

## **Curating ‘Homes of the Homeless’**

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### **Abstract:**

This short essay explores the experiences of a historian and a curator who worked together on the exhibition ‘Homes of the Homeless: Seeking Shelter in Victorian London’ which was on show at the Geffrye Museum of the Home in 2015. The piece examines the process of transforming findings from an academic research project into an accessible exhibition for a public audience based on the different spaces and places open to the poor on the streets of Victorian London. We examine the challenges inherent in curating the lives of poor men and women, and discuss the display strategies that we developed to overcome these problems. Finally, we discuss how the exhibition worked as public history, looking at how historical materials were used in an accompanying outreach project and reflecting on the politicisation of the public response to the exhibition.

### **Keywords:**

Museum, curating, exhibition, homeless, home, poor, London, Victorian, collaboration, public history

In 2015, ‘Homes of the Homeless: Seeking Shelter in Victorian London,’ opened at the Geffrye Museum of the Home in Hoxton. The special exhibition explored the spaces and places open to the destitute and poor on the streets of London in the nineteenth century, and presented their experiences by considering their material environments. Academic historians came up with the idea and sources for the exhibition, but it was developed together with the curatorial team at the Geffrye Museum and independent designers Andy Feast, Sharon Beard and Sally McIntosh. This kind of cross-institutional team work is increasingly typical in museum exhibitions, and ‘Homes of the Homeless’ is one of a series of curatorial projects that the Geffrye has developed in collaboration with academics.<sup>1</sup> In this short essay, two of the curators of the exhibition, Jane Hamlett, a historian from Royal Holloway, University of London, and Hannah Fleming, a curator from the Geffrye, reflect on this collaborative process, and the benefits (as well as pitfalls) for academics and curators when they work together. We will consider how the collaboration allowed new academic arguments and research to be used in a public context, how the exhibition itself was created by teamwork and occasional creative friction, and, finally, how visitors reacted to our presentation of life on the streets of Victorian London.

### **1. From research project to exhibition proposal**

The idea and original proposal for Homes of the Homeless emerged from the research project, ‘At Home in the Institution: Asylum, School and Lodging House Interiors in South East England, 1845-1914,’ funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.<sup>2</sup> It was led by Jane Hamlett, who worked with two Research Fellows, Lesley Hoskins and Rebecca Preston, at Royal Holloway, University of London. Victorian Britain saw the building of an unprecedented number and range of institutions. Driven by an expanding state and philanthropic impulses prisons, workhouses, lunatic asylums, reformatories and institutional ‘homes’ of many kinds were established. Since the 1970s, historians have interpreted these places in different ways.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of the project was to take a new approach, by looking at the ‘material life’ of institutions and considering their relationship with ideas of home.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Other recent collaborative exhibitions at the Geffrye include ‘At Home in Japan: Beyond the Minimal House,’ March-August 2011, <<https://geffryemuseum.org.uk/aboutus/press/releases/at-home-in-japan/>> [accessed 12 June 2017] and ‘Swept Under the Carpet? Servants in London Households, 1600-2000, March-September 2016.

<sup>2</sup> ESRC RES-061-25-0389.

<sup>3</sup> For a full discussion see *Residential Institutions in Britain, 1725-1970: Inmates and Environments*, ed. by Jane Hamlett, Rebecca Preston and Lesley Hoskins (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Jane Hamlett, *At Home in the Institution: Material Life in Asylums, Schools and Lodging Houses in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015).

The study drew on new research on material culture, using the material world to understand past lives and experiences.<sup>5</sup> The project focused on three different institutional types – lunatic asylums, public schools and lodging houses – with the aim of uncovering the material worlds created for different classes and groups, specifically the poor, the mentally ill and children. During the project, the team amassed a large amount of visual and textual source material that it was felt would make a good basis for an exhibition. The academic team also wanted to use some of the key concepts developed during the project, namely that the exploration of the material world of historical contemporaries allows us to tell new stories about their experiences.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1. Photograph of ‘bunks’ in a Salvation Army Shelter. This was one of the archival images that inspired the exhibition. Courtesy of the Salvation Army Heritage Centre.

