**‘Unceasing Bustle and Traffic’: Print Culture and Metropolitan Spaces in the 1830s**

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Cultural histories of London commonly divide the first half of the nineteenth century into two distinct eras. In the period sometimes referred to as Romantic, sometimes Regency, the city is characterized by a new confidence articulated in the urban improvements underway (most notably the various developments across London undertaken by John Nash, including Regent Street and Regent’s Park). In this moment, Deborah Epstein Nord suggests, ‘society…regarded the metropolis as a stage on which to perform and on which to witness its own civility, grandeur, and ebullience’.[[1]](#footnote-1) At the same time, Gregory Dart argues, an ‘expansive spirit’ allowed for ‘a certain kind of openness in the treatment of the city’, particularly in the periodical culture that flourished in the 1820s, and, as Nord notes, ‘the questioning or probing of complex social relations was avoided by architect, essayist, and graphic artist alike’.[[2]](#footnote-2) By the mid- to late 1840s, however, this sense of expansiveness all but disappeared and, Caroline Arscott explains, a ‘growing middle-class awareness of social problems in Britain and a fashion for social reportage developed’.[[3]](#footnote-3) According to Alex Potts, these new concerns led to a ‘radical transformation of the pictorial iconography of the city’, and from the 1840s onwards, the city becomes, in Dart’s words, ‘a problem to be solved’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Broadly speaking, then, the 1830s can be thought of as a liminal moment between the confidence and playfulness of the period through the 1820s, and the growing concerns about poverty and slums that take shape in the 1840s.

In what follows, I want to consider a series of literary and visual representations of London produced between the late 1820s and the early 1840s in order to consider how they sought to capture a city that was, in the words of Jerry White, ‘ever renewing itself’.[[5]](#footnote-5) The works discussed below include illustrated topographies produced in the late 1820s by the architectural writer James Elmes and the artist Thomas Hosmer Shepherd, Charles Dickens’s *Sketches by Boz* (1836), John Tallis’s *London Street Views* (1838-1840), sketches and watercolours by George Scharf, and *London As It Is* (1842), a collaboration between the artist Thomas Shotter Boys and the publisher Charles Ollier. As the many differences between these works make clear, there is no one mode of presenting the city in this period. Yet, these works display recurring motifs that reveal something about how readers and viewers wanted to see their city, and have their own ideas and attitudes reflected back at them. New buildings, the development of what Jon Klancher has termed ‘a metropolitan service caste’ that began to feature more regularly in representations of London, an increasingly confident sense of the city’s commercial wealth as linked to improvement, the arts, and culture – all are characteristics of the metropolis in the 1830s that were examined in the print culture of the period.[[6]](#footnote-6) Taken together, Shepherd’s views of the city’s newest buildings, his and Boys’s busy commercial scenes, Scharf’s sketches of the transformations to the built environment, the announcement of new owners, locations, and goods in Tallis’s *London Street Views*, and the glimpses offered by Dickens of the social dramas unfolding across the city, define London in terms of the bustle of activity. As writers and artists moved away from a conceptualization of the urban as a collection of buildings towards a more dynamic sense of the city as characterized by the movement through and the activities in the city’s streets, they offered a seemingly confident account of London as a city of both commerce and culture, although this self-image would come under strain in the following decades as reading audiences became increasingly aware of the plight of the urban poor.

**Metropolitan Improvements**

In the early nineteenth century, London embodied a burgeoning sense of ‘metropolitanism’, as James Chandler and Kevin Gilmartin explain – ‘a sense of the urban site as at once capital to the provinces and point of contact with the wider world’, home to art and culture, as well as commercial wealth.[[7]](#footnote-7) While eighteenth-century commentators on the appearance of London were often anxious about whether commercial preeminence was sufficiently matched by progress in the arts, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, Ann Bermingham argues, there grew ‘a widespread assumption shared by many artists and critics, that arts would naturally keep pace with the nation’s economic progress’.[[8]](#footnote-8) As Jon Mee notes, a work like *The Microcosm of London*, published by Rudolph Ackermann in 1808-1810, ‘seems to have been designed as a flagship publication to celebrate London as a city at once commercial and cultured’; in it, Bermingham suggests, the metropolis emerges as a ‘world city’, and readers are invited ‘to marvel at London’s material progress, in short, its modernity’.[[9]](#footnote-9) Not everyone subscribed to this view; for some an interdependent relationship between the arts and commerce could only have the effect of debasing the former.[[10]](#footnote-10) Nevertheless, this newfound confidence informs a wide variety of works aimed at an audience which wanted to see itself as urbane and modern.

The presentation of a mutually improving relationship between commerce and the arts in accounts of London in the early nineteenth century reflects a growing sense of what Jon Klancher has termed a ‘commercial cosmopolitanism’ or ‘commercialist urbanity’ that is especially evident in the periodical culture of the 1820s.[[11]](#footnote-11) In a work like Cyrus Redding’s ‘London and the Country’, published in the *New Monthly Magazine* in September 1822, the metropolis is figured as the home to all refinement: ‘Art, science, literature, fashion – all the stores of intellect – all that is truly noble and great, concentrate in London’.[[12]](#footnote-12) As Klancher argues, Redding’s use of commercial metaphors, by which the city is figured as a ‘vast storehouse’ with a ‘vast reserve’, ‘accentuates the capitalizing, *as* resources’ of these various pursuits, which ‘the metropolis saves up and makes available as a modern English culture’.[[13]](#footnote-13)

