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## **‘A Veritable Palace for the Hard-Working Labourer’? Space, Material Culture and Inmate Experience in London’s Rowton Houses, 1892-1914**

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### **Introduction**

In 1898, Halboro Denham, a little known writer, travelled to Clerkenwell, not far from central London, to report on a new kind of charitable institution which was attracting much attention from the press. Impressed by the ‘immense and imposing structure’ before him, the writer stepped off the busy street into the ‘well managed’ interior of Rowton House, King’s Cross - where he found ‘a veritable palace for the hard-working labourer’.<sup>1</sup> Rowton Houses were large-scale institutional spaces that each housed hundreds of single men in turn-of the century London. This paper examines Rowton Houses through their material culture and considers the influence of ideas of home life, circulated and celebrated in nineteenth-century culture, on the design and representation of Rowton Houses. But it also explores the domestic life constructed and experienced by those who lived there.

Lord Rowton, a Tory peer and philanthropist, a nephew of the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, and formerly Disraeli’s private secretary, opened the first Rowton House at Vauxhall in 1892.<sup>2</sup> A lodging house for working men, this enterprise was not solely charitable but was designed to be self-supporting; it was one of a range of semi-philanthropic initiatives that emerged in response to the 1880s housing crisis in London. The habitations of the urban poor caused a great deal of anxiety, especially common lodging houses, which were

thought to harbour criminality and disease. Rowton had surveyed conditions in common lodging houses in the East End of London for the Guinness Trust in about 1890, and Rowton House, Vauxhall, was his attempt to provide improved accommodation for the single working man.<sup>3</sup> The success of the first House led to the establishment of Rowton Houses as a limited company which built five, successively larger, Houses at King's Cross (1896), Newington Butts (near the Elephant and Castle, 1897), Hammersmith (1899), Whitechapel (1902) and Camden Town (1905), which alone contained over 1000 beds. Despite their modest cost of 6d a night, the buildings offered impressive suites of day rooms, separate laundry facilities, and individual cubicles on the floors above and were far in advance of comparable lodging houses. While the company architect was responsible for the overall buildings, Rowton and his co-director Richard Farrant personally oversaw the interior design.

It is widely accepted that the notion of home life played a central part in nineteenth-century middle-class culture. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's seminal *Family Fortunes* demonstrated how a growth in evangelicalism helped create a culture of domestic virtue, with an emphasis on differentiated male and female roles.<sup>4</sup> For Davidoff and Hall, home was not just a physical space but also an imagined moral world. The importance of middle-class domestic objects as carriers of meaning has been emphasised by Deborah Cohen and Margaret Ponsoyby.<sup>5</sup> Jane Hamlett has recently shown how material and spatial practices in the home created a shared middle-class identity.<sup>6</sup> Working-class home life, and the significance of ideas about 'respectability' in creating different domestic practices, has been explored by Martin Daunton, Geoffrey Crossick, and most recently by Victoria Kelley.<sup>7</sup> What we know less about is how domesticity - the shared material practices created in the home and the values that were attached to them - were played out within institutional life. Quintin Colville and Amy Milne-Smith suggest that elite men away from home could forge parallel domesticities in the club and the officers' quarters,<sup>8</sup> but what of those lower down the social scale? This chapter explores the influence of powerful, predominantly middle-class ideas of domesticity, on an institution designed for and (mostly) inhabited by working-class men.

The study of material culture - that is, the cultural and social meanings ascribed to the physical world and the practices associated with it - has recently begun to be used quite widely by historians.<sup>9</sup> As Judy Attfield has explained, people use goods 'as vehicles of meaning through which [they] negotiate their relations with each other and the world at large'.<sup>10</sup> Material culture can be helpful when exploring the lives of underprivileged groups in society. As the anthropologist Daniel Miller puts it, 'however oppressed and apparently culturally impoverished, most people nevertheless access the creative potential of the

unpromising material goods around them.<sup>11</sup> If, as is often the case, the words of the poor do not survive, sometimes we do have evidence of their possessions. Indeed, recent work by Tim Hitchcock, Peter King, and Pamela Sharpe on the eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century poor has argued that historical research should turn to the voices of the poor and the material strategies they adopted in order to survive.<sup>12</sup> One way of doing this is to consider the spaces the poor inhabited, and the objects they were provided with, and how such things could be used. John Styles explores the relationship between material culture and agency in his study of spaces for eighteenth-century lodgers.<sup>13</sup> Amanda Vickery examines how lodgers sought privacy through locking, separation and concealment in metropolitan lodgings in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>14</sup> Our chapter takes up this approach in the study of the later-nineteenth-century poor. Although recovering the voices of the poorer lodgers in Rowton Houses is highly problematic (as the ensuing discussion will show) one way forward is to look at the spaces they inhabited and the objects they were allowed to have, as well as the way in which they responded to these.

