Aestheticizing the Ancestral City: antiquarianism, topography and the representation of London in the long eighteenth century

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Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary (1755) defined ‘Metropolis’ as the ‘mother city’. Forged from the Greek mütēr, the use of maternal metaphors for London had a long tradition in literature which reached its emotive peak in the poetic responses to the Great Fire of 1666. A notable case in point is Roger l’Estrange’s Vox Civitatis: or, London’s Call to her Natural and Adopted Children; Exciting them to her speedy Reedification (1666). L’Estrange, a Royalist pamphleteer turned Restoration Censor, made the poignant comment that London was a ‘sad Mother . . . Burnt by the raging Fire almost to th’ ground’.1 John Stow’s Survey of London (1598), the first attempt to recount the successive phases of London’s development, was also framed by his affection for ‘my native mother and Countrey’.2 Following Stow’s example, antiquarian accounts of London were
published almost annually throughout the eighteenth century but these generally eschewed the use of metaphor. Representations of London as the nation’s mother would, nevertheless, have had implicit cultural reverberations for eighteenth-century readers who had a remarkable appetite for antiquarian subject matter.3

Mother is part of us all, our progenitrix and a figure with which we can identify as home-maker – in myth and ideology, if not practice. Her symbolic function in relation to London was that of a common ancestor for the whole nation and a locus of collective identity. This evocative, maternal root highlights the importance of London, or, more exactly, London’s myriad pasts as the birth place of national and cultural identity. In the words of Henry Hunter, an antiquarian author writing in 1811:

The History of London and its Environs, though peculiarly appropriate to the inhabitants of those places, is important to readers in general, inasmuch as London is the centre to which every person, from the remotest parts of the island, is attracted at some period of life ... for the purpose of business or pleasure.4

While this statement brings out the universal allure of London, it also confirms that the concept of London’s past was of national importance. This past was conceived, born and fed by antiquarian prints and literary accounts. Such
publications were widely disseminated and were enjoyed by a geographically diffuse audience and were not, therefore, predicated upon a presence in the metropolis. This fact was recognized and reinforced by Richard Gough who insisted that ‘it was not till . . . the invention of printing . . . that we began to be acquainted with the face of our own country.’ Indeed, as a catalogue of all that had ‘been done for illustrating the topographical antiquities of Great Britain and Ireland’, Gough’s extensive Anecdotes of British Topography (1768) demonstrates the great quantity of topographical representations that were in circulation by the mid-eighteenth century and, at the same time, the importance of this material in the study of mapping, history and chronology. These topics had been a seminal part of the ideal humanist education of young aristocrats since the seventeenth century and were additionally directed to young gentlemen by the start of the eighteenth century. Such knowledge was viewed in patriotic terms as having ‘immense political advantage’ and enhancing the ‘publick spirit’. Thus young gentlemen were advised that ‘It will be singularly beneficial for you . . . to travel over most parts of this Kingdom.’ During such trips they were not only encouraged to observe scenes of trade and industry but also ‘to take notice of monuments of Antiquity’. Otherwise, it was feared, by pedagogues and parents alike, that England would be undervalued and that youths would be targets of foreign derision when making their Grand Tour. In these circumstances, a specific knowledge of London was considered the sine qua non. This was made plain in Sir John Fielding’s caution that it would be ‘strangely preposterous . . . for any person to embark in hazardous and expensive peregrinations’ if he should ‘appear at the same time to be deficient in his acquaintance with the beauties even of his own metropolis.’ Such words of advice were taken to heart by England’s gentry. When, in 1787, the celebrated antiquarian and natural historian Thomas Pennant prepared his teenage son for a trip to the continent he accompanied him to London from their home in Wales, to help him form ‘a comparison of the naval strength and commercial advantages . . . of our island, with those of her two powerful rivals’. Equally, from Pennant’s manuscript reflection ‘I was very unwilling that foreigners should find him . . . In urbe sua hospes [In his own city a stranger] but was ambitious that he should support the honour of our name’, he shows that topographical knowledge – the knowledge of one’s own metropolis – remained the very basis of national and personal identity.

Pennant’s concerns and ambitions for his son appear to have been much informed by topographical and antiquarian literature such as John Strype’s A Survey of the Cities of London and Westminster and the Borough of Southwark (1720) and William Maitland’s The History of London from its Foundations by the Romans to the Present Time (1739). We know from the footnotes in Pennant’s own Some Account of London (1791) that he was familiar with such texts and these volumes are just three of the plethora of antiquarian accounts which rehearsed a set-piece trajectory of London’s history that invariably concluded with hyperbolic disquisitions on the contemporary ‘Grandeur and Opulence of this vast City’. But while these texts culminated in heroic celebrations of urban progress, their audience was sensitive to the fact that the anatomy of London was being violently reworked and that many of the visible remains of London’s past were being completely erased. The rebuilding of London was of ‘prodigious extent’ and
the ‘rage of building everywhere’ was thought to be so ubiquitous that ardent antiquarians like John Britton reacted painfully to the ‘many fine . . . Buildings . . . entirely obliterated, and others . . . daily falling a prey to the slow but sure dilapidations of time, and the reprehensible neglect, or destructive hand of man’.15

Given London’s position as the ‘mother city’, the disorientation caused by these transformations threatened a crisis in national and cultural identity, a crisis which was partially addressed by antiquarian engravings of texts, views of monuments and scenes of urban life which helped keep the past in sight. Just as exiles might hoard souvenirs and remnants of their original home in order to retain a sense of self, we could well interpret the antiquarians’ often indiscriminate tendency to publish and collect representations of the past as an effort to come to terms with the perceived separation from the emotional motherland of London. The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to chart the responses to the city as documented by antiquarian prints in the long eighteenth century. Our aim is not to provide an architectural history of London; rather, it is to investigate what antiquarian prints tell us about the conflicting discourses of preservation and modernization and to question whether such disseminated representations could provide an effective alternative to actual engagement with the urban fabric.

Publish and Perish: the antiquarian dilemma in metropolitan representation

From the earliest activities of the Elizabethan College of Antiquaries, in the 1580s, the disparate interests of antiquarians were at least coherent in one shared objective: that antiquarianism should determine and confirm ‘by historical or archaeological precedent the institutions of . . . contemporary England’.16 Consequently, a spirit of historical disclosure informed John Stow’s survey which, though published without the help of illustrations, sought to uncover ‘what London hath been of auncient time . . . as what it is now every man doth beholde’.17 Despite his promise of objectivity, Stow’s account was underpinned by a patriotism, at once stalwart and parochial, that betrayed his deep conservatism towards urban growth and the changing appearance of London. He not only remembered physical details such as ‘Fagges Well, neare unto Smithfield . . . [and] hardly now discerned’, he also related his own childhood experience of fishing in the clear and open ‘Towne ditch’.18 No doubt it was this intimate quality, along with his observations of a Reformation and pre-Fire London, that ensured the enduring influence of Stow’s Survay on many eighteenth-century accounts of the city, many of which show a clear debt to his taxonomic and thematic treatment of the subject.19 Not surprisingly, the outdated character of Stow’s portrayal of London was soon noticed by Edward Hatton, for example, who opined that ‘the devouring Flames made such vast Alterations, what was in Mr Stow’s time is now like another city.’20 That was in 1708. But by the century’s end Stow was no longer taken as a benchmark for the antiquarian survey, London but was an historical testament in its own right – one that evoked a particularly sentimental reading. His eventual resting place in the canon of antiquarian worthies is shown by John Thomas Smith’s rhetorical question ‘Can
we read . . . industrious Stowe [sic], or laborious Hollar, without emotion?21 John Thomas Smith was a major figure in the popularization of antiquarian London.22 His etchings of London’s ancient topography mark the rise of an antiquarian printmaking which implicitly critiqued old London and thus welcomed the onset of urban reforms and improvements (plates 8 and 9). But before turning to Smith in detail, we need to examine the traditions of antiquarian topography on which he drew, which serve to signal the ambiguous relationship between antiquarian prints and the depiction of sites of metropolitan antiquity.

The fashion for collecting English prints became increasingly popular in the early eighteenth century. And Wenceslaus Hollar (1607–77) was seen as the father of domestic printmaking.23 This is evident, for instance, in George Vertue’s hierarchical taxonomy of fourteen artistic categories, into which a collection of Hollar’s work could be distributed. It was more for his numerous plates of English topography, however, that Hollar was granted a near-heroic status in the minds of later antiquarians.24 This was evidently Horace Walpole’s opinion when he proclaimed that ‘till the arrival of Hollar the art of engraving was in England almost all confined to portraits.’25 Nathaniel Hillier’s judgement on ‘the excellence of his execution’ helps to explain Hollar’s celebrity, but the currency of his prints, at least among eighteenth-century antiquarians, was largely due to the artist’s own involvement with seventeenth-century antiquarians such as Elias Ashmole, along with the evocative charge of certain of his etchings of London.26

Most emotive of all was surely his parallel long-view London Before and After the Great Fire (1666) (plate 1). Sketched from the spire of Southwark Cathedral, this comparative design was essentially a narrative composition, one where the first stage of its temporal dynamic was the commemoration of a lost vista – the ‘Before’ – and the second the devastations of the fire – the ‘After’. By juxtaposing a thriving London, crowded with reductionistic signs of houses and church spires, against the relative ruin of the post-fire vision, this plate was an effective record of the trauma and loss generated by that conflagration. It is often argued that people experience nostalgia only after the ‘internal relation between past and present’ is made impossible by ‘absolute disruption’.27 Several twentieth-century commentators further agree that a ‘requirement of nostalgia is that objects, buildings, and images from the past should be available’ as the ‘material objects from which nostalgia is constructed’.28 Just such a reaction could be attributed to Hollar’s etching, which, through its comparative strategy, reminds us of Jean Starobinski’s premise of the ‘memorative sign’ which helps to kindle nostalgia.29 Reinforcing this point is John Bowles’s A Plan of London in Q. Elizabeth’s Days (c. 1750) (plate 2) which – in medley format – collated miniature versions of Ralph Agas’s map of 1560, one half of London Before and After the Great Fire and several of Hollar’s vignettes of buildings destroyed in the fire. Bowles’s print indicates that Hollar’s various designs remained the archetypal way of envisaging the depredations of the Great Fire. But beyond this, its medley format, which emulates the antiquarian tradition of amassing fragments of information in cabinets of curiosity which could then provide a world- or over-view, also suggests the imaginative potential of such combined vignettes in presenting a gloss of past experience.30 In the eighteenth century many of Hollar’s original prints were already considered rare, but Bowles’s antiquarian production reflects that, even at
the cheaper end of the print market, purchasers enjoyed the manifold possibilities of contrasting early images of London with references to its ‘present magnitude’.

Hollar’s *London Before and After the Great Fire* was a unique document which could never be imitated, although it was occasionally copied. By contrast, Hollar’s series of illustrations for William Dugdale’s *The History of St Paul’s Cathedral in London* (1658) had a more enduring impact upon subsequent antiquarian representations of London. Dugdale’s *St Paul’s* was a work of rigorous archival research which was concerned to record ‘by Inke and paper, the Shadows of them … might be preserved for posteritie, forasmuch as the things themselves were so neer unto ruine.’31 It was also one of the first coherently illustrated works of London topography. The appearance of a second edition in 1716 indicates that it remained of interest to antiquarians for several decades after its publication. From Walpole’s complaint that ‘extracts from Dugdale … swell and crowd most of our histories’, we know that his circle of antiquarian friends clearly took Dugdale’s work for granted.32 The inclusion of Hollar’s west view of old St Paul’s among the vignettes of Bowles’s medley plate (plate 3) suggests that for ensuing generations of antiquarians Hollar’s illustrations did, indeed, constitute the definitive visual record of a monument which burnt down six years after the volume’s publication. The success of Dugdale’s work and, tentatively, the style adopted for many eighteenth-century antiquarian representations of London both had their point of origin in Hollar’s designs. The etching *Ecclesiae Cathedralis Sti Paulis Ab Occidente Prospectus* (plate 3) characterizes the format of all his exterior views in which the size, monumental qualities and, by inference, the cultural importance of the structure were accentuated by the raised viewpoint.
Further, setting the cathedral apart, removing it from the topographical clutter of its surrounding streets, ensured a clarity of visual information which could never be matched in situ. In Hollar’s time the actual situation of old St Paul’s, planted in the middle of a chaotic, medieval city ‘deformed’ by the ‘congestion of Houses’ and the narrowness of the streets, was deemed hugely unsatisfactory. Even after London was restored and Sir Christopher Wren’s St Paul’s had risen from the ashes, such frustrations did not abate. Without the benefit of any coherent urban planning, vociferous objections abounded about London’s ‘endless labyrinth of streets’, its ‘tumultuous crowds’ and its ‘fine cathedral’ ‘coop’d up’ in ‘monstrous thraldom’. For eighteenth-century viewers encouraged to value topographical prints because of their notional ability to ‘represent absent Things to us, as if they were present . . . [and] convey us instantly, without Hazard or Expence, into the most distant Countries’, Hollar’s records of the past would, no doubt, have had a considerable resonance. If topographical representations could, indeed, be enjoyed in such imaginative ways then, we can make sense of the later antiquarian usage of Hollar’s graphic formula for illustrating London, where prints had the capacity to triumph over primary fieldwork.

The study of artefacts was absolutely fundamental to the antiquarian project and, as Arnaldo Momigliano put it, the literary text was generally ‘subordinated’ in favour of visual evidence.36 Though many Fellows of the Society of Antiquaries did actively conduct fieldwork, the earliest entries in their minutes demonstrate the importance placed upon the collecting of representations of metropolitan antiquities – a comparatively passive mode of antiquarian inquiry. In 1720, the Secretary:

W. Stukeley proposed . . . that the Society should take Drawings of all the Old Edifices in London that have not yet been or not well done, and have them inserted from time to time in Mr. Stripe’s [sic] Stows Annalls belonging to the Society which was agreed to: It was likewise added that Every Member be desired to buy all good prints of Such public Buildings, Monuments and the like that happen in his way at as reasonable a price as he can, which shall be repaid by the Treasurer out of the Societys money.37

By suggesting such a thematic collection of visual data to serve as a common fund of antiquarian information, this entry formalized Stukeley’s earlier statement that ‘Without drawing or designing the Study of Antiquities . . . is lame and imperfect.’38 By contrasting these two statements it becomes clear that antiquarians viewed their project as a rational science which, like natural history, elevated sight to primary importance and thus relied on visual representation as the very foundation of its researches. Consequently, they could not long rely on the vagaries of the individual Fellows’ print collecting and Stukeley’s proposal heralds their entry into the publication of metropolitan plates which eventually formed part of *Vetusta Monumenta* (1747–1906), their ongoing series of folio engravings.

*Vetusta Monumenta* was not principally concerned with London and its environs. But the importance of metropolitan topography is apparent in the forty plates, around one fifth of the Society’s total publication, issued before 1815. Several of these plates are particularly indicative of the methods and expectations of antiquarian inquiry, the physical status of the monument and the way it triggered the historical imagination. These issues are all apparent in *Waltham Cross* (1721) and *King Street Gate Westminster* (1725) (plates 4 and 5), examples of the style George Vertue, the Society’s engraver, espoused to promote the ideal that prints could act as identical transcriptions of antique prototypes.39 To achieve this gloss of exact representation and overcome the two-dimensionality of the medium, Vertue attempted to resist charges of artistic capriciousness by asserting his own antiquarian credentials. He did so by invoking a hierarchy of printmaking, previously articulated by John Evelyn in his *Sculptura* (1662), where ‘Burination’ (i.e., engraving) was aligned with the manual labour of ‘plowing’ which was akin to the digging of archaeological excavation.40 Privately, Vertue expounded this in numerous unpublished manuscripts, including his extensive Notebooks.41 Publicly, he asserted this principle in many of his works and (despite some etched detail) this can be observed in these plates’ basic formulation and execution. Like Hollar’s plates of old St Paul’s, *Waltham Cross* and *King Street Gate* are stereographic, front-lit views which placed the notional spectator just above street level but denied them any extraneous, evocative information to help

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locate these London structures in time and place. Apart from the scale references to human form – traffic or tourist – with which the viewer could identify, Vertue did not develop a human narrative to pinpoint the customs and practices relating to these urban monuments. Seemingly freed from the trapings of their contemporary situation, their singular, uninterrupted focus was, it would appear, crucial to the antiquarian desire for authoritative empirical information.

Such antiquarian representations were intended as diagrammatic ‘illustrations of those minute particulars which would require volumes of description’. And certainly the earliest subjects in *Vetusta Monumenta* actually remind us that engravings were not always valued as works of art. So *King Street Gate Westminster* was published as part of a three-sheet fascicule, which included the corresponding depiction of *The Gate at White Hall* (1725) and another single sheet presenting the ground plans of both gates. Also seen on the single plate of *Waltham Cross*, this grouping of images set up an interplay of alternative categories of viewing. The first was representational – which placed the viewer in the same plane as the gate and thus attempted to recreate the visitor’s experience. The second was linear, providing a theoretical overview of the relationship between the architecture and its immediate situation. ‘Cross-referencing material bits of distant reality’, as Barbara Maria Stafford has usefully suggested, was integral to the natural historians’ and therefore antiquarians’ method of synthesizing discrete parts to make up an ‘encyclopedic’ whole. By providing ‘Materials of Knowledge’ to ‘liberal’ minds capable of abstract thought, the aggregate impact of these plates was, I imagine, intended to offer the antiquarian a comprehensive, all-round image which pretended to a three-dimensional view. Moreover, when viewed in sequence in *Vetusta Monumenata*, such plates also promised their audience a more incisive and encompassing view than that afforded in reality where, like the figure depicted in *Waltham Cross*, they would be limited to viewing the monuments only from ground level. We may conjecture, once again, that such metropolitan representations served as valid alternatives to fieldwork or urban tourism.

The contemporary perception of Vertue’s work as documentary evidence is suggested if we compare two differing appraisals from opposing ends of the critical spectrum. In 1768 the antiquarian Richard Gough praised the integrity of Vertue’s
transcriptions by commending his ‘extreme labour and fidelity’. In contradistinction, William Gilpin, whose Essay upon Prints (1768) was part of the ongoing discourse on Taste, allowed that Vertue was ‘an excellent antiquarian’ but vehemently insisted that he was ‘no artist’. It transpires, therefore, that the early plates in Vetusta Monumenta were not viewed as works of art but were, instead, the results of antiquarian investigation which could answer the members’ preconceived desire to ‘capture the imperceptible’. Despite Vertue’s evident success in making the past visible for an antiquarian audience, the circulation of his prints contributed to the debate about the relative merits of publication and preservation.

Because the plates in Vetusta Monumenta intimated the results of quasi-scientific experiments conducted according to an established method, the Society and its audience were acutely aware of the question of their clarity and accuracy. Such issues were fundamental to the Society’s corporate identity in the unchartable public perception that accompanied these plates’ dissemination beyond the immediate circle of the Society of Antiquaries. Perhaps their sensitivity was related to the plethora of modest illustrations, produced by commercial draughtsman such as Benjamin Cole (plate 6), that were produced to elevate the many repetitive antiquarian accounts of London which were otherwise little more than ‘vamped up’ books ‘consisting merely of disguised extracts’ of repetitive text. In these commercially led accounts of London, the compartmentalized, focused framework that the Society had championed for depicting metropolitan antiquities quickly found a broader audience. As a result the Society was keen to employ alternative methods to promote the sophistication and rigorous standards of prints that would officially bear its distinctive and aggrandizing endorsement ‘Sumptibus Societatis Antiquariae Lond’ (plate 5). In order to establish the probity of this Latin certificate ‘at the expense of the Society of Antiquaries of London’ the Society was keen to assert the research that went into the production of each print. Many of the prints in Vetusta Monumenta were endorsed with inscriptions such as ‘from an antient Drawing in the Possession of the Earl of Cardigan’, which appears on a view of Richmond Palace in the time of Henry VII, or ‘Said to be Design’d by Hans Holbein’ which is seen on The Gate at White Hall. In contrast, the annotation on King Street Gate (plate 5) – which was agreed upon by a ballot of the members –
would seem to contradict its guarantee of authenticity as viewers must surely have realized the discrepancy between the actual status of the gate described as ‘demolish’d Anno 1723’ and this portrait, dated 1725.51

Antiquarians preferred to see the antique object intact; as a ‘truly magnificent ... structure [which] was not that which most showed its age but that which, through careful ... refurbishment retained a fresh appearance in defiance of time’.52 Representations encouraged this desire for a ‘gloss of perfection’ which enabled the viewer to imagine the subject in its prime – as it would have been experienced by its historical contemporaries rather than after years of neglect and redundancy.53 This idea is most cogently supported by the etched adumbration of the lost finial and the pristine sculptures of Waltham Cross (plate 4). At one and the same time, these passages fulfilled the antiquarians’ desire for visual accessibility and also, through the ephemeral character of the etched line, gave rise to a projection of things as they should have been. Whereas some of the earliest plates in Vetusta Monumenta, like Vertue’s view of Colchester Castle (1732), did present subjects in a decidedly ruined and overgrown state, this was never true of representations of metropolitan antiquities. One explanation for this metropolitan distinction is found in Margaret Aston’s argument that the ‘ruins in a landscape’ topos came about as a direct result of the ravages of the Dissolution and the resulting spectacle of ecclesiastical remains across the English countryside.54 In London, however, church property actually suffered very little tangible damage as it was most often seized, deconsecrated and then awarded to Henry VIII’s followers. Even the rubble left in the wake of the Great Fire had been quickly

swept away by the imperatives of rebuilding the commercial city.\textsuperscript{55} As a result London had fewer noble and historical ruins than rural or provincial areas. In the later eighteenth century, a critique of architectural dilapidation and loss could, nonetheless, still be attached to London; it was situated in the increasing clash of ‘heritage and improvement’, as aesthetic standards, safety and traffic requirements led to large-scale rebuilding and the demolition of old structures.\textsuperscript{56} Metropolitan buildings in manifest decay and the speed with which they were being replaced in the eighteenth century were two of the more incriminating signs of the eighteenth-century antiquarian’s inability to halt the progress of modernization.

In the preface to the first number of \textit{Archaeologia} (1770) Richard Gough reiterated that the Society’s main responsibility was the protection of ancient buildings against ‘vandals, souvenir hunters and ... restorers’.\textsuperscript{57} The eighteenth-century antiquarians’ unfortunate impotence in this regard was emphasized by their frequent publication of souvenirs of \textit{lost} or dying buildings. Vertue’s \textit{King Street Gate} – which had been removed for road-widening – and his reconstituted spire of \textit{Waltham Cross} are evidence of an antiquarian editing of the modern which refuted actual decay or demolition by fixing an impression on copper. The antiquarian faith that such graphic records provided an acceptable alternative to action was central to their perception of the urban dynamic. Preempting loss was, as already mentioned, the primary motivation behind works such as Dugdale’s history of St Paul’s. By the late eighteenth century, however, this passive approach began to present a moral dilemma for many antiquarians. Their anxiety, as we shall see, increased in direct correlation to the level of building work in the city. Whereas James Peller Malcolm’s commercially oriented publication \textit{Views within 12 Miles round London} (1800) was pleased to announce that his etchings would ‘preserve the perishable Forms of many a Building whose Fate has been pronounced’, his satisfaction was not shared by those critics who hoped for intervention on the part of the Society of Antiquaries.\textsuperscript{58} In 1788 a correspondent writing to the \textit{Gentleman’s Magazine}, under the pseudonym ‘D.N.’, censured the Society’s complacent, self-interested investment in printmaking rather than in more active forms of restoration and preservation. These ambiguities were clearly expressed in his lament that:

\begin{quote}
The art of engraving, which helps to make ancient buildings known, and preserves their form to a certain degree, contributes ... to their demolition ... No matter if the engraving be \textit{inaccurate} – or exhibiting only a \textit{partial view} – or any other way deficient – when the engraving is made, farewell to the things engraved!\textsuperscript{59}
\end{quote}

Taking Waltham Cross, which ‘cries out for repair’, as his prime example he dismissed the Society’s continuing regard for Vertue’s outdated engraving when, in reality, the actual Cross was so imperiled as to be ‘ready to fall’.\textsuperscript{60} As a precautionary measure, he encouraged the Society to use their influence to convince the owners of antiquities of their \textit{private} duty in safeguarding their property for the \textit{public} good. It was, however, in his suggestion that a fund for restoration ‘would hardly cost more than the engraving of vile drawings’ that the connection between the Society’s practical impotence and their print production was most pointedly attacked.\textsuperscript{61}
In typical fashion, the Society reacted to D.N.'s scathing critique with another print: Jacob Schnebbelie's *The Cross erected in memory of Queen Eleanor, near Waltham* (1791), engraved by Isaac Basire (plate 7). If we compare Vertue's earlier rendition with this second plate of Waltham Cross, we witness the Society’s changing response to metropolitan antiquities. Revelling in the influence of the Picturesque, one might ask how this fashionable, artistic style came to invade the plates of *Vetusta Monumenta* where, formerly, all signs of decay had been glossed over in the name of historical exactitude. One answer might be that the later Waltham Cross was published with a two-page text and a separate sheet where the necessary ichnography and sculptural detail were elucidated. As Schnebbelie’s *Waltham Cross* was no longer an independent disseminator of antiquarian information, he was at greater liberty to emphasize the sentimental associations and ambience of this site. For an antiquarian audience used to seeing monuments frozen in their prime, the depiction of crumbling masonry and weeds situated Waltham Cross securely in the quotidian and as testimony of the inexorability of the decay wrought by time. By the 1790s the discourse on the preservation of antiquities had taken a new direction and the confident chauvinism with which such images were now published can be inferred from Richard Gough’s anti-French polemic that ‘I congratulate my country that so many monuments of art have yet survived … while a *neighbouring Nation*, which was so stored with similar monuments, seems to have given them up a prey to a new system of policy.’ If England’s enemies displayed such barbaric tendencies towards their past then, I argue, the very act of reporting such decay was a conciliatory measure which implied the enlightenment of permitting nature to run its course upon the fabric of national antiquities.

The Society of Antiquaries may have invested large amounts in publishing prints but, by the late eighteenth century, they could do little to conserve or restore the antiquities upon which their corporate identity rested. During the political upheavals of the 1790s they may have managed to turn this into a virtue, but D.N.’s earlier critique reveals the emergence of an antiquarian ambivalence which was specifically formulated in relation to the fate of metropolitan antiquities. D.N. looked ‘upon these antique erections as national objects’, but he...
could not reconcile their preservation with the more public-spirited duties of building ‘new bridges, and conducting new roads’.63 Once the passage of metropolitan ‘improvement’ acts quickened around 1760, the Society’s draughtsmen could do little more than ‘rush to the bedsides of dying buildings [to make] their death masks’.64 In consequence, the graphic record increasingly became the preeminent system for sustaining links with London’s past in a cultural climate more aggressively attuned to the promotion of the city’s commercial and international profile.65

The ‘Improvements’ of London and the Popularization of the Past

In the foregoing paragraphs I have attempted to show that antiquarian representations – though often considered problematic by their contemporaries – played an important part in shaping responses to London’s past at a time when the appearance of that city was in flux. At the popular, more commercial end of the market (in contrast to the Society of Antiquaries) publishers were compelled to vie with each other and this gave rise to accounts of old London embellished with ever more pleasurable modes of picturing metropolitan customs and antiquities. A sense of the output of this industry is given in John Thomas Smith’s Preface to his Ancient Topography of London (1810–15), where he complained that ‘the country has . . . been inundated with histories of London, which have been stolen from each other, without adding a single record of new matter.’66 (plates 8 and 9) In making this allusion and by continuing that ‘Topographical books are frequently put aside by the inspector, as soon as the prints have been turned over’, Smith attempted to market his own periodical publication as a more refined antidote to the genre.67 It was certainly in the vanguard of a ‘new style of embellishment; in which accuracy of representation combined with picturesque effect’ succeeded in rendering antiquarian topography an ‘object of fashionable pursuit’.68

Two representative plates from Ancient Topography which illustrate Smith’s innovations are South East View of the Old House Lately Standing in Sweedon’s Passage, Grub Street (1811) and Houses Lately Standing on the West Corner of Chancery Lane, Fleet Street (1812) (plates 8 and 9). Firstly, instead of individual monuments, they depict sites of vernacular architecture which ‘for the most part were never before published’ and, secondly, with their ‘spirited’ manner of etching, they appear unusually Picturesque in their ‘close attention to mutilation . . . crumbled stone and decayed wood’.69 In Remarks on Rural Scenery (1797) Smith had already shown an interest in the composition of the Picturesque which could be imposed upon a scene by including elements such as ‘patched plaster . . . fissures and crevices of the inclining wall . . . [and] the mischievous pranks of ragged children’.70 This visual vocabulary of the Picturesque can be seen at work in nearly all his plates in Ancient Topography; Smith, however, refuted this categorization by deriding other ‘Topographical draughtsmen [who] introduce more than they see, in order to make their productions picturesque’.71 Like Vertue before him, Smith’s desire to deny his artistic intervention alerts us to the continuing expectation that antiquarian draughtsmanship should be a precise science. Though he deployed the Picturesque because of its undoubted commercial
potential, Smith thus attempted to disassociate himself from the ramifications of a style whose very formulation was understood as artistic artifice and the strategic compilation of objects of aesthetic pleasure. He did so by constantly gesturing towards the more empirical requirements of antiquarian data and by implying a level of intrepid fieldwork in his own ‘discovery’ of sites down darkened and insalubrious alleyways or when demolition or fire uncovered traces of London’s historic structures. Additionally, by recording the date of his initial on-site sketch alongside formulaic phrases such as ‘These Houses were taken down by the city in May 1799 to widen Chancery Lane’, seen on *Houses Lately Standing on the West Corner of Chancery Lane* (plate 9), Smith’s work responded to the needs of antiquarian topography and, as such, his views of lost antiquity had the capacity to generate a wide range of conflicting responses. Despite Smith’s notational deference to antiquarian concerns, it would have been difficult for any observer to ignore that these scenes were chosen and composed for maximum moral and emotive effect.

In his discussion of picturesque prints, Tim Clayton has observed that these ‘taught tourists what to appreciate in gardens or the natural landscape.’ While this is valid for rural subjects, as Smith promoted his *Ancient Topography* as an ‘entertainment for the evening’, we are alerted to the likelihood that viewers would have been grateful that they were distanced from the squalid sites that Smith presented. William Hogarth and his competitors had certainly revelled in the human texture of the streets, but early antiquarian engravings had always
excluded the sort of human drama that typified urban life. Though topography and biography were inextricably intertwined in antiquarian accounts of the city, people were only mentioned when their noteworthy lives were invoked by their associations with tombs, palaces or monuments and other architectural features under discussion. Hence, by extrapolation, the sort of disenfranchized and abject characters who populate Smith’s scenes never made an appearance in earlier topographical representations. On an aesthetic level, the incorporation of labourers, cripples, street vendors and the like was part of the Picturesque vocabulary that contributed visual variety to Smith’s compositions. But as this urban poor scratch out their existence in the shadow of an antiquity to which they are oblivious, their presence turns these scenes into a form of impressionistic journalism which invites a variety of moral and social judgements relating to the city and its fabric.

For an audience sensitized to issues of antiquarian preservation the wretched figures with which Smith enlivened his London served as a comment on the architectural history and current conditions of the sites represented. Additionally, their dramatization with an urban underclass was, in Smith’s view, intended to approximate ‘a complete picture of former times’75. If read solely as representations of medieval London, Smith’s images of overhanging, rickety buildings and blind courtyards would undoubtedly have added to the concept of a London once plagued by ‘pestilence and perpetual fears of incendiaries’.76 But
these were not simply images of an archaic past. The recent nature of these scenes was underlined, not just in their dated inscriptions, but also in Smith’s insistence that characters such as the crippled ‘Ann Siggs’, hobbling along Chancery Lane (plate 9), were ‘all drawn from life’.77 Perhaps in order to mitigate this disturbing intrusion of living London into a work of antiquarian topography, Smith attempted to justify their presence as an analogy for ‘London in former days, [which] has afforded characters for the pencil equally singular with those of the present time’.78 This was, I suspect, a thin veneer; while the array of such dejected figures may have incited the sympathy of some viewers, the accompanying letterpress set up a more judgmental reading. Ostensibly depictions of ancient architecture, the moralizing content of these scenes was most emphatically engendered by Smith’s antiquarian anecdotes which, in the case of Sweedon’s Passage, recounted that the building – once the ‘residence of Sir Richard Whittington’ – had latterly been let out in tenements to poor people and had become ‘a great nuisance’, especially as ‘A filthy old woman, who sold Duke Cherries on sticks … occupied the upper wretched hole or loft.’79 Making his opinions even more overt, Smith claimed that this ‘lowest class of people’ were less the victims than the perpetrators of ‘frequent nuisances’ and ‘depredations’ upon the ancient fabric that the City has ‘suffered them to inhabit’.80 Given that the shaping of urban space reflects the lifestyles that it fosters, it is not surprising that Ancient Topography can be interpreted as heralding the city’s regeneration.

All this demonstrates that while Smith’s Ancient Topography retained the patina of antiquarian data, albeit anecdotal, it was largely predicated upon a type of information and a mode of viewing which would have been unthinkable in early antiquarian imaging. No longer looking back nostalgically, the expected audience for such commercially oriented antiquarian publications was evidently looking forward to the sanitization and social regulation which was destined to replace such sights. The function of such representations of London’s generic past – at a point of apparent closure – can be most cogently detected in Vagabondiana (1817) (plate 10), Smith’s speedy response to the findings of the 1815 Select Committee on Vagrancy.81 Preempting the later nineteenth-century interest in ‘anecdotes and illustrations of deformed, eccentric, and sometimes crazed, persons on the streets of London’, Vagabondiana is a series of portrait etchings which catalogued those ‘curious characters’ who, like the many decaying buildings of Ancient Topography, would soon be cleared away; ‘compelled to industry’ or ‘provided for … in their respective workhouses.’82 Though Vagabondiana was promoted as a record for future antiquarians, in advising contemporary visitors how to distinguish ‘the real object of charity’ from ‘the imposter’, it served a far more immediately didactic purpose; one which capitalized upon the late eighteenth-century fashion for assessing social types according to physiognomy.83 With its address to those who had found such beggars ‘a pest for several years’, Vagabondiana was less imbued with any regret for the clearance of these ‘notorious’ urban types than it was a celebration of the institution of ‘parochial poor houses’ which would soon result in the ‘improvement of the streets’, not just in aesthetic terms but also on a practical level for the visitor to London.84

By the early nineteenth century, the increase in population and the changes to the urban fabric were thought to have rendered London ‘the epitome of the vast
and teeming modern metropolis’. Though commentators often wrote of the alienating effects of its enormous scale and ceaseless motion, the ‘highly charged’ human spectacle of the streets of London was not, as Alex Potts has argued, singularly the province of literary representation. The work of John Thomas Smith has demonstrated that London’s social and architectural chaos could be visualized when it existed in a kind of temporal limbo: at a hiatus on a road heading from a once tangible past towards a phantasmagorical future. On condition that the site depicted was either condemned or recently removed, such detailed representations of low human life, due to their execrability, operated as synecdoches for the state of London’s architectural fabric and the urgency of regeneration. Throughout the eighteenth century, treatises on ‘metropolitan improvements’ had drawn this parallel between urban environments and social life in their repeated proposals that London’s architectural renewal would lead to a ‘refinement’ of morals, the increase of industry and the improvement of health. Representations of London’s ancient topography as the eternal abode of disease and depravity should, despite their antiquarian bias, be interpreted in relation to the prevailing discourse on modern improvements rather than that of antiquarian preservation. Indeed, a dialectic between past and future underpinned the rhetoric of ‘metropolitan improvements’. After all, the word ‘improvement’ denotes the process as much as the outcome and it was only through direct comparison of the old with the new that urban achievements could be assessed and the genteel reclamation of London promoted. The dogmatic confidence in the social and aesthetic advantages of such building projects can be illustrated by James Elmes’s *Metropolitan Improvements* (1827) where the hyperbole of modern London’s elegance and grandeur, with new ‘healthy streets and elegant buildings’ was repeatedly defined against the ancient disorder of ‘pestilential alleys and squalid hovels’.

Due to their expurgated nature, which tended to present London’s antiquities as revered structures in their prime, earlier depictions of demolished monuments may have troubled the antiquarian conscience by reminding viewers of their inability to safeguard the objects of their attentions. Representations of the...
picturesque texture of such ageing monuments could equally have engendered wistful projections, but the advent of a more fully fleshed, socialized aesthetic for dramatizing London’s past indicates the divergent concerns of a wider audience for antiquarian images. The extent to which antiquarian interests pervaded the popular perception of a London undergoing transformation can be deduced from John Girtin’s publication of his deceased brother Thomas Girtin’s (1775–1802) design for *St Martins Le Grand* in 1815 (plate 11). Having grown up on St Martin’s Le Grand, Thomas Girtin’s sun-drenched sketch of 1795 reveals its artist’s personal affinity for this bustling yet shabby location where sweepers and draymen cross paths with more fashionably dressed pedestrians. Twenty years later, when John Girtin eventually commissioned this aquatint, its message was intrinsically encapsulated by exactly these characterizations of contraflow problems, the commingling of social classes and the obscured view of St Paul’s. Published to coincide with Parliament’s decision to tear down St Martin’s Le Grand for the construction of the new General Post Office, Girtin’s plate was a celebration not of the past but of the future prognosis for this site. Robert Smirke’s General Post Office, designed with Ionic porticoes and flanked by spacious routes along which the Royal Mail coaches could hurry, was eventually acclaimed the very apogee of modern achievement. But the building was not
inaugurated until 1829. In 1815, therefore, when John Girtin issued this view, people could not yet know the exultant end point of this localized narrative of urban change and had to make do with depictions of what had been lost. If we accept that Girtin’s portrayal of St Martin’s Le Grand was not an uninviting scene, it served to justify modernization and at the same time to assuage the urban disorientation that must have accompanied such a lengthy programme of building works. To further consolidate the pastness of this view, Girtin inscribed the plate with two extra lines of antiquarian information (quoted directly from Thomas Pennant’s *Some Account of London*), which summarized the Saxon foundation of the site, its control by the Dean of Westminster and the anomaly of its surviving status as a Liberty with ‘the dreadful privilege of sanctuary allowed to Murderers, Robbers &c. &c.’. By drawing attention to the fact that it was only now that this archaic privilege was annulled, Girtin enhanced the appeal of *St Martins Le Grand* both as an antiquarian document and as a chronicle of urban history brought up to date. Though not in the mainstream of antiquarian publishing, *St Martins Le Grand* demonstrates that the celebration of modern London was a cumulative exercise and that any topographical representation could, potentially, contribute to this antiquarian mode of enjoying prints as a form of urban excavation. If, as Samuel Prout believed, some representations engendered peculiarly imaginative readings which allowed viewers to ‘sit and securely traverse extensive regions . . . without quitting the elbow chair’, then the same armchair tourism could be true of time as well as space. This was certainly the *Morning Herald*’s estimation when they advised that Thomas Girtin’s now-lost panorama, known as the *Eidometropolis* (1800–01):

might be fitted up, and form an elegant object in a Nobleman or Gentleman’s park; it would be novel, and would furnish its owner with an opportunity of seeing London though in the Country, and would be particularly gratifying to his visitors, from the endless variety it contains. The Antiquary in a few years would see what London was, and mark the great alterations that are about to take place.

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Notes

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1 Roger l’Estrange, *Vox Civitatis: or, London’s Call to her Natural and Adopted Children; Exciting them to her speedy Reedification* (London, 1666), n.p.
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6 A Letter of Advice to a Young Gentleman at the University. To which are subjoined, Directions for young Students (rpt, 1701, London, 1751), p. 12.


9 ibid.

10 ibid., p. 13.


18 ibid., pp. 16 & 20.


24 Horace Walpole, *A Catalogue of Engravers, Who have been born in England; Digested by Mr. Horace Walpole from the MSS of Mr. George Vertue; To which is Added an Account of the Life and Works of the Latter* (Strawberry Hill, 1763), p. 2.


38 Vertue’s career as the Society of Antiquaries engraver from 1717 to 1756 has recently been discussed in Martin Myrone, ‘Graphic antiquarianism in eighteenth-century Britain: The career and reputation of George Vertue (1684–
40 ibid., pp. 45–8.
43 For the artistic potential of plates in Vettusa Monumenta, see Maria Grazia Lolla, ‘Ceci n’est pas un monument: Vettusa Monumenta and antiquarian aesthetics’, Producing the Past, op. cit. (note 3), pp. 15–36.
45 These matters were widely discussed in the eighteenth century. See, for example John Locke, Of the Conduct of the Understanding, ed. John Yolton (rpt, 1706, Bristol, 1993), p. 48.
48 Stafford, Body Criticism, op. cit. (note 44), p. 44.
50 The Society employed this publication line between 1720 and c. 1803. The term ‘custody’, in relation to their print publication, first appeared in the draft of their founding tenets. Minute Book, 1 January 1718, p. 6.
51 See Minute Book, 11 December 1723, vol. 1, p. 94.
55 T.F. Reddaway’s, The Rebuilding of London after the Great Fire (London, 1940), remains the most definitive account of these events.
59 D.N., ‘Correspondence’, Gentleman’s Magazine, vol. 58, no. 2 (August 1788), pp. 689–91 (pp. 689–90).
60 ibid., p. 689.
61 ibid., p. 690.
65 Two of the most emphatic treatises on urban improvements are John Gwynn’s London and Westminster Improved (London, 1766) and James Elmes, Metropolitan Improvements (1827).
67 ibid.
74 Smith, Ancient Topography, op. cit. (note 21), n.p.
75 ibid., p. 69.

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78 ibid., p. 69.
79 ibid., p. 42.
80 ibid., p. 36.
83 ibid., p. v.
84 ibid., pp. v, vi & 35.
86 ibid., p. 29.
89 Girtin’s sketch is now at the Yale Center for Studies in British Art, see Susan Morris, *Thomas Girtin* (New Haven, 1986), cat. 32 & p. 23.
90 For a description of the workings of the Post Office see Herbert Joyce, *The History of the Post Office* (London, 1893).
91 Samuel Prout, *Rudiments of Landscape* (London, 1813), p. 17. My thanks to David Morris of the Whitworth Art Gallery for bringing this work to my attention.