However, the process of ‘translating’ this research into an exhibition was not quite as straightforward as it might first appear. The first thing the team had to do, was to rework the research with a public audience in mind. While the focus on ‘institutions’ worked well as an academic device, it was less useful as a frame for a popular exhibition. The term can be interpreted in a variety of different ways, and although the academic application of it was very specific, taken alone it is rather general and not suggestive enough. So, the team thought about which aspects of the research would resonate with a wider audience. Drawing material from all three sections of the project was not going to work so in the end the team focused on lodging houses for the London poor.<sup>7</sup> This subject allowed the exhibition to draw on two well-established and potentially rich contemporary seams – ideas about the poor and homelessness and public understandings of Victorian London. While the subject of homelessness has never gone away, the post-2008 economic downturn has led to an increase in homelessness in London, as well as a growing public awareness of the challenges faced by men and women living on the streets, and discussions of this in contemporary media.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For discussion see *Material Culture and History: A Student’s Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*, ed. by Karen Harvey (London: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> See Hamlett, *At Home in the Institution*.

<sup>7</sup> See Hamlett, *At Home in the Institution*, chapters five and six and Jane Hamlett and Rebecca Preston, “‘A Veritable Palace for the Hard-Working Labourer’: Space, Material Culture and Inmate Experiences in London’s Rowton Houses, 1892-1918”, *Residential Institutions*, ed. by Hamlett, Hoskins and Preston, pp.93-107.

<sup>8</sup> For example see ‘Number of rough sleepers in England rises for sixth successive year,’ *The Guardian*, Weds 25 January 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/jan/25/number-of-rough-sleepers-rises-in-england-for-sixth-successive-year> >, [accessed 12 June 2017].

The team also aimed to engage with popular history and the often evoked and re-imagined world of Victorian London. While the original research covered 1845 to 1914, the exhibition was billed as ‘Victorian’, even though this involved some slight inaccuracy in the representation of our research material. The term Victorian is immensely evocative. As Lauren Padgett and Jack Gann have discussed previously here, a large heritage industry has grown up around the Victorians – ranging from the Dickens Museum to the National Trust to blockbuster exhibitions such as the Museum of London’s 2012 Dickens and London. And while, as Padgett and Gann demonstrate, there might be a gap between the presentation of the Victorians in museums and recent critical approaches within the academy, the ongoing cultural resonance of the Victorians is of immense value to scholars who want to communicate and interact with wider audiences.

Accordingly, the team set out to develop an exhibition that looked at the different spaces and places that were available to the poor and destitute on the streets of Victorian London. The project’s research already included a detailed study of hostels and shelters (especially those run by the Salvation Army) common lodging houses (privately run institutions that offered a bed for a night for a few pence, often in a shared room), model lodging houses and the large-scale residential institutions for working men such as the Rowton Houses that were established in the final decades of the nineteenth century. To place our findings in a broader context, we carried out some additional research on homelessness and state provision for the destitute, and we also drew on research that Lesley had undertaken as part of the ‘Making Imperial Citizens’ project, working with Alastair Owens at Queen Mary University of London on Barnados homes for children in the late nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> We brought these materials together to write an exhibition proposal structured around a series of different spaces in Victorian London, which might have been available to a homeless or destitute person according to their sex, age and how much money they had. So, when visitors first entered the exhibition they were presented with the problem of homelessness in Victorian London, followed by the street, shelters, workhouses and casual wards, common lodging houses, model lodging houses and large-scale institutions, and finally children’s homes.

## **2. Developing the exhibition – a collaborative effort**

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<sup>9</sup> Making Imperial Citizens: Thomas Barnado and the preparation of children for migration in London’s East End, c.1870-1920, < <http://www.geog.qmul.ac.uk/staff/owensa.html> >, [accessed 12 June 2017].

Once we had assembled our proposal on paper, and discussed it with the museum, the real work began. The first question we all had to ask ourselves was what to put in the exhibition? This might seem quite straightforward – the academic team had after all just spent two years amassing a huge quantity of archival evidence on our subject, and had many stories and images to share. However, the first criterion of an exhibition is to have something material to *show* which is not always the same thing. The main problem was a distinct lack of 3-D objects that could be brought in as part of the display. Few objects survive that relate to the lives of the poor and the homeless in Victorian London. Not only did these people have few material possessions, but preserving their material culture has only become a priority in museums and heritage organisations relatively recently. What we did have were some institutional objects, things provided by workhouses, casual wards and so on – so we pursued these by conducting a survey of the holdings of institutions and repositories. The Salvation Army Heritage Centre lent us some very evocative objects, including tokens that were given out in exchange for work that could be used to purchase food in the shelters. We also borrowed institutional objects from the Museum of London, and a nationwide search produced a spittoon from the Guildford Spike and goggles that were worn for stone breaking at a casual ward.