Opening up the doors of Rowton Houses also allows us to look closely at nineteenth-century class relationships. Recent work on social housing and philanthropy in London focuses on the narratives of middle- and upper-class men and women who made it their mission to enter the slums.<sup>15</sup> This is epitomised by Seth Koven's *Slumming* which considers this exercise in class-crossing from a range of perspectives.<sup>16</sup> A recent essay by Ruth Livesey demonstrates the tensions often inherent in spaces created by the middle and upper classes for the 'improvement' of others. Eluding the middle-class ideal of home, tenants in 'model dwellings' in East Smithfield reclaimed the buildings' landings to exchange money, gossip and sexual favours.<sup>17</sup> While British social housing, including model lodging houses, has frequently been discussed as an institutional, philanthropic phenomenon,<sup>18</sup> aside from Livesey's work there have been few attempts to consider the use of space in these institutions.<sup>19</sup> Rowton Houses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries offer a particularly interesting example of class-crossing. We consider how the transmission of a set of ideas was attempted through the material world - and the limitations and failings of that transmission. The founders of Rowton Houses and many journalists represented Rowton interiors as laden with domesticity, and they expected that their facilities would stimulate ideal behaviour amongst the men. Yet the residents of Rowton Houses, rather than absorbing or resisting the domesticity apparently created by their surroundings, had their own ideas about how to achieve a sense of comfort, and a feeling of security.

## Rowton Houses in Words and Images

Rowton Houses were the subject of thousands of column inches in which they were almost universally praised in all corners and political stamps of the press. They were also very frequently photographed. The first section of this chapter explores how Rowton Houses were represented in the press, through words and images. As would be expected at this date, hygiene and fireproofing featured strongly in these accounts, most of which were heavily influenced by images and descriptions supplied by the company. But there was also an extraordinary emphasis upon the domesticity and the homelike qualities of the day rooms. Tory and Liberal London-based newspapers, provincial newspapers, the popular illustrated periodical press, and articles in specialist medical and architectural publications, all reported at length on every aspect of Rowton Houses' design and management.

While it did not advertise directly, Rowton Houses Limited made early use of photography to promote the aims of the company to potential lodgers - to allay public unease at the cheap housing together of large groups of poor men, and to satisfy shareholder concerns. They also very carefully presented the light and airy interiors of Rowton Houses as the antithesis of the common lodging house of popular imagination, which was dirty, dark, overcrowded and criminal.<sup>20</sup> High quality prints were used as internal records but reached a wider audience through the press, where they appeared in seemingly independently authored magazine articles and newspaper reports. Archival evidence indicates that the company supplied these, with text, in the fashion of a modern press release, written by the directors with assistance from the architect. Not surprisingly, given his background, Rowton was on first name terms with London newspaper proprietors, with whom he corresponded about Rowton Houses, notably Oliver Borthwick at *The Morning Post*.<sup>21</sup> He also approached others personally, such as Mr Lloyd of *Lloyd's News*, prior to the appearance of long articles in their publications.<sup>22</sup> Photographs also formed part of an article on the capital's model lodging houses in George Sims's influential and popular work of photojournalism, *Living London*, which, for the first time, showed Rowton Houses populated with lodgers.

The discussion on interiors was focused on their look and feel – summed up in *The Manchester Guardian*'s observation that 'comfort' as well 'health and cleanliness' were attended to and, moreover, 'the internal decorations are artistic'.<sup>23</sup> Like other newspapers, *The Manchester Guardian* was also very keen to portray the institution as 'domestic', characterising the Vauxhall House as 'cheerful' and 'homely'.<sup>24</sup> Again and again in the *The Lancet*'s ostensibly sanitary reports, the 'homely' nature of the interiors was stressed: at

Vauxhall it was claimed that ‘No one can enter [the House] without being gratified with the inviting appearance of homeliness, comfort and trust which are so pre-eminently the characteristics of everything in this [reading] room.’<sup>25</sup>

In 1896, in the second of a series of ‘Special Sanitary Commissions on Private Action in Respect of Common Lodging Houses’ *The Lancet* published a mostly favourable report on the newly opened Rowton House, King’s Cross. It began:

To Lord Rowton belongs the honour of being the first to supply a real need in the lives of single men of the poorer working classes in London – a cheap and comfortable home. We say home advisedly, for if we eliminate the factor of mixed family life – not by any means an unimportant one – Rowton Houