankester, requested the provision of a mortuary.<sup>36</sup> However, there was a growing acceptance in this period of the need to provide at least a basic facility for use during epidemics or in emergencies. In Hackney, the base of the tower of the former church was used as a makeshift mortuary during the cholera epidemic of 1865–1866, and again in 1868 for the body of a murder victim.<sup>37</sup> In St George-in-the-East, the Inspector of Nuisances reported from 1864 the prompt removal of the bodies of those who had died from contagious diseases to a 'dead-house in the churchyard'.<sup>38</sup> The precise nature of this building is not known; it was demolished in 1876 and

replaced by a ‘commodious Mortuary’ with roof-level ventilation (a common feature of London mortuaries of this period), which still stands, although it is now sadly neglected (Figure 1).<sup>39</sup>

### Protest and appeasement: 1866–1875

The Sanitary Act of 1866 ushered in the second phase of mortuary provision. There was still no obligation on a parish to erect a mortuary, but where one had been provided, the act empowered county magistrates, at the request of a doctor, to insist upon the removal of the corpse of anyone who had died from an infectious disease, if the body would otherwise be retained in a single-roomed dwelling.<sup>40</sup> With the possibility of commissions in sight, in the following year architect Philip Masey wrote to the *Builder*, suggesting that it should be compulsory for every parish to provide a mortuary and, maximising the value of any scheme to his profession, recommended that a coroner’s court should be annexed to each.<sup>41</sup> It was an ambitious plan, but the size of the site that would be required, and the cost, put such schemes out of the reach of many parishes, at least in the short term. Population pressure meant that vacant land was often expensive and in short supply. The few sites that were available might also be unacceptable to some, and in trying to improve the living standards of the poor, the authorities often faced protests from other local residents. A number of parishes, including St George Southwark, Bethnal Green, St James Westminster, Bow, Bromley and Poplar, took steps towards providing a parish mortuary between 1866



FIGURE 1 The mortuary at St George-in-the-East, constructed in 1876 (author’s photograph)

and 1875, but in each case chose to appease the protesters, by changing their plans if this could be achieved relatively easily, or by leaving the issue in abeyance. Despite the differing economic profiles of these parishes, the protests assumed a common form. Having been told several years previously that their local burial ground was injurious to their health because of the decomposing bodies that it contained, property owners in the vicinity of a proposed mortuary site were concerned that this might pose similar health risks, which potentially affected the capital or rental value of their property, as the examples below will demonstrate.

The parish of St George, Southwark was one of the most densely populated in the capital.<sup>42</sup> Little vacant land was available for building, but in 1867 the parish vestry resolved to erect a mortuary on a disused burial ground at a former hospital, at a cost of £1400.<sup>43</sup> This was met with sharp local opposition: a deputation attended the vestry meeting, a memorial was sent to the bishop, and there was talk of a letter to the home secretary.<sup>44</sup> Although the site was described as ‘more open and airy’ than almost any other place within the parish, minimising any perceived danger to health from atmospheric ‘miasma’, at a public meeting the protesters claimed that the plans were ‘destructive to property’. The chairman then stirred up the emotions of those present by alleging that workmen would crush the bones of those members of their families who were buried on the site, and take them away in dust carts.<sup>45</sup> The strength of feeling was such that the plans were shelved for more than a decade, with the mortuary eventually opening, in St George’s churchyard rather than on the hospital burial ground, in 1880.<sup>46</sup>

The vestry of Bethnal Green, another poor and densely populated parish, turned its attention to the need for a mortuary in 1871.<sup>47</sup> In February that year, during a smallpox epidemic that was to kill 147 parishioners in the first quarter, the medical officer reported that he considered a mortuary to be a necessity, ‘for it often happened that a person who has died of contagious disease is left in a room for two or three days where the family are living’.<sup>48</sup> The sanitary officer had tried to take the ‘very much decomposed’ body of 60-year-old Ann Burrell to the workhouse dead-house, but the authorities refused to accept the corpse, out of concern for the health of their own residents. He reported that he had therefore been ‘obliged to take it to his own House’.<sup>49</sup> This appears to have been the catalyst required, and the vestry agreed a proposal to convert the old watch-house in the south-west corner of the churchyard. Objections were raised by the rector, whose own property lay within the curtilage of the churchyard; he thought that the plans would make his position ‘less eligible than it is’ and ‘at times it would be quite an intolerable nuisance that my family could not live here’.<sup>50</sup> As at Southwark, the plans were shelved, in this case until 1875.