Figure 2. The poor left little behind them, and we were only able to identify a few objects to display. © Geffrye Museum.

The majority of the objects borrowed for the exhibition were small-scale, scruffy-looking and sometimes broken – including glass and ceramic fragments excavated from the site of a common lodging house. So an early concern for the curators was the paucity of objects on display and how significant an impact these things would make – although their rarity, smallness and scruffiness was part of what made them telling. In the event, there was only one response from a visitor in the comments book that referenced the comparative lack of objects – but they also stated that “I loved the audio recordings and the large wall images” – so presumably didn’t feel too short-changed. The only other comments directly relating to the objects on display described them as “great”, “well-selected”, “well researched exhibits from all over the country” and “lovely use of objects to tell the story”.<sup>10</sup>

It was important for both the historians and curators that objects did not just function as set-dressing, but carried messages as strongly as the images. To this end, the focus was on sourcing objects for display that had provenances directly linking them to the spaces we were

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<sup>10</sup> Homes of the Homeless Visitor’s Book, March-July 2015, Geffrye Museum.

exploring. We did make two exceptions – displaying a Windsor armchair and a stuffed stag’s head in the section on model lodging houses that had no traceable connections with the institutions being discussed. However, although we couldn’t establish that the specific objects on display had ever furnished a model lodging house, we had evidence they were appropriate examples of the type of furnishings that were used in these spaces. The Windsor chair was displayed in front of a photograph of a reading room in a lodging house showing a chair of an exactly similar type – allowing visitors to make the visual connection and introducing a 3D dynamic to a section otherwise entirely occupied by flat prints and photographs.

The chair was from the museum’s existing collections. As well as enlivening the exhibition, identifying it as a suitable exhibit meant the museum re-evaluated the object itself in this new context of its suitability as a type of furnishing for an institution housing working men. Temporary exhibitions allow curators to re-examine collections with a particular focus – enriching individual objects histories and ensuring they can be used to tell multiple stories.

The stag’s head was hired from a theatrical prop company, so was to all intents and purposes set-dressing – albeit historically appropriate. Like the life-size images, the introduction of 3-D objects gave a sense of scale too. It also functioned as a rather startling object in an exhibition about homelessness – our intention was that it would be perception-changing; unsettling visitors’ ideas about the appearance and feel of Victorian institutions.

Figure 3. A Windsor chair from the Geffrye’s collections was re-purposed for the exhibit, and a stag’s head was borrowed to depict the surprisingly well-furnished interiors of London’s Rowton Houses. © Geffrye Museum.

We also considered displaying paintings that depicted the poor and homeless in Victorian London. There are many well-known art works, like Fildes ‘Casual Ward’ that focus on the problem of poverty, although sourcing these objects brought its own problems (as will be discussed below) and it was also an issue for us that these images often represented the poor and the London streetscape in a certain way. The message of these images was often as much about the moral representation of the poor as it was about the lives and experiences of people on the streets in Victorian London. In the end we decided that while we wanted to use some paintings they were not, fundamentally, what the exhibition was about, and we should be fairly sparing with them. Borrowing them in large numbers would also have been logistically difficult and prohibitively expensive.

So, what we were left with was a predominantly 2-D exhibition. Images and texts on our theme, were, as mentioned above, far too plentiful but this too brought its own problems.

Used to writing detailed analyses for academic audiences, the academic team arrived at the first exhibition meeting armed with a huge list of potential images and writings, anxious to cram in as many of these as possible. The initial borrowing list was an excel file that listed hundreds of sources – obviously too many – as the curators were keen to point out. The challenge now was to isolate what was important on the list and to whittle it down. A series of intense discussions followed as the communicative value of each image and item was explored in detail. The challenge for the designers was to think about how these items could be best displayed. What we did have were a series of novel and striking photographs – showing the homeless on the streets, as well as the interiors and life within the institutions we were looking at. These images became the focus of the exhibition – blown up large – as close to their actual life size as we could get – we used the photographs as a means of inviting onlookers into these spaces in the past – and they were displayed as a series of places that could be walked through. The selection of the large-scale images was perhaps the element of the exhibition design process that involved the most discussion and negotiation with all contributors – this and other decisions were made in a series of meetings, and it felt vital for everyone to be in a room at the same time for these discussions.