This sense of confidence was also expressed in Thomas Hornor’s panorama of London, developed from sketches taken from scaffolding erected on the dome of St. Paul’s cathedral in 1821, and which was first exhibited in the purpose-built Colosseum in the newly laid out Regent’s Park in 1829. Its display throughout the 1830s serves as a reminder of how what might be thought of as the ‘mood’ of the 1820s continued to inform metropolitan self-representation in the following decade. From the distant, elevated perspective at the top of St. Paul’s cathedral, the daily dramas of urban life were obscured by the grandeur of the scale, which created a sense of order, harmony, and magnificence. Viewers were invited to meditate not only on the city seemingly laid open before their eyes, but on its connections with the surrounding countryside and – via the Thames and its shipping – the wider world. Hornor’s *Prospectus* for his view of the city celebrated its ‘perfect representation of a scene unparalleled in extent and variety, whether considered in regard to those interesting objects which characterize the great metropolis, with its distinguished port; to the accumulated memorials of ancient times concentrated in its precincts; or to the diversified beauty of the environs, and residences by which they are adorned’.[[14]](#footnote-14) The painted panorama was matched by the views across Regent’s Park available from what *A Picturesque Guide to Regent’s Park* (1829) described as an ‘open gallery’ at the top of the building.[[15]](#footnote-15) This perspective helped to frame London as a series of contrasts and relationships: between past and present, the City (as symbolized by St. Paul’s) and the West End (as embodied in the new development spreading around the Colosseum), the country and the city, the artificial (in the form of the panoramic painting) and the real (as viewed from the outdoor gallery), and – via shipping on the Thames – the local and the global.

The changes to the capital that had taken place over the 1810s and 1820s – spearheaded by George IV and carried out by architects including John Nash, Decimus Burton, John Soane, and Robert Smirke – were, according to Dana Arnold, part of a ‘conscious restructuring’ of the city that emphasized the ‘importance of vistas and focal points’.[[16]](#footnote-16) A stroll south along the luxury shops lining Regent’s Quadrant would bring the pedestrian in view of the Duke of York’s column, for example, while the west Strand improvements led to the demolition of buildings in Charing Cross to make way for Trafalgar Square, the eventual site of Nelson’s column (planned in 1838 and completed in 1849). Other improvements dating from the period include the development of Regent’s Park and the surrounding area; a series of monuments including the Hyde Park screen, Wellington or Constitution Arch, and Marble Arch; and the new London Bridge, opened in 1831.[[17]](#footnote-17) These improvements were not without their critics. Leigh Hunt, for example, complained that Marylebone was ‘monotonous and ill-built’, a place where ‘The fronts of houses have no architecture, no variety, no taste’, while the architectural critic James Elmes found there to be ‘many blemishes’ in Regent Street.[[18]](#footnote-18) Nevertheless, while there were criticisms of particular aspects of it, the development was frequently celebrated as a whole, with Elmes stressing that, for all its defects in individual buildings, Regent Street was ‘the finest work now in progress’.[[19]](#footnote-19) While the pace and nature of urban improvements slowed down after the financial crash of 1825 and changed considerably in nature after the death of George IV, whose grand vision for London Nash and others were seeking to implement, these recently constructed spaces continued to inform a confident metropolitan self-image into the 1830s.

*Metropolitan Improvements; or, London in the Nineteenth Century* (1827) focuses on ‘the ‘wonderful alterations’ that have taken place’ and which were reshaping the West End.[[20]](#footnote-20) The volume, dedicated to George IV, lauds the ‘splendid and useful improvements that have been effected in this METROPOLIS, under your MAJESTY’S auspices’, and credited his support for these projects.[[21]](#footnote-21) ‘Among the glories of this age’, Elmes declares, quoting from James Thomason’s poem ‘Liberty’ (1735-1736):

the historian will have to record the conversion of dirty alleys, dingy courts and squalid dens of misery and crime, almost under the walls of our royal palaces, into ‘stately streets,’ to ‘squares that court the breeze’ to palaces and mansions, to elegant private dwellings, to rich and costly shops, filled with the productions of every clime, to magnificent ware-rooms, stowed with the ingenious and valuable manufactures of our artisans and mechanics, giving activity to commerce with all the enviable results of national prosperity .[[22]](#footnote-22)

Elmes’s account draws together arts and commerce here, with ‘elegant’ buildings sitting side by side with ‘rich and costly shops’. While Elmes highlights the scale of change, Shepherd’s visual account of these improvements, Caroline Arscott notes, focuses on presenting ‘finished environments for the modern bourgeoisie to inhabit’, complete with ‘regular spaces, foursquare monuments and open paths for celebratory viewing’, rather than the process of transformation itself.[[23]](#footnote-23) The first two-thirds of the work concentrate entirely on the area around Regent Street and Regent’s Park, thereby reorienting the metropolis around these new developments. Here, Elmes proclaims, recent changes ‘have metamorphosed Mary-le-bone park farm and its cow-sheds, into a rural city of eastern magnificence’, an obtrusive image that introduces a potentially destabilizing element to the account of luxury offered in the descriptions of Regent Street’s shops.[[24]](#footnote-24) This sense of the new developments as forming what is all but a separate city is reiterated again a few pages later, when Elmes declares that those improvements around Regent’s Park have ‘more the appearance of a newly founded capital of a wealthy state, than one of the suburbs of an ancient city’.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The account of these newly laid out quarters as a rival to the rest of London focuses on the monumental architecture reshaping the West End, and is further reinforced by the lack of reference to traditional iconographical markers of London such as St. Paul’s Cathedral and Westminster Abbey. At the same time, the streets in Shepherd’s views are often busy but never characterized by crowds; instead, they gesture towards an especially refined version of Klancher’s ‘commercialist urbanity’.[[26]](#footnote-26) The Regent Street scenes, for example, are less reflective of the working bustle of the commercial metropolis (carts, wagons, porters, and so on) than of a location of fashionable leisure (Fig. 1). In some ways, then, *Metropolitan Improvements* appears to endorse the series of boundaries that Nash’s plans attempted to create and reinforce. Regent Street was designed to form, in Nash’s words, ‘a boundary and complete separation between the Streets and Squares occupied by the Nobility and Gentry, and the narrow Streets and meaner Houses occupied by mechanics and the trading part of the community’ by limiting the number of east to west thoroughfares that crossed the new street.[[27]](#footnote-27) At Oxford Street, Edward Copeland explains, Nash also had to contend with an already existing imagined north/south boundary that separated the ‘aristocratic stronghold’ of Mayfair to the south from ‘the domicile of the nabobs, the newly titled, the newly rich and the successful professional ranks, that is to say the home of power-in-waiting’ in Marylebone to the north.[[28]](#footnote-28) The curves of Oxford Circus were designed by Nash to disguise, or at least soften, the sense of having crossed the north/south boundary for those travelling from the Houses of Parliament and Mayfair to Regent’s Park.