The parish of St James, Westminster contained some of the best housing in London in the south of the parish, but to the north the parish was heavily overcrowded.<sup>51</sup> Medical officer Edwin Lankester had been unable to obtain agreement to the construction of a parish mortuary in 1863, but in 1867 the parish sanitary committee recommended that the former engine-house, on the corner of Jermyn Street and Church Place, should be converted. The vestry refused to add their approval, and asked the committee to reconsider.<sup>52</sup> By 1870 there had been no progress and, under pressure from Lankester, the works committee recommended to the vestry the building of a mortuary ‘in some eligible situation’.<sup>53</sup> With no sign of any alternative site being



agreed, a deputation of ratepayers from Church Place and Jermyn Street attended a vestry meeting to present a memorial, signed by 50 inhabitants from that part of the parish, objecting to the proposal:

That such a building erected there w<sup>d</sup> be most detrimental and ruinous to the inhabitants of the locality, and pernicious to the interests of property in the surrounding neighbourhood, besides injuring the large number of Lodging-house keepers, Hotel proprietors, and trades-people, such a preposterous exhibition of morbid taste would not fail, in this age of improvement, to act most injuriously upon the large, influential, and fashionable community who annually make their selection for marriage at the St James's Church'.

The vestry elected to refer the matter back to the committee.<sup>54</sup> After failure to reach an agreement either with the burial board of the neighbouring parish of St Anne, Soho to share their mortuary, or with the poor law authorities to share the workhouse dead-house or to rent a property from them that formed part of their relief offices, the subject was quietly dropped.<sup>55</sup> Renewed approaches were made to both St Anne's and the workhouse authorities in 1874, but with no more success.<sup>56</sup>

Away from the crowded centre of London, the availability of several possible sites could ease any difficulties faced. In 1868, the Poplar district board of works attempted to provide mortuaries for its three constituent parishes of Bow, Bromley and Poplar.<sup>57</sup> Difficulties were encountered at Bow, where the preferred site adjacent to the railway line was not available for purchase, and at Poplar, where the rector objected to the building of a mortuary in a paddock adjacent to the churchyard, partly on account of its proximity to his house. For Bromley, the district board proposed a site in the north-east corner of the new Tower Hamlets cemetery, although the churchwardens thought that somewhere closer to the river and docks would be more practical.<sup>58</sup> The following year, with no resolution to the problems at Bow and Poplar, the board decided to acquire the cemetery land for £200 and build a single mortuary that could be shared by the three parishes.<sup>59</sup> A deputation of residents from Wellington Road presented a memorial to the board, signed by over one hundred householders, who claimed that the mortuary would be 'dangerous' to their health and

very seriously detrimental to the value of the property in the said Wellington Road and which property is some of the best in the Parish & would probably be the cause of many of the said Houses becoming and remaining unlet, which would diminish the Rateable value of the Parish besides causing to remove from the neighbourhood some of the most respectable Inhabitants.<sup>60</sup>

The board responded by arranging a land-swap within the cemetery ground. The new mortuary opened in 1871, on land within the cemetery but close to the railway line, and well away from the homes of the middle classes.<sup>61</sup>

Throughout the 1870s, the medical journal *Lancet* was active in promoting to its readers the benefits of mortuary provision.<sup>62</sup> However, a survey conducted by the *British Medical Journal* suggests that only nine other mortuaries were provided in London between 1866 and the end of 1875, in the City and at Battersea, Bermondsey, Hackney, Lambeth, Lewisham, St Luke, St Mary Newington and St Saviour Southwark.<sup>63</sup> They varied widely in cost and quality. In Newington, a 999-year lease was taken on a railway arch for £20 per annum, and this was converted into a

mortuary at a cost of £250.<sup>64</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, the Corporation of the City of London agreed a budget of £13,000 in 1869 to provide a large mortuary on Golden Lane, with a post-mortem room, disinfecting chamber and ambulance station. The plans were later modified, after disagreement about whether the provision of what was described as a ‘palace for the dead’ was an appropriate use of ratepayers’ money, but the complex was independently described in 1875 as ‘the best building of the kind in London’.<sup>65</sup> A coroner’s court was added to the complex in 1877, bringing the total cost to £12,000.<sup>66</sup>

### Action: 1875–1889

It was not easy to balance the needs of the poor with the rights of property, but there was a sharp shift from 1875 towards the provision of mortuaries. Eleven further mortuaries appear to have opened in London between 1875 and 1880, including buildings at Bethnal Green, St James Westminster and St George Southwark, all parishes where plans had been shelved in the late 1860s and early 1870s because of protests.<sup>67</sup> This may have been partly due to the success of the Metropolitan Board of Works, created in 1855, in improving London’s drainage, so attention could be turned to other sanitary matters,<sup>68</sup> but there were also several specific reasons why the need for mortuaries became more pressing in this period. A few parishes had made arrangements to share their local workhouse’s dead-house, but in 1875 the president of the Local Government Board criticised the poor law guardians at Shoreditch for giving such permission, adding that the vestry should provide accommodation of its own. Other poor law boards were immediately required to tighten their own policies.<sup>69</sup> The autonomy enjoyed by the parishes was also under threat. In August 1875, the Public Health Act gave the Local Government Board the power to compel local authorities in the provinces to provide mortuaries.<sup>70</sup> Although the act did not extend to London, in the following month the Strand Board of Works sent a memorial to the Metropolitan Board of Works, appealing to it to seek powers from parliament to purchase sites for mortuaries and to ‘devise a comprehensive scheme by which such buildings could be placed in such positions as the population and requirements of the district or neighbourhood might demand’.<sup>71</sup> Mortuary provision was particularly important to the Strand Board of Works, as it was responsible for a riverine district, but with many small parishes and little available land, it had struggled to find potential sites.<sup>72</sup> The Metropolitan Board of Works was the only body with administrative powers that extended across London, and new powers could enable it to create a network of mortuary buildings and assign parishes to each. The Strand Board of Works copied the memorial to other district boards and vestries, to seek their support, but the vestries of Newington and St James, Westminster, and also the Metropolitan Board of Works itself, replied that they believed this was a matter best dealt with locally.<sup>73</sup>

Immediately upon receipt of a copy of this memorial, the vestry of St James Westminster resolved to take ‘immediate steps’ to provide the mortuary for their parish that they had first considered almost a decade earlier.<sup>74</sup> This would ensure that, whatever the response of the Metropolitan Board of Works, St James would retain control over the location and cost of the building. Their mortuary opened in



Dufours Place in August 1876.<sup>75</sup> It is probably also no coincidence that the Bethnal Green vestry made minor alterations to the old engine-house in September 1875 to provide a mortuary, and drew up plans for a more ambitious conversion. This would provide a mortuary and post-mortem examination room on the ground floor, a court room for inquests on the first floor, and a keeper's residence.<sup>76</sup> Although the rector now added his support, the building required the consent of the diocesan consistory court, and the plans were opposed by local residents and property owners. A compromise judgement was reached, allowing the parish to erect a mortuary and post-mortem examination room, but the building had to be further from the road and could not include either a coroner's court or keeper's accommodation.<sup>77</sup> The new mortuary, within the churchyard but to the north-west of the church, opened in June 1880.<sup>78</sup> It was dressed with Portland stone, its style complementing the adjacent church of St Matthew, helping to suggest reverence for the dead and respectability (Figure 2).

Changing public opinion, partly driven by coroners and the medical profession, may also have played a role in encouraging vestries to provide mortuaries. From the mid-1870s, reports become more frequent of coroners' juries, who were obliged to view the body of the deceased, complaining about the places that they visited. In 1875, jurors in Clerkenwell complained after viewing a body that had been lying for three days in a room 10 foot square, where another person slept.<sup>79</sup> In the following year, jurors in Battersea 'expressed their great disgust' that the decomposing body of a man who had drowned had been held in the yard of a public house, 'simply because the

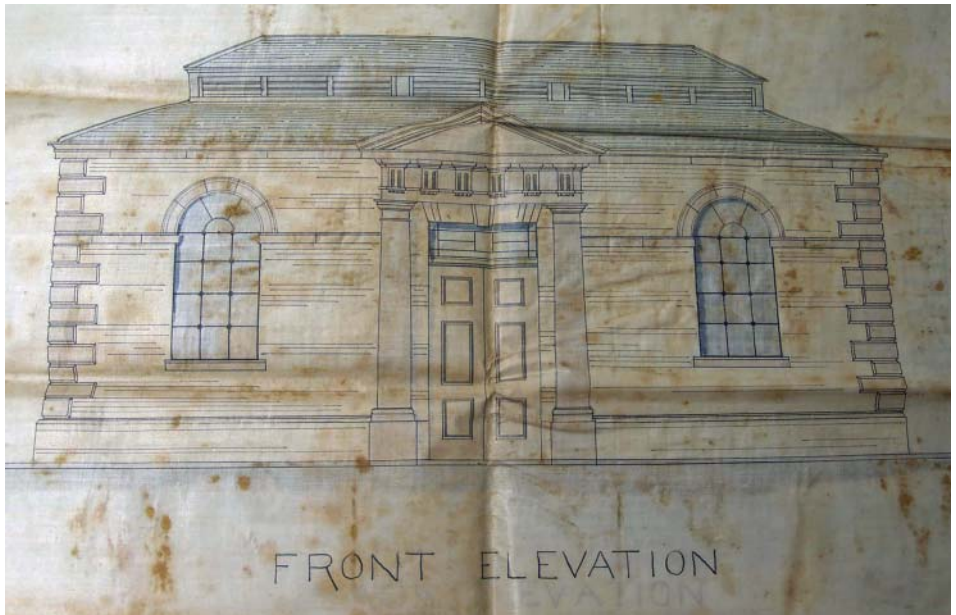


FIGURE 2 Architect's drawing of front elevation of the proposed mortuary at Bethnal Green (1877). Reproduced by kind permission of the London Diocesan Registry and Guildhall Library, City of London (Guildhall Library MS 18319/1)

parish authorities refused to erect a proper mortuary', and in 1880, a coroner offered jurors in Hampstead a memorial to sign if they agreed with him that the parish should have its own mortuary, with a room for conducting post-mortem examinations.<sup>80</sup> Coroners and doctors both benefited from the erection of mortuaries: coroners would save time if the bodies for two or more inquests could be viewed in one place, and doctors required to carry out autopsies would obtain a better environment for their examination than in the home of the deceased.<sup>81</sup> Local pride also played a part. When the decomposing body of a woman who had been washed up by the Thames was taken to a vault in St Clement Danes church in 1876, several of the inquest jurors refused to enter, and a motion was carried unanimously by all the jurors that it was a 'disgrace to the metropolis'.<sup>82</sup>

## Utilisation

In addition to the practical and cultural reasons mentioned for the retention of a corpse, there was a risk that depositing a body in a mortuary would leave it vulnerable to surgical dismemberment. Dissection denied hope to a Christian family of bodily resurrection on Judgement Day, and was also a fate associated with the worst criminals, as from 1752 it had become an additional punishment for murderers after their execution.<sup>83</sup> Cadavers were valuable: before 1832, many had been stolen from graveyards and from the dead-house of at least one London workhouse to supply the medical schools.<sup>84</sup> As well as the possibility of theft, there was also a risk that a corpse would be sold by the authorities. The Anatomy Act of 1832 permitted anyone 'having lawful Possession of the Body of any deceased Person' for any purpose other than burial to sell that body to a medical school, and the Sanitary Act of 1866 gave lawful possession to the poor law union relieving officer if a body in a mortuary was not buried within a period set locally by the authorities.<sup>85</sup> Some poor law authorities had demonstrated their willingness to sell the bodies of workhouse inmates, and cases had been publicised where the authorities had acted beyond the strict letter of the law.<sup>86</sup> Arrangements by vestries to use workhouse dead-houses, and also the erection of parish mortuaries close to workhouses, like that at St James Westminster, would have increased concerns about the fate of deposited corpses. Moreover, the number of bodies supplied to medical schools by poor law authorities increased from the 1870s, just when the number of mortuaries was growing, and some may have suspected hidden motives behind the erection of these buildings.<sup>87</sup> By retaining possession of a corpse until the funeral, the family retained control, and if they were finally forced to surrender it because the burial money could not be raised, ongoing decomposition would have rendered it less attractive to the surgeons.

As well as reassuring the poor that there would be no charge for using the mortuary, the vestries therefore also had to convince them that the bodies of those left there would be treated with respect and kept safe from theft or sale. The Soho mortuary had a tablet over the door inscribed with the words 'Free of Charge', and the burial board distributed 3000 handbills within the parish, advising that the 'coffined dead will be strictly guarded and watched day and night by a resident attendant'. The appointment of a woman as the first keeper, and the purchase by the burial board of a 'suitable black dress' for her to wear, would have helped to reassure the public that

the bodies of their family members would be treated with care and dignity.<sup>88</sup> When the Bethnal Green mortuary was opened, the rector advised those present that the building was ‘hallowed by prayer’, and that the dead would be ‘surrounded by the signs and symbols of Christian hope’.<sup>89</sup> Acknowledging the cultural practice of viewing the body, many mortuaries allowed relatives and friends to visit within specified hours to pay their respects to the dead.<sup>90</sup> New terminology may also have been a deliberate introduction: the word ‘mortuary’ first appears as a description for this type of building in 1862.<sup>91</sup> It was soon widely adopted, and distinguished these new buildings from the institutional ‘dead-house’, with its connotations of anonymous pauper burials or dissection.

Despite these steps, encouraging the use of mortuaries was to prove more challenging to the vestries than getting them built. The first beneficiaries of these new buildings were coroners and local doctors, and their influence is clearly demonstrated by the development of the court, mortuary and post-mortem room complex, which became the preferred design from around 1875, wherever a site permitted.<sup>92</sup> The poor preferred to keep the bodies of their dead at home, however unpleasant that may have been. In Newington, 62 bodies were taken to the parish mortuary between 1883 and 1888, but 54 of these were inquest cases taken there at the request of the coroner. Similarly, in St James Westminster, of the first 74 bodies received after the mortuary opened in 1876, 31 were inquest cases and 22 were of homeless people or visitors passing through.<sup>93</sup>