Figure 4. A print of a lodging house sleeping room has been blown up life-size, to give a sense of space. © Geffrye Museum.

The decision to reproduce some images on a large, life-size scale was partly informed by our failure to secure a painting to display in the introductory section. We had requested to borrow two different versions of Luke Fildes’ ‘Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward’ – one at Royal Holloway (1874) and a smaller, later version at the Tate (after 1908). The Holloway version particularly is an impressive visual representation of the system of queuing to enter a casual ward, and we thought it would make an arresting introduction to seize visitors’ attention. Both versions were however already committed to other exhibitions. This led us to turn to Fildes’ earlier engraving, ‘Houseless and Hungry’ (1869), which the paintings were based on and is arguably a more powerful, arresting image. As an engraving, we could also reproduce it successfully on this large scale and as the opening image, it set the stage for the repeated use of prints and photographs reproduced on this scale.

A final key concern of both curators and historians was the need to bring the research and images too life – interactivity was a key part of the exhibition design. Given that we had started with a (whittled down) long list of 189 images, and just 18 were selected to be

reproduced large-scale and 47 as smaller, supporting images, this left a lot of images – and a lot of research – unused. Our solution was to reproduce them as slideshows on iPads in different sections. Each image was captioned, so this additional information was there for those who wanted to explore the images in greater depth.

As well as these digital interactives, we included a number of low-tech, physical interactives. This was partly to counter the lack of physical objects, and also to include sensory, participatory elements, allowing visitors to engage and learn differently – through giving some suggestion of the physical experience of life in shelters. We built a wooden boxed-in bed with a straw-filled mattress of the sort used in Salvation Army shelters, and invited visitors to try stepping inside and lying down in it. We provided a quantity of old rope and asked visitors to unravel it, to mimic the task of oakum-picking performed in casual wards and shelters. Although not intended solely for children, child visitors responded particularly well to them – Martha, aged 7, recorded in the visitors' book: "I liked undoing the rope, pretending to sleep in the shelter and writing the letter to the parents or orphans."

Figure 5. Visitors were invited to try out a recreated Salvation Army 'bunk' and to try picking oakum. © Geffrye Museum.

### **3. The exhibition as public history**

One of the most exciting things about the process for the historians was the way in which our research came to take on new meanings when the public became involved. While the emergence of the impact agenda in academia has placed a new onus on academics to find public audiences for their research, this has been paralleled by the growth of 'public history' in UK universities – a movement that often challenges the way in which academic authority is constructed.<sup>11</sup> Doing public history involves thinking about the way in which history is imagined by the different parties involved, and recognising that academic interpretations of the past can take on new meaning when taken to different audiences. 'Homes of the Homeless' was designed to engage with the public on two different levels – firstly, through the exhibition itself, and secondly through a collaborative outreach project, 'What makes a *home?*', that the museum developed alongside it.

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<sup>11</sup> Hilda Kean, 'Introduction', in *The Public History Reader*, ed. by Hilda Kean and Paul Martin (London: Routledge, 2013), pp.xiii-xxxiii.



‘What makes a *home*?’ was a collaboration between the museum and the charity New Horizon, that helps young homeless people in London today. While we were developing the exhibition, Rachael Crofts, the Young People’s Programmes Manager at the museum ran six sessions of outreach activities with young people living in a hostel, showing them material from the exhibition and encouraging them to produce creative responses to it. The results of these sessions, were displayed in a small exhibition titled ‘Home and Hope’ alongside Homes of the Homeless. Rachael used the historical material - images we had collected for the project and exhibition - as the basis for the sessions – these were then incorporated into short films, art work and poems by the participants. For the historians working on the exhibition the transformative creative work undertaken by the young people on the ‘Home and Hope’ project was the most moving and surprising part of the whole project. Poems like Sarah’s, directly inspired by voices and images from the past, are a powerful reminder of how evocative and resonant the past can be, when placed against our own contemporary concerns. It is also worth stressing that this is not the kind of work that academics would be able to carry out independently – this kind of deep public engagement was made possible by the skills of the outreach team at the museum, and would have been very difficult to achieve by the project team who were working in a university history department.

Figure 6. ‘Time to Die,’ a contemporary image of a Salvation Army shelter that was used as part of the ‘What makes a *home*?’ Project. Courtesy of the Salvation Army Heritage Centre.

**Work and strain, work and pain, work for a bed and roof but nothing has changed.**

**“Are you ready to die” is carved into stone – the thoughts carved into minds of those without a home.**

**Wooden coffins aligned in rows, keeping hundreds safe from temperatures falling too low.**

**Makeshift coffins hidden under cover, saving one or two with cardboard and other junk, clutter.**

**From cardboard to shelter, from shelter to home**

**Each journey is different, but can some know**

**The strife that one life must fear, while warmth and security has never been a care.**

**Children sleeping on buses at night in a city awash with neon lights**

**Adults stealing bread for a day in the cells, seeking the basics, trying to avoid personal hell.**

**Suffer in pain, suffer in pain, why try to move on**

**When nothing will change,**

**“Are you ready to die” was carved into stone –**

**But still is carved into hearts of those without a home.**

Poem by Sarah in the What Makes a Home Project.

Figure 7. Young people at work on the ‘What makes a *home*?’ project. © Geffrye Museum.

At the end of the exhibition’s run we also took stock of how the main show had been received by visitors. The exhibition itself received 7,133 visitors over sixteen weeks and 453 of these people responded to what they had seen in the visitors’ book. As is usually the case in the visitors’ books used by the Geffrye, most comments were positive, and demonstrated that the interactive elements – especially the oakum picking and the coffin bed –worked quite effectively. The exhibition also had a wide range of press coverage. As might be expected, given the subject matter, the longest and most sympathetic piece was Maeve Kennedy’s feature in *The Guardian*.<sup>12</sup>

The team that put the exhibition together – curators and historians – had very deliberately decided not to take an overt political tone. The idea was that the material should be presented as neutrally as possible and that it would speak for itself. It was our opinion that we were there to tell a story about experience in the past and to highlight connections between that past and continuities in the present, but not to deliberately use that material to make a contemporary political point. Of course, no writer is ever entirely politically neutral – this is a balance that professional historians are always trying to strike. This is a point that one or two of the more thoughtful reviewers of the exhibition wondered about – should we have used the exhibition to make a firmer political point? Should we have used it as a platform to argue for further political attention to the contemporary problem of homelessness?<sup>13</sup> When we were assembling this, back in 2010, we had concerns of another sort – in particular we were worried that a too overt celebration of the philanthropic efforts of

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<sup>12</sup> Maeve Kennedy, ‘Homelessness in Victorian London: exhibition charts life on the streets,’ Friday 2 January 2015, *The Guardian*, < <https://theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jan/02/homelessness-victorian-london-exhibition-geffrye-museum> > [accessed 12 June 2017].

<sup>13</sup> See Sarah Wise, ‘Keys to the Street,’ *The Lancet*, vol 385, May 22<sup>nd</sup> 2015, p.1717

the Victorian age might be read as a vindication of current Tory laissez-faire social policy, and in particular the idea of the ‘Big Society’ which placed a new onus on the activities of individuals rather than the state to combat social ills.<sup>14</sup> As it turned out, these worries were misplaced, as our audience themselves and a dramatic change in the political climate led to its being interpreted very differently.

The comments in the visitors’ book were surprising because of their strong political tone. Of the 453 responses, seventy-two explicitly reflected on the state of homelessness or government efforts to help today, suggesting that little had changed. This kind of overtly political response appears to be unusual amongst Geffrye visitors. While a good number of visitors usually respond to exhibitions in the visitors’ books, comments on contemporary politics are rare. In comparison, an exhibition on the history of servants, which took place the following year, received no explicitly political comments from visitors, despite having similarities in subject matter and approach. The following two quotes are typical of the sort of remarks that were made about Homes of the Homeless:

*Interesting – note the same language of victims & shirkers the ‘work for benefits’ mentality, the stigmatisation – feels like 1945 is receding fast. Thank you for this exhibition (comment 96 anonymous 8th April).*

*Why not invite Cameron, Osborne and IDS to visit the exhibition. Oh, but on second thoughts they might come away with the conclusion that they need to re-invent the workhouse casual ward. (Comment 416).*

Not only were the comments in the visitors’ book strongly political in tone, but a small number of visitors also used the interactive postcard activity to express their views. The activity was designed to allow visitors to imagine themselves in the role of a nineteenth-century child in an institution and to use the card to create a fictional communication with imaginary parents. The activity was very open ended, and visitors could use it in any way they chose – but we did expect it to be mainly used by the school groups who were coming to the exhibition as an exercise in historical empathy, and indeed most of the seventy-one cards

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<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Watt, ‘David Cameron reveals ‘big society’ vision – and denies it is just cost cutting,’ Monday 19 July 2010, *The Guardian*, < <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/jul/19/david-cameron-big-society-launch> > [accessed 12 June 2017].

that were filled in were completed by school children. However, three adult writers chose to use these postcards differently, again to make explicitly political critiques of the Conservative Party. Again, while the writers of the cards only represent a very small number of visitors, it does seem significant that it was this exhibition in particular which inspired this playful subversion of the museum's interactive display. The museum staff were quite surprised by the postcards and had not come across anything quite like this in visitor responses before. Here is what was written on three of the postcards:

*Dear Mr. Osborne & Mr. Cameron. Please come and see this exhibition – you might get an idea of how difficult it is to live without money or a decent job.*

*Dear 21<sup>st</sup> century Mum and Dad, the Tories aren't what they used to be back in your days – don't vote for them please! They don't care for the poor anymore...*

*Fast forward to 2015 – just after the election of another Tory government which talks about “hard working families” and draws a comparison between those who “deserve” and those who “don't”. The language is very similar to these displays. Austerity Bites!*

Why did 'Homes of the Homeless' strike such a strong political chord with the visitors who came to see it? The answer must partly lie in the exhibition itself – a display that presents the history of the homeless and the working classes is likely to attract visitors with a social conscience or those with an interest in the social work of the state to support the poor – and there is a strong correlation between these kinds of people and left-wing political views. Yet the resonance of the exhibition and the strong emphasis on government and political figures was also created by the political moment in which it was staged. The months in which the exhibition was on show – the spring before the 2015 general election – saw a fraught debate over government and the austerity politics espoused by the current Tory government. Cameron and Osborne were poster boys for austerity at this point – hence their prominence in the comments penned by visitors. As discussed above, it was not the deliberate intention of the historians and curators to make a political point with this exhibition although this was very clearly how it was interpreted (although it might be argued that staging an exhibition on this theme is essentially a political act in itself).

In sum, reflecting on the collaboration that produced 'Homes of the Homeless' is a reminder of what can be achieved by museum curators and academics working together. On

the academic side, using research in museum exhibitions can be enormously beneficial. Working with the skills of trained curators and design professionals is essential in producing high quality exhibitions. Contributing to an exhibition means that research reaches a far wider audience than it would if confined to the pages of academic monographs and journals. But the curating process itself, and the new thinking about research materials that it entails, is also transformative – the academic team thought about their findings differently after they had discussed them with the curators. And they also, arguably, understood the research in a new way as a result of the way audiences responded to it – with ‘Homes and Hope’ and the ‘subverted’ postcards both communicating the strong contemporary resonance of the lives of those on the streets of Victorian London. Working with academics was also beneficial for the museum curators – not only do academics bring new knowledge and research into museums, but by working with a range of different academics, museums are able to expand their knowledge and expertise considerably beyond the individual expertise of curatorial team members. Finding out more about the material worlds of the destitute in the nineteenth-century led the museum to expand their collections, and to come up with new interpretations of existing objects, such as the Windsor chair mentioned above. While a temporary exhibition has a limited shelf life, the knowledge and interpretation developed for ‘Homes of the Homeless’ will inform part of a new permanent exhibition on home that is currently being put together as part of large-scale plans to redevelop the museum, allowing the Victorians to play a prominent role in the new display.

Reaching wider audiences, and thinking about research in new ways have obvious benefits for academic researchers. But working on this topic in this way, and engaging with public responses to it, also raised interesting questions about what we do as academic historians, and how far we should aim to use our research to change or transform public opinion. While there is an obvious educative value in sharing historical research, the way in which this is done almost always carries some political connotations, and indeed, even as purely academic researchers it is never entirely possible to distance ourselves from political context or meaning however much we might strive for objectivity or neutrality. Nonetheless, the intentions of the team who constructed this exhibition, both curators and historians, was that the exhibition should not make a directly political comment. From the museum’s point of view, the staging of an obviously polemical display would have been inappropriate given the need for the institution to maintain political neutrality. As for the historians, the empirical basis of their discipline strongly discourages an overt political stance in academic work. While the choice to investigate the topic itself clearly stems from a leftist social history

tradition of exploring hidden histories, the writing of the exhibition itself (and history) was presented as clearly and objectively as possible and it was hoped that the sources and voices from the past would speak for themselves. The audience response suggests that they did just that.

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