Two-thirds of the way through, *Metropolitan Improvements*’ initial focus on the new West End as a seemingly separate city gives way to an account of improvement across the whole of London. As it takes the reader along Regent Street to Waterloo Place, it turns along Pall Mall East to consider, among other new buildings, the transformations that had opened up St. Martin’s Church to view, and the improvements at Charing Cross, a location that in the second half of the eighteenth century had been increasingly understood, in the words of John Barrell, as ‘the centre of London, and so…the epicenter of the cultural and commercial influence that radiated from the metropolis throughout the nation and empire’ – a place where, John Nash noted, ‘the greatest part of the population of the Metropolis meet and diverge’.[[29]](#footnote-29) Itself the site of improvements, including Robert Smirke’s new College of Physicians and the Union Club (Fig. 2), with more yet to come, Charing Cross sutures the West End to an existing London, which is often characterized in *Metropolitan Improvements* by other kinds of people and activities. In Shepherd’s view, Charing Cross appears as a hub, with strollers, pleasure coaches, and stage coaches passing along the network of streets as servants get water from the pump at the base of Charles I’s statue and loiterers idle away the time. From Charing Cross, the text moves more freely across London in its description of places including, for example, the London University, the Bank of England, the new Corn Exchange and Custom House, Southwark and Waterloo Bridges, the Guildhall, The Regent’s Canal at Limehouse, the new Covent Garden Market, and Hyde Park Corner. This movement across the rest of the city (which is not topographically organized in the way that the route to Charing Cross is) both appears to disperse the effects of metropolitan improvement, making the spirit of improvement a hallmark of the metropolis as a whole, and to connect those new developments around Regent’s Park to the rest of London. In this way, metropolitan improvements broadly considered become the defining feature of ‘London in the Nineteenth Century’, as the work’s subtitle declares.

**‘Some idea of its unceasing bustle and traffic’**

In 1829, Shepherd and Elmes published a second collaboration focusing on the metropolis. *London and Its Environs in the Nineteenth Century* offered a historical and descriptive account of the key buildings beyond the area covered in *Metropolitan Improvements.* Elmes’s account opens with an overview of London’s history, and by initially examining St. Paul’s and Westminster Abbey, it appears to privilege historical over contemporary structures. While the shift in focus from *Metropolitan Improvements* is announced on the title page with its reference to ‘the earlier edifices, antiquities, &c.’, Shepherd’s images ensure that the work is in no way straightforwardly antiquarian, even if Elmes’s text frequently is.[[30]](#footnote-30) Despite the focus on older structures, the views present the buildings and locations explored as part of the fabric of the modern metropolis via the various figures and objects that populate each scene. Men and women in contemporary costume and new modes of transportation like the short stagecoaches connecting London with its suburbs clearly situate these views in the present. At times in both collections, Shepherd engraves the walls or signage in his images with ‘London in the Nineteenth Century by Tho. H. Shepherd’, not only reminding readers of the modernity of these scenes, but also – in naming himself as their creator – presenting himself as *the* artist of the modern city (Fig. 3).

Elmes’s text gives each building an entry containing details of its appearance and history, and many of Shepherd’s views present these individual buildings. In some instances, however, the text moves from accounts of individual structures to descriptions of streets or intersections. While Elmes does not comment on the work’s principles of inclusion, his account of Shepherd’s view of Ludgate Hill makes it clear that it was a scene chosen by Shepherd: ‘The grand and truly picturesque view which this point of the metropolis presents to the pedestrian, has induced our artist to select it as a subject for an engraving’ (Fig. 4).[[31]](#footnote-31) Shepherd’s view presents Ludgate Hill as a crossroads, focusing on the intersection of Fleet Street, Ludgate Hill, Bridge Street, and Farringdon Street. The termination of the vista, St. Paul’s Cathedral, is obscured by the buildings along Ludgate Hill, making the street itself (as the title of the image makes clear) the true subject of the image. Vehicles moving in each direction, and foot traffic ranging from porters and street sweepers to strollers and window shoppers populate the scene, the latter contemplating goods in ‘some of the most elegant shops to be met with in the metropolis’.[[32]](#footnote-32) Elmes’s description of the scene states that ‘it would be difficult to find [a view] more imposing, and combining so many beautiful objects within so small a focus, in any part of the metropolis’.[[33]](#footnote-33)

As Alex Potts argues, early nineteenth-century print series like *Metropolitan Improvements* and *London and Its Environs in the Nineteenth Century* at first glance seem firmly rooted in ‘traditional modes of topographical depiction’; yet, in their presentation of ‘the unending network of streets, and the flow of people and traffic through them’, artists like Shepherd and Thomas Shotter Boys (whose 1842 work *Original Views of London As It Is* will be discussed below) gesture towards ‘a narrative of city life, a moving through the main arteries of the city that would not have an immediate equivalent in a single static picturesque view’.[[34]](#footnote-34) At times, Shepherd’s interest in presenting the bustle of intersections and crossroads is at odds with Elmes’s text, as in the presentation of Northumberland House, Strand. Where, as elsewhere, Elmes focuses solely on providing a history and description of the building, Shepherd’s view seems more interested in the activity at Charing Cross (Fig. 5). While the angle of the street in relation to the equestrian statue of Charles I would have made it difficult to approach the edifice from the front, Shepherd chooses to dramatize space not by opening up a view to the building (as mid eighteenth-century topographical prints sometimes did) but instead by opening up the space around the statue. While light, as well as the image’s title, draws our attention to it, Northumberland House is set back, and pedestrians, lamp posts, and a carriage obscure the view of the lower part of the building, making it difficult to glimpse what Elmes describes as its ‘exceedingly magnificent’ front.[[35]](#footnote-35) Rather than focus on Northumberland House, then, Shepherd presents it as a backdrop to a view of Charing Cross as a crossroads in much the same way as he does in *Metropolitan Improvements*, with an omnibus and a short stagecoach for Blackheath lingering in the foreground, and a coaching inn on the left.

In Shepherd’s views of streets and intersections rather than specific buildings, there is, according to Potts, ‘a noticeable absence of clearly demarcated key prospects’ so that ‘Traditional points of orientation in the cityscape are effectively submerged in the huge urban sprawl’.[[36]](#footnote-36) What we have in place of such focal points are, as Elmes’s account of Cheapside, Poultry, and Bucklersbury indicates, views ‘at once characteristic of Metropolitan activity, commerce, and opulence’ (Fig. 6).[[37]](#footnote-37) Shepherd’s representation of crossroads in scenes described by Elmes as ‘grand’, ‘picturesque’, ‘interesting’ and ‘imposing’ offer an insight into the workings of the world’s preeminent commercial city.[[38]](#footnote-38) His views of Cheapside, Poultry, & Bucklersbury and of Aldgate, which share a page, are fascinating for their similarity of composition, inviting the viewer to look ahead to a junction, with coaches and pedestrians highlighting possible routes. This arrangement is repeated in the view of Cornhill and Lombard Street, from the Poultry, where stage coaches, pedestrians, wagons, and carriages draw the viewer’s eye down the various points of intersection, including that of Prince’s Street and Threadneedle Street, just out of view on the left but signaled by the carriage arriving into view (Fig. 7). This sense of dynamism and flow as essentially commercial is distinctive to Shepherd and Elmes’s presentation of the City of London in street scenes which suggest, in Elmes’s words, ‘an extraordinary scene of activity’ and which ‘convey to the mind of a stranger some idea of [the metropolis’s] unceasing bustle and traffic’.[[39]](#footnote-39) These older thoroughfares stand in contrast to the ‘commercial portions’ of Regent Street in *Metropolitan Improvements*, which are defined by the beauty of the displays and the luxury goods on offer: here are ‘wide handsome fronts, calculated for broad showy shop-windows, wherein goods and manufactured articles of the most splendid description, such as the neighbouring world of wealth and fashion are daily in want of’.[[40]](#footnote-40)

This privileging of streets and intersections as key sites for understanding contemporary London is even more evident in Boys’s views in *London As It Is*. This emphasis can be seen most dramatically when comparing Boys’s view of Mansion House with that produced by Shepherd (Fig. 8 and Fig. 9). In Shepherd’s view, the Mansion House is shown from the Bank of England, with the viewer looking at it straight on from the junction of Cornhill, Poultry, and Threadneedle Street, thereby making the building very much the focus of the image. In Boys’s presentation of the Mansion House, by contrast, the viewer looks along Poultry and Cornhill as if passing the Mansion House, whose frontage appears along the line of the street at the left; indeed, without the print’s title, it would be difficult to say that the Mansion House itself was the subject of this print. Rather than stopping at the building to which the title draws the viewer’s attention, his or her eyes are carried along the street, reaching out along the extent of the thoroughfare to where the crowds of people, carriages, and omnibuses fade into the distance. This is less a view of a building than of a location, an intersection through which crowds pass on foot and in wheeled vehicles. Where Elmes offers only a historical and descriptive account of the building, the text by Charles Ollier that accompanies Boys’s view opens by drawing attention to the vitality of the scene; only then does it move on to give an historical account of the building:

*NEVER* surely was conveyed so adequate an idea of the crowded state of our principal metropolitan streets as it is given in the print before us. The throng of human beings, wedged almost inextricably in one mass, and yet individually distinct, is most skilfully [sic] represented…All the objects in our view seem instinct with animation, from the pedestrians who monopolize every inch of the *trottoirs*, to the omnibuses, stage-coaches, carts, horsemen, and groups of women rushing for their life across the carriage-road. The very distance is in a ferment with the struggle of wayfarers. One’s sight is bewildered by such a confused turmoil; and so vital is the scene, that we almost imagine we hear the noise of the wheels, and the vociferation of the multitude.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Shepherd’s more orderly crowd becomes a noisy throng here, and the termination of his vista – the Mansion House – is replaced with a blurred indistinct mass in the distance. Yet, despite its use of a phrase such as ‘confused turmoil’ (redolent of Book VII of William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*), Ollier’s description emphasizes that, while the scene is confusing and bewildering, it is also ‘vital’ and dynamic. The individual actors are ‘instinct with animation’, suggesting that they are able to make sense of, and respond to, an environment that might at first glance seem unreadable.

Taken together, we can see across Shepherd’s and Boys’s views of London a shift away from a focus on monumental architecture, and with it a conception of the city as a collection of individual buildings (itself the organizing principle of many eighteenth-century topographical print series), and a move towards a presentation of the city as a nexus of people and activities. These views present London’s commercial character through the movement and circulation of wheeled traffic and crowds in the streets, where passers-by contemplate the rich variety of commodities on display in shop windows and wagons transport goods across the city. A comparable sense of commercial London – defined by shopping streets rather than warehouses, financial institutions, or manufactories – is evident in John Tallis’s *London Street Views* (1837-8), a series of 88 pamphlets that combine various elements – trade directory, advertising circular, topographical description, pictorial views, and architectural elevations – to create a wholly new descriptive account of London as a modern metropolis (Fig. 10). While the title page presents itself as first and foremost a ‘STRANGER’S GUIDE THROUGH LONDON’, the series is little concerned to point visitors to those sites that normally formed part of the tourist’s itinerary such as St. Paul’s and Westminster Abbey, and intent instead on ordering the city as a series of shopping opportunities.[[42]](#footnote-42) The elevations, which trace the outline of each individual building in the street or portion thereof covered in an issue, at first glance seem to reflect a sense of the city as defined by its buildings as they remove any suggestion of people or traffic. Yet the *Street Views*, too, capture a sense of commercial activity in the various advertisements that accompanied them. To keep down costs to purchasers, Tallis’s publication was in large part funded by these advertisements, which appeared both on the architectural elevations and in the pages surrounding them. The range of wording displayed on the buildings whose proprietors opted to advertise on the elevation suggests that businesses were charged either by the word or character. Some advertisements simply display the name and occupation of a business owner, while others make reference to connections with royalty or foreign countries, linking the local consumption of goods to Britain’s global trade.[[43]](#footnote-43)

These seemingly static images paradoxically testify to the dynamism of commercial activity, since accompanying advertisements tell of businesses relocating, changing hands, or opening new premises. Like Charles Dickens’s ‘Shops and Their Tenants’, one of the *Sketches by Boz* (1836), these announcements remind readers of the commercial fortunes being won and lost on a daily basis. Dickens’s essay recounts ‘the gradual progress – the rise or fall’ of a particular shop, tracing its various fortunes and incarnations.[[44]](#footnote-44) Signs of newness – such as fresh paint and new fittings – appear before the arrival of each new tenant, but over time the shop begins again to show signs of decline, including the loss of staff, dirty and broken windows, and the increasing number of rooms above being let out. The building reaches its ‘lowest pitch of degradation’ when, in the final incarnation described, it becomes a dairy, with chickens running in one door and out the other.[[45]](#footnote-45) In much the same way as, Gregory Dart notes, ‘fashion and clothing are often metonymic in *Sketches by Boz* – the part that speaks for the whole’, here the appearance of the shop and its changes of goods and fittings stand in both for the fortunes of the people who set up business there and the neighbourhood around it.[[46]](#footnote-46) The shop thus provides a glimpse of the endless cycle of renewal and decline that is a part of the overall sense of activity and bustle: the progress of commerce in a nutshell, treated with a pathos and attention to detail of a kind not possible in an architectural elevation. In Tallis’s presentation of the shops of London, this story is more positive because the focus remains on the new rather than the old: a move to a new location, the opening of additional shops, and the taking over of other premises are proudly announced, while news of shops going out of business is absent.

Shepherd and Elmes, Boys, Tallis, and Dickens all conceive of the city as defined by the workings of commerce, then, albeit that they differ from one another in their focus on different kinds of commercial people and activities. In Shepherd’s presentation of thoroughfares and intersections and throughout Boys’s views, groups of fashionably dressed strollers and window shoppers mix with people whose presence in the street is connected to their occupation, including, for example, porters, crossing sweepers, and itinerant traders, thereby creating what Alan Robinson suggests is above all an ‘*orderly* bustle’.[[47]](#footnote-47) This commercial bustle is signaled in other ways in Tallis’s *Street Views*: advertisements offer advice and instruction on where to shop for particular articles, while the directories and street elevations help readers to locate the businesses they want. In Tallis’s work, the cumulative effect from a reader’s perspective is a vicarious experience of the city as first and foremost a series of commercial thoroughfares where the consumer can purchase anything he or she desires.

**Busy People**

While Shepherd, Tallis, Boys, and – as we shall see – George Scharf variously present the city as characterized by commercial activity, if in different ways, Dickens captured the restless nature of metropolitan life in his exploration of those ‘cockneys’ who formed what Jon Klancher has described as a ‘metropolitan service caste’, and who, Dart notes, ‘entered literature en masse’ in this period.[[48]](#footnote-48) These men and women, in the words of William Hazlitt, ‘eke out a dreary, wretched, scanty, or loathsome existence from the gorgeous, busy, glowing scene around them’, their seemingly stunted lives standing in contrast to the bustle of the city, even while they are also a product of it.[[49]](#footnote-49) *Sketches by Boz* in particularshines a light on the habits and mannerisms of those men and women – dressmakers, milliners, apprentices, clerks, tailors, shop assistants, and a host of other people – whose occupations seemed to define their existence, and who spent their small amount of disposable income on exploring alternatives to their working lives. During the week they might be found in shops and running errands in the city streets; in the evenings and at weekends, Dickens shows us, they are to be found in suburban tea gardens, taking pleasure trips along the Thames, and partaking of various other forms of entertainment aimed precisely at those with a little bit of money to spend and not very much time to spend it. The sketch form, as Jon Mee argues, allowed Dickens to cater for a desire for works that ‘show the rapidly changing city to itself and to the world’.[[50]](#footnote-50) *Sketches by Boz* does this not by focusing on the grand architecture of the new West End, but instead by looking at ordinary Londoners. Dickens’s subtitle to his collection of essays and tales – ‘illustrative of every-day life and every-day people’ – positions his work as reclaiming the everyday by paying attention to what previous writers had largely ignored.

*Sketches by Boz* presents the busy world of what Dart refers to as ‘that ambitious, amphibious stratum just above the traditional labouring classes’.[[51]](#footnote-51) In contrast to Shepherd’s scenes, in which the lower middling sorts go about their work alongside fashionable strollers, providing a form of picturesque variety, Boz presents the world of cockney amusement with a tone of affection that is due in large part to his recounting of his own familiarity with the world he describes. He tells of his experience as a ‘frequenter of Greenwich Fair’ and even being ‘the eighth outside, on the top of a hackney-coach, at something past four o’clock in the morning, with a rather confused idea of our own name, or place of residence’, and ‘confess[es] to have made one’ of those who delighted in the pleasures of Vauxhall Gardens, only to be disenchanted on seeing them by daylight.[[52]](#footnote-52) He writes affectionately, as well as comically, about the social and sexual conflicts at play in a sketch like ‘Miss Evans and the Eagle’, and sympathetically in ‘Shabby-Genteel People’ (a type that, Boz explains, ‘appear[s] to appertain exclusively to this metropolis’) about a man whose efforts to hide his pinched existence with the use of a clothing ‘reviver’ only draw more attention to his impoverishment.[[53]](#footnote-53)

As if to illustrate Hazlitt’s assertion that ‘*Your true Cockney is your only true leveller*’, the clerks, apprentices, and shop assistants in Dickens’s sketches often see no distinction between themselves and those who are financially and socially superior to them.[[54]](#footnote-54) In ‘Thoughts about People’, he describes the ‘beautiful attempts at the grand and magnificent’ of a group of apprentices ‘who had come out of some part of the city’ and were parading down the Strand on their way to St. James’s Park: ‘There were four of them, all arm-in-arm, with white kid gloves like so many bridegrooms, light trousers of unprecedented patterns, and coats for which the English language has yet no name…walking with a sort of paralytic swagger irresistibly ludicrous’.[[55]](#footnote-55) On their arrival at the Park, one of the party hires a chair to rest his feet on, ‘and flung himself on this two-pennyworth of sylvan luxury with an air which levelled all distinction between Brookes’s and Snooks’s, Crockford’s and Bagnigge Wells’ – in other words, between West End exclusivity and Cockney amusement.[[56]](#footnote-56) Just at the moment when Boz’s humour at their ‘ludicrous’ behaviour appears to accentuate their failure to mimic fashionable masculinity, though, he declares that ‘if they do display a little occasional foolery in their own proper persons, it is surely more tolerable than the precocious puppyism of the Quadrant, the whiskered dandyism of Regent-street and Pall-mall, or gallantry in its dotage any where.’[[57]](#footnote-57)

‘Thoughts about People’ interrogates the imagined geographical boundaries in the city that Nash attempted to reinforce, and not least in the way in which it levels, or even subverts, distinctions between the apprentices and masculine types associated with the fashionable West End. Their very appearance in the Park suggests that boundaries are permeable: the Duke of York Steps, constructed at the foot of Waterloo Place, were opened in 1831 and created a direct route between Regent’s Park and St. James’s Park. Nash’s east/west barrier at Regent Street is here circumvented by the apprentices’ approach from the City via the Strand, and Boz’s account of their swaggering posture suggests that they see themselves as having every right to be there, with the display of the ‘best-made boots’ by one apprentice, and the showing off of a pocket watch ‘the size and shape of Ribstone pippin’ by another, serving as self-conscious efforts to secure their entrée into this world.[[58]](#footnote-58) This fluidity is also reflected in the temporal boundaries at play in the *Sketches*. While, as Dart explains, Dickens frequently presents ‘the lower middle classes as the natural consumers of the newly-out-of-fashion’, suggesting that they always remain a few steps behind the truly fashionable, ‘Thoughts about People’ describes the young men as wearing outfits that are new to the point of being unique to themselves.[[59]](#footnote-59) This complex relationship between past and present, old and new, can also be seen in the figure of Boz as one who speaks of these cockney pleasures as familiar from personal experience. The cockney’s present, though, is Boz’s past, and, as Dart notes, in distinguishing himself from such forms of entertainment and self-fashioning, Dickens ‘write[s] as if the social ladder had been pulled up after him, and he was writing about a rank quite different from his own.’[[60]](#footnote-60)

**Old and New**

The figure of the Cockney, in his desire to be thought of as modern and fashionable, embodies in many ways the restlessness that is so characteristic of accounts of the metropolis in this period, even as accounts of the Cockney such as Dickens’s point to an uneasy interplay between old and new, fashionable and outmoded. While there is no visual analogue for the representation of restless energy in, for example, Shepherd’s views of the new urban developments which are presented as a series of finished and complete spaces, the sketches of the artist George Scharf, offer a broadly comparable sense of seemingly ceaseless transformation. In the 1820s and 1830s, he produced sketches and watercolours of, among numerous other subjects, a row of shops at the western end of the Strand about to be razed; the demolition work undertaken to remove buildings at the lower end of St. Martin’s Lane and Charing Cross as part of the laying out of Trafalgar Square; the building of the new London Bridge and its approach roads; the construction of the Fleet Sewer; and the laying of gas pipes across the city (Fig. 11).

Scharf’s sketches, as Caroline Arscott observes, are less invested in the idea of the city as site of progress (as a work like *Metropolitan Improvements* was, with its emphasis on a period of transformation that was now complete) than they are interested in the city as the site of process: a place constantly being reworked as old buildings go, new ones take their place, and the city itself is continuously reshaped.[[61]](#footnote-61) Scharf’s focus on the labour involved in this process, more than what the removal of certain buildings might reveal, also distinguishes his sketches from those that would be published in the illustrated newspapers of the following decades, when, Lynda Nead explains, there was a pictorial currency for works which presented urban modernity as ‘an accumulation of uneven and unresolved processes of urbanization’.[[62]](#footnote-62) The difficulty that Scharf met with in trying to find publishers interested in his views of London helps us to think about the current of metropolitan tastes in the 1830s. There was no audience, it seems, for images of workmen tearing down buildings piece by piece. Scharf’s images seem to hover – problematically for those whose business was to sell images of the city to middle class audiences – between old and new.[[63]](#footnote-63) His focus on what Dart refers to as ‘the everyday look of the street’ during the actual process of urban improvement results in views of scenes that are neither new enough to appeal to an audience like the one for *Metropolitan Improvements*, nor old enough to entice those with antiquarian interests.[[64]](#footnote-64)

Processes of change are not absent from Shepherd and Elmes’s works, but are notably signaled in different ways. As we have seen, in *Metropolitan Improvements*, Elmes’s text describes the transformation of London from old to new, while Shepherd’s views present completed developments rather than works in progress. In *London and Its Environs in the Nineteenth Century*, too, Shepherd’s views present finished and complete spaces, but Elmes’s text sometimes describes changes that the images themselves do not convey. Shepherd’s views of the Old White Hart and Fleet Market, for example, present these places as intact, while Elmes’s text records that ‘the ancient tavern’ in Bishopsgate Street is ‘now pulled down’ and Fleet Market has been ‘recently removed’ (the only indication in Shepherd’s views of these changes is a small note under the title of each).[[65]](#footnote-65) Elsewhere, the text also tells of the repurposing of older structures, such as when Elmes describes how the King’s Mews in Charing Cross, ‘originally used as stables, are now appropriated to the exhibition of useful and mechanical arts, and manufactures’.[[66]](#footnote-66) While John Tallis’s inexpensive, ephemeral *Street Views* allowed him to keep pace with change by updating and reprinting individual issues, adding and removing shop names as he did so, the nature of Shepherd and Elmes’s more substantial and more costly work made it impossible to update. In some cases – such as with the King’s Mews, which would soon be razed as part of the development of Trafalgar Square – they were unknowingly recording buildings that were about to disappear.

Boys’s *London As It Is* gestures to processes of excavation and rebuilding before the emergence of a visual rhetoric that allowed for a focus on demolition and construction, and in which, Nead explains, ‘the image of dereliction’ was ‘a sign of the past and of preparation for the future’ (Fig. 12 and Fig. 13).[[67]](#footnote-67) Across his series of street scenes, we see labourers laying water pipes, ladders and construction materials laying in or being carted through the streets, scaffolding on buildings, pavements being repaired, streets being dug up, and men laying the groundwork for the new Royal Exchange. These details are not, as is often the case with Scharf’s sketches and watercolours, the main focus of any of the images, but their presence in Boys’s views is nonetheless suggestive of another shift in how the metropolis was imagined in this period. As we have seen, works like *Metropolitan Improvements* and *London and Its Environs in the Nineteenth Century* captured the confidence of the 1820s in their presentation of monumental architecture, while at the same time – and especially in Shepherd’s views – they presented commercial activities (including the transportation, advertising, buying, and selling of goods) as the hallmarks of urban modernity. By the 1840s, as Boys’s views suggest, audiences for works about London were increasingly open to a visual depiction of the city recording the process of change, rather than simply celebrating its results. In his accompanying text, Ollier sometimes draws the viewer’s attention to these aspects of the scene. Commenting on Boys’s view of Piccadilly, for example, he invites the viewer to note the two hot air balloons ascending, ‘a sight which has arrested the progress of labourers engaged in laying the iron water-pipes’, while in the view of the Bank, he points their attention to ‘A heap of stones, with workmen busily employed about it, as seen in our view, [that] lie there in consequence of the preparations for the building of the new Royal Exchange, now in progress’.[[68]](#footnote-68) The descriptions, as well as the images, integrate these scenes into the daily workings of urban life.

One of the explanations for this accommodation of ‘process’ may rest in the changing nature of urban improvements in the 1830s. Deborah Epstein Nord, drawing on the work of Donald J. Olsen, argues that by the mid- to late 1830s, the ‘aristocratic aspirations’ of Regency improvements were increasingly thought to be ‘pompous, ostentatious, and wasteful’; Londoners instead wanted practical improvements ‘that would provide comfort, cleanliness, and health for the many’.[[69]](#footnote-69) As Jerry White explains, in the wake of the 1832 cholera epidemic, ‘social objectives’ became the driving forces of urban improvement, which frequently focused efforts on slum clearances.[[70]](#footnote-70) The construction of new streets to replace parts of St. Giles, Spitalfields, Whitechapel, and an area around Westminster Abbey known as Devil’s Acre, would have raised awareness of the plight of the urban poor to the middle class. Boys’s inclusion of scenes of labourers reshaping the infrastructure of the city by laying pipes and repairing roads offers an account of urban modernity designed to appeal to an audience invested in practical improvements to the city.

At the same time, the coming of the railways offered opportunities to explore not only the technological feat of demolition and construction, but also those areas of the city previously obscured from middle-class viewers that were now laid open. As Michael Freeman explains, railway companies chose to build their lines through areas occupied by the working classes and the urban poor for a number of reasons, including the fact that ‘the contemporary concern with sanitary conditions favoured companies in destroying run-down or poor-quality residential housing’.[[71]](#footnote-71) The construction of the railways opened adjacent slums up for viewing, both in images depicting the twin processes of demolition and construction, which fed into what Nead has termed a ‘metropolitan picturesque’ that began ‘to represent process and change, the last traces of the past in the present’, and from the perspective of railway passengers themselves.[[72]](#footnote-72) A glimpse of the living conditions of the city’s poorest inhabitants was inescapable, and London was increasingly figured as a city of sharp divisions. While, as Dart notes, accounts of the ‘very poor’ appear in but are nevertheless atypical of *Sketches by Boz*, Dickens would begin to explore their plight in more detail at the end of the 1830s with *Oliver Twist* (1837).[[73]](#footnote-73)