## Conclusion

The concept of the public mortuary was sound, but the success of Chadwick and others in persuading the public that decomposing bodies in graveyards posed a health risk inevitably led people to conclude that corpses stored above ground could be just as harmful. The erection of mortuaries in crowded urban areas merely transferred a perceived health risk from one location to another, and many individuals, whether residents or landlords, used every means available to try to prevent a mortuary being built anywhere near *their* property. The Metropolitan Board of Works showed no interest in adding mortuary provision to its list of responsibilities, and with no other central body in place before 1889 to take decisions for the good of the capital as a whole, it was left to each parish to decide where mortuaries stood in their list of sanitary priorities, and to find their own way to balance the competing interests of public health and private property. The problems were probably greatest in the crowded parishes of central London, where there was little choice of site. Cost could also be an issue, and some parishes provided only the most basic of facilities, but once the decision had been taken and a site identified, many parishes demonstrated a willingness to set aside monetary concerns.<sup>94</sup> The objections voiced at Southwark to a proposal to spend £1400 on a mortuary, a vast sum for such a poor parish, centred on the location and the possible ‘miasma’, not the cost, and at Bethnal Green, the authorities determined to provide a building that was aesthetically pleasing, as well as functional. The readiness of many parishes to provide visiting areas and to employ salaried attendants also suggests that cost was not an over-riding concern in every case.

Parishes were often disappointed by the response of the poor, although utilisation levels gradually increased.<sup>95</sup> Fears of dissection were understandable in the context of the practical working of the Anatomy Act, and could only be allayed through time and the absence of any scandals. Additionally, the custom of visiting and paying respects to the corpse was deeply ingrained. It allowed expressions of comfort to be provided to the family, and perhaps also a small contribution towards the cost of burial, but these benefits were largely dependent upon the corpse remaining in the home.<sup>96</sup> Sympathy, and a sense of belonging to a community, were also provided to families on the day of the funeral by neighbours and friends, who would often accompany the procession from the home of the deceased to the church or chapel, a practice that would have to be modified if the body was lying in a mortuary.<sup>97</sup> Looking after a corpse at home was considered to be the normal and decent thing to do, and the working classes had no desire to modify their customs and forego some of the support and condolences of the local community. It was these cultural issues, not the availability of buildings, that were to prove the greatest obstacle to mortuary use, and they would ensure that, for all the efforts of the reformers, the separation of the dead from the living would not be achieved until well into the twentieth century.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Parliamentary Papers, 1843 (509), XII, *Supplementary Report on the Results of a Special Inquiry into the Practice of Interment in Towns*, 34–5.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 31–40.
- <sup>4</sup> M. W. Flinn, 'Introduction' to E. Chadwick, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (Edinburgh, 1965), 62–4; C. Hamlin, *Public Health and Social Justice in the Age of Chadwick: Britain, 1800–1854* (Cambridge, 1998), 60–1.
- <sup>5</sup> *Supplementary Report*, 197.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.
- <sup>7</sup> Parliamentary Papers, 1842 (006–008), xxvi–xxviii, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain*.
- <sup>8</sup> Flinn, 'Introduction', 68.
- <sup>9</sup> Parliamentary Papers, 1842 (327), X, *Select Committee on the Improvement of the Health of Towns. Report on Effect of Interment of Bodies in Towns*; G. A. Walker, *Gatherings from Graveyards, Particularly those of London: with a Concise History of the Modes of Interment among Different Nations, from the Earliest Periods. And a Detail of Dangerous and Fatal Results produced by the Unwise and Revolting Custom of Inhuming the Dead in the Midst of the Living* (1839). See also J. Pinfold, 'The green ground', in P. C. Jupp and G. Howarth, *The Changing Face of Death: Historical Accounts of Death and Disposal* (Basingstoke, 1997), 76–89; P. C. Jupp, 'Enon chapel: no way for the dead', in Jupp and Howarth, *Changing Face*, 90–104.
- <sup>10</sup> For further background on Chadwick and the public health movement of the 1840s, see S. E. Finer, *The Life and Times of Sir Edwin Chadwick* (1952); R. A. Lewis, *Edwin Chadwick and the Public Health Movement, 1832–48* (1952); Hamlin, *Public Health*.
- <sup>11</sup> For two recent expositions, see J. S. Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death* (Stroud, 2000), 40–160; C. Arnold, *Necropolis: London and its Dead* (2006), 94–167.
- <sup>12</sup> Curl, *Victorian Celebration*, 120–5. For an account of the fear of premature interment in an international context, see J. Bondeson, *Buried Alive: The Terrifying History of our most Primal Fear* (2002).
- <sup>13</sup> I. A. Burney, *Bodies of Evidence: Medicine and the Politics of the English Inquest, 1830–1926* (2000), 88–92.
- <sup>14</sup> C. Graham, *Ordering Law: The Architectural and Social History of the English Law Court to 1914* (Aldershot, 2003), 238–65, 384–408 *passim*.
- <sup>15</sup> *Supplementary Report*, 42.

- <sup>16</sup> See A. Mearns, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (1883); H. Jephson, *The Sanitary Evolution of London* (1907), 108–13, 166–70.
- <sup>17</sup> D. R. Green, *From Artisans to Paupers: Economic Change and Poverty in London, 1790–1870* (Aldershot, 1995), 144–5; *Supplementary Report*, 31; H. Jones, *East and West London: Being Notes of Common Life and Pastoral Work in Saint James's Westminster and in Saint George's-in-the-East* (1875), 7.
- <sup>18</sup> 11 & 12 Victoria, c. 63; Lewis, *Edwin Chadwick*, 147–8.
- <sup>19</sup> For more detail, see J. Davis, *Reforming London: The London Government Problem, 1855–1900* (Oxford, 1988), 1–67; D. Owen (R. MacLeod, ed.), *The Government of Victorian London, 1855–1889: the Metropolitan Board of Works, the Vestries, and the City Corporation* (1982).
- <sup>20</sup> 13 & 14 Victoria, c. 52. For further detail, see Lewis, *Edwin Chadwick*, 240–57.
- <sup>21</sup> 15 & 16 Victoria, c. 85.
- <sup>22</sup> Parliamentary Papers, 1854 (143), LXI, *Return of Notices for Discontinuance of Burials within the Metropolis*. See also Curl, *Victorian Celebration*, 150–60; Arnold, *Necropolis*, 120–1.
- <sup>23</sup> City of Westminster Archives (CWA), A2337, 13–14.
- <sup>24</sup> CWA, A2337, 14–18, 24–5, 48–92.
- <sup>25</sup> H. C. Burdett, 'The Necessity and Importance of Mortuaries for Towns and Villages, with Some Suggestions for their Establishment and Management', paper read at the Sanitary Congress, Exeter, 22 Sep 1880, 6–7 (British Library).
- <sup>26</sup> Graham, *Ordering Law*, 241.
- <sup>27</sup> *Times* (16 Jan 1867), 9; *Times* (17 Jan 1867), 5.
- <sup>28</sup> J. M. Clarke, *London's Necropolis: A Guide to Brookwood Cemetery* (Stroud, 2004), 16–17. For the background to the foundation of this cemetery, see Curl, *Victorian Celebration*, 142–7; Arnold, *Necropolis*, 161–7.
- <sup>29</sup> *Times* (14 Mar 1862), 1.
- <sup>30</sup> J.-M. Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870–1914* (Cambridge, 2005), 110–20, 131–3; *Supplementary Report*, 46–55. Chadwick found that the burial of an adult of the labouring class cost about £4, and that of a child about 30s., both figures excluding ground and burial fees: *Supplementary Report*, 48.
- <sup>31</sup> *Supplementary Report*, 32.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 84–9.
- <sup>33</sup> Strange, *Death, Grief*, 99.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 66–87; *Supplementary Report*, 32; R. Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (2001), 17–26.
- <sup>35</sup> *Times* (9 Jun 1852), 2. Chadwick also objected to the proposal, as he did not consider 'the dry arches of the railway' to be 'a fitting place of reception for the dead': University College, London, Special Collections, Papers of Edwin Chadwick, Interments, box 59, 'Objections to the Necropolis Bill'.
- <sup>36</sup> CWA, D2158, 176–1; 1864–65. *St James's, Westminster. Account in Abstract of Receipt and Expenditure for the Year ending 25 March, 1865, and summary statement of Contracts, together with the Surveyor's Report of the Proceedings of the Vestry in the Execution of the Act; to which are appended, the reports of the Medical Officer of Health, and the Sanitary Inspector* (1865), 40–3.
- <sup>37</sup> D. Hunter, 'Cholera and Public Health in 19th Century Hackney', *Hackney History*, 13 (2007), 24–33; *Times* (11 Apr 1868), 12.
- <sup>38</sup> Tower Hamlets Local Studies and Archives (THA), 1864. *The Eighth Annual Report of the Vestry of the Parish of St George in the East, pursuant to the Metropolitan Local Management Act, 18 & 19 Vic. Cap. 120* (1864), 33.
- <sup>39</sup> THA, 1877. *The Twenty-first Annual Report of the Vestry of the Parish of St George in the East, pursuant to the Metropolitan Local Management Act, 18 & 19 Vic. Cap. 120* (1877), 5.
- <sup>40</sup> 29 & 30 Victoria, c. 90.
- <sup>41</sup> *Bulder* (15 Jun 1867), 423–4.
- <sup>42</sup> 1851 census.
- <sup>43</sup> Southwark Local Studies Library (SLS), Southwark, St George, vestry minutes, 7 May 1867.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 11 Feb 1868, 25 Feb 1868, 10 Mar 1868.
- <sup>45</sup> *South London Chronicle* (14 Mar 1868), 3.
- <sup>46</sup> SLS, Southwark, St George, sanitary committee minutes, 11 Mar 1879, 17 Feb 1880.
- <sup>47</sup> As a result of population growth and a decline in the silk industry, by the 1870s Bethnal Green had become one of the poorest and most overcrowded parishes in the capital: D. K. Bolton, 'Bethnal Green: Building and Social Conditions from 1837 to 1875', in T. F. T. Baker (ed.), *History of the County of Middlesex*, (Oxford, 1998), XI, 120–6.
- <sup>48</sup> THA; T. Sarvis, *St Matthew, Bethnal Green, Sanitary Statistics and Proceedings for the Year Ending March 1871* (1871); T. Sarvis, *St Matthew, Bethnal Green, Sanitary Statistics and Proceedings for the Year Ending March 1872* (1872).
- <sup>49</sup> THA, L/MBG/B/1/8, 502–3. See also *Times* (15 Jan 1878), 11.
- <sup>50</sup> THA, L/MBG/B/4/2 (2 Jan 1872).
- <sup>51</sup> M. P. English, *Victorian Values: The Life and Times of Dr Edwin Lankester MD, FRS* (Bristol, 1990), 98–9.
- <sup>52</sup> CWA, D2034 (3 Apr 1867); D1786 (11 Apr 1867).
- <sup>53</sup> CWA, D1982 (2 Jun 1870).
- <sup>54</sup> CWA, D1787 (4 Aug 1870).
- <sup>55</sup> CWA, D1983 (11 Aug 1870, 6 Oct 1870, 19 Oct 1870, 17 Nov 1870, 30 Nov 1870); D1787 (29 Sep 1870, 8 Dec 1870, 19 Jan 1871, 16 Feb 1871).
- <sup>56</sup> CWA, D1788, 338, 341.



- <sup>57</sup> THA, POP/783, 51–3.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 79, 211.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 52, 123, 157, 249, 351, 359, 369. Shortly after this proposal was made, Bow vestry decided to provide its own mortuary, within the churchyard: BOW 741, 621, 630; BOW 742, 6; *Lancet*, ii (1870), 318.
- <sup>60</sup> THA, POP/783, 507–9; TH/8652/15; L/PBW/D/3/6. The Ordnance Survey map confirms that Wellington Road contained some of the largest houses in the parish: 1870, sheet VII.50.
- <sup>61</sup> THA, POP/784, 122, 356, 410; POP/785, 11.
- <sup>62</sup> See, for example, *Lancet*, ii (1872), 793; *Lancet*, i (1874), 703–4; *Lancet*, ii (1874) 848.
- <sup>63</sup> *British Medical Journal*, ii (1875) 802–3. This list is not complete, as some parishes did not respond to the request for information. It excludes the mortuary at Bow, and also a mortuary in St Martin-in-the-Fields, which opened in 1873 (CWA: circular loose in back of SBW 35).
- <sup>64</sup> SLS, *Fifteenth Annual Report of the Proceedings of the Vestry of the Parish of St Mary, Newington in the County of Surrey, 1870–71* (1871), 42–4, 78, 114; *Nineteenth Annual Report of the Proceedings of the Vestry of the Parish of St Mary, Newington in the County of Surrey, 1874–5* (1875), 106, 165.
- <sup>65</sup> *Times* (27 Oct 1869), 9; *City Press* (1 Oct 1870), 3–4; *City Press* (29 Oct 1870), 2; *British Medical Journal*, ii (1875), 802–3.
- <sup>66</sup> Burney, *Bodies of Evidence*, 87.
- <sup>67</sup> The figure is based on a comparison of the lists compiled by the *British Medical Journal* in 1875 and Burdett in 1880, adjusted for known omissions from the former: *British Medical Journal*, ii (1875), 802–3; Burdett, ‘The Necessity’, 18–19.
- <sup>68</sup> For the Metropolitan Board of Works and drainage, see Owen, *The Government*, 47–73.
- <sup>69</sup> *Times* (24 Jul 1875), 8.
- <sup>70</sup> 38 & 39 Victoria, c. 55. Compulsion was proposed for London parishes in 1877, but the bill was withdrawn from parliament before it reached the statute book: *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, 235, cols 235, 1512.
- <sup>71</sup> CWA, SBW 11, 419; London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), Metropolitan Board of Works, Minutes of Proceedings, 1875, ii, 307.
- <sup>72</sup> *Sanitary Record* (15 Jan 1876), 43. The district comprised the parishes of St Anne Soho, St Paul Covent Garden, the precinct of the Savoy, St Mary-le-Strand, St Clement Danes and the Liberty of the Rolls: 18 & 19 Victoria, c. 120.
- <sup>73</sup> CWA, SBW 11, 431; D1789, 27–8; *Times* (1 Nov 1875), 9. The Strand board sent a deputation to wait on the president of the Local Government Board in January 1876, but to no avail: *Times* (11 Jan 1876), 11; *Sanitary Record* (15 Jan 1876), 43. In 1891, the Public Health (London) Act gave London County Council the power to compel sanitary authorities to provide mortuaries: 54 & 55 Victoria, c. 76.
- <sup>74</sup> CWA, D2034 (15 Oct 1875); D1789, 27–8.
- <sup>75</sup> CWA, D2070 (4 Aug 1876).
- <sup>76</sup> THA, L/MBG/B/4/4, 132–3, 136; Guildhall Library, 18319/1; *Times* (11 Jan 1878), 11.
- <sup>77</sup> THA, *The Parish of St Matthew Bethnal Green in the County of Middlesex. Account in abstract of receipt and expenditure for the year ending 25 March 1879, together with a summary statement of all contracts entered into, and of moneys due to and debts owing by the vestry to that day, also, the twenty-third annual report by the vestry, with a list of its several members and officers* (1879), 24–7.
- <sup>78</sup> THA, L/MBG/B/1/11, 322; *East London Observer and Tower Hamlets and Borough of Hackney Chronicle* (12 Jun 1880), 7.
- <sup>79</sup> *Times* (16 Sep 1875), 8.
- <sup>80</sup> *British Medical Journal*, ii (1880), 517; *Times* (8 Aug 1876), 6.
- <sup>81</sup> *Lancet*, ii (1867), 256; *Times* (17 Jul 1875), 7.
- <sup>82</sup> *Sanitary Record* (27 May 1876), 365.
- <sup>83</sup> Richardson, *Death, Dissection*, 15–6, 35–7, 76–8; J. Rugg, ‘From Reason to Regulation, 1760–1850’, in P. C. Jupp and C. Gittings, *Death in England: an Illustrated History* (Manchester, 1999), 224–6.
- <sup>84</sup> Richardson, *Death, Dissection*, 57–72; *Times* (2 Feb 1832), 6; *Times* (4 Feb 1832), 4.
- <sup>85</sup> 2 & 3 Will. IV, c. 75, s. 7; 29 & 30 Victoria, c. 90.
- <sup>86</sup> Richardson, *Death, Dissection*, 293. In 1841, the poor law authorities in St Marylebone provided the body of a pauper for dissection before the required time had elapsed and also failed to arrange for the return and burial of other pauper bodies. In 1858, the family of a woman who had died in Newington workhouse attended what they thought was her funeral, but discovered later that her body had been supplied to Guy’s Hospital: *Morning Chronicle* (15 Jan 1842), 3; *Liverpool Mercury, and Lancashire, Cheshire, and General Advertiser* (8 Jan 1858), 3.
- <sup>87</sup> For the increasing trend in the number of bodies sold, see E. T. Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism: Poverty, Politics and Poor Relief in Late-Victorian England, 1870–1900* (Woodbridge, 2007), 192–213.
- <sup>88</sup> CWA A2337, 89–92.
- <sup>89</sup> *East London Observer and Tower Hamlets and Borough of Hackney Chronicle* (12 Jun 1880), 7.
- <sup>90</sup> The regulations for the mortuary in St George’s parish, Southwark, for example, allowed visiting daily, between 10 a.m. and 12 noon, and some other parishes gave greater flexibility: SLS, *Regulations for Mortuary*; Burdett, ‘The Necessity’, 15.
- <sup>91</sup> *Times* (14 Mar 1862), 1. The Oxford English Dictionary has been unable to trace this usage before 1865: [http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00316165?single=1&query\\_type=word&queryword=mortuary&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00316165?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=mortuary&first=1&max_to_show=10) (accessed



- 13 Apr. 2006). The word appeared for the first time in legislation in 1866: 29 & 30 Victoria, c. 90.
- <sup>92</sup> Graham, *Ordering Law*, 238–65. This may be linked to a wider desire for a more ‘professional’ inquest; see Burney, *Bodies of Evidence*, 88–92.
- <sup>93</sup> SLS, *Annual Reports of Board of Works for St Saviour’s District*, 1877–1878; CWA, *St James’s, Westminster. Account in Abstract of Receipt and Expenditure for the Year ending 25 March, 1878, and summary statement of Contracts, together with the Surveyor’s Report of the Proceedings of the Vestry in the Execution of the Act; to which are appended, the reports of the Medical Officer of Health, and the Sanitary Inspector* (1878), 26.
- <sup>94</sup> The attitude of the vestries towards mortuary provision bears out the view of John Davis, that the traditional view of London vestries as parsimonious and reluctant to act on sanitary matters is too simplistic: Davis, *Reforming London*, 17–18.
- <sup>95</sup> Holborn Library, Vestry minutes, St John, Hampstead, new series, 1857–1858, letter from St Anne, Soho, 71–2; *Lancet*, ii (1875), 331.
- <sup>96</sup> Strange, *Death, Grief*, 117, 127.
- <sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 117, 121–3.

## Notes on Contributor

**Pam Fisher** completed a PhD at the University of Leicester in 2007 on the coroner in England and Wales in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, entitled ‘The Politics of Sudden Death’. She is continuing her research on coroners and inquests, in addition to her ongoing research on the provision of mortuaries in England, and can be contacted via email at [pjf7@le.ac.uk](mailto:pjf7@le.ac.uk).