Metropolitan print culture of the 1830s mapped the spaces of London in time and place. In *Metropolitan Improvements*, the new buildings serve as markers of a new West End and a distinctive break with a recent past associated with dirt and squalor. In Tallis’s *Street Views*, shops become landmarks, even while the ebb and flow of commercial fortunes puts their longevity into question. *Sketches by Boz* described for its readers a world of leisure and entertainment that emerged around a new social type that had itself been shaped by the needs of commerce and trade – the clerks, seamstresses, and apprentices whose work helped London to function, while in Shepherd and Boys’s views, intersections themselves become landmarks of urban modernity. All of these different works help us to think about the ways in which print audiences in the 1830s wanted to see London as an exceptional world city characterized by commercial dynamism and its concomitants. Boys’s references to streets being excavated and building work about to get underway begin to scratch the veneer of the seemingly finished city so often found in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century topographical prints.

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2. Gregory Dart, *Metropolitan Art and Literature, 1810-1840: Cockney Adventures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 28; Nord, p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Caroline Arscott, ‘The Representation of the City in Visual Arts’ in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain* *Vol. 3, 1840-1950*, ed. by Martin Daunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 809-832 (p. 813). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Alex Potts, ‘Picturing the Modern Metropolis: Images of London in the Nineteenth Century’, *History Workshop Journal* 26:1 (1988), pp. 28-56 (p. 32); Dart, p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jerry White, *London in the Nineteenth Century: A Human Awful Wonder of God* (London: Vintage, 2008), p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jon Klancher, ‘Discriminations, or Romantic Cosmopolitanisms in London’ in *Romantic Metropolis: The Urban Scene of British Culture, 1780-1840*, ed. by James Chandler and Kevin Gilmartin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 65-82 (p. 77). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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8. Ann Bermingham, ‘Urbanity and the Spectacle of Art’ in *Romantic Metropolis*, ed. by Chandler and Gilmartin, pp. 151-176 (p. 157). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Jon Mee, ‘‘Mutual Intercourse’ and ‘Licentious Discussion’ in *The Microcosm of London*’, *London Journal* 37:3 (2012), pp. 196-214 (p. 197); Bermingham, pp. 160-161. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Bermingham, p. 166, and Mee *passim.* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Klancher, p. 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cyrus Redding, ‘London and the Country’, *New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal* 5:19 (January 1822), pp. 273-277 (p. 274). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Redding, p. 274; Klancher, p. 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Thomas Hornor, *Prospectus. View of London, and the Surrounding Country, taken with Mathematical Accuracy from an Observatory Purposely Erected over the Cross of St. Paul’s Cathedral to be Published in Four Engravings* (London: T. Hornor, 1823), p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *A Picturesque Guide to Regent’s Park* (London, 1829), p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Dana Arnold, *Re-presenting the Metropolis: Architecture, Urban Experience and Social Life in London, 1800-1840* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See White, pp. 9-35 for an overview of the transformations in this period. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Leigh Hunt, ‘The Townsman. No. IV’ in *The Selected Writings of Leigh Hunt Volume 3: Periodical Essays, 1822-1838*, ed. by Robert Morrison, pp. 262-264 (p. 264); Hunt, ‘The Townsman No. III’ in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Morrison, pp.259-261 (p. 259); James Elmes, *Metropolitan Improvements; or London in the Nineteenth Century: Displayed in a Series of Engravings…by Mr. Thos. H. Shepherd* (London: Jones and Co., 1827, rpt. New York: Arno Press, 1978), p. 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Elmes, p. 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Ibid.*, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Ibid.*, p. iv. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Ibid.*, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Caroline Arscott, ‘George Scharf and the Archaeology of the Modern’ in *George Scharf: From the Regency Street to the Modern Metropolis* (London: Soane Gallery, 2009), pp. 27-41 (p. 28-9). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
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25. *Ibid*., p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Klancher, p. 75 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. John Nash, *First Report of the Commissioners of His Majesty’s Woods, Forests, and Land Revenues; in Obedience to the Acts of 34 George III. Cap. 75 and 50 George III. Cap. 65. Dated 4th June 1812. Ordered, by the House of Commons, to be Printed, 13 June 1812*, p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
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32. *Ibid*., p. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. *Ibid*., p. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Potts, pp. 30, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Elmes, *London and Its Environs*, p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Potts, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Elmes, *London and Its Environs*, p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Ibid*., pp. 60, 87, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *Ibid*., pp. 83, 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Elmes, *Metropolitan Improvements*, p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
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43. Alison O’Byrne, ‘Representing Commerce in Tallis’s *London Street Views*’, *Journal of Victorian Culture* 22:3 (2017), pp. 297-316 (pp. 302-305). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Charles Dickens, ‘Shops and Their Tenants’ in Charles Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, ed. by Dennis Walder (London: Penguin, 1995), pp. 80-84 (p. 81). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
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47. Alan Robinson, *Imagining London, 1770-1900* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2004), p.17. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
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51. Dart, p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Dickens, ‘Greenwich Fair’ in *Sketches*, pp. 135-145 (pp. 135, 137); Dickens, ‘Vauxhall Gardens by Day’ in *Sketches*, pp. 153-159 (p. 153). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Dickens, ‘Shabby-Genteel People’ in *Sketches*, pp. 303-307 (p. 303). [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Hazlitt, p. 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Dickens, ‘Thoughts about People’, in *Sketches*, pp. 251-255 (p. 255). [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
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59. Dart, p. 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. *Ibid*., p. 231. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
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67. Nead, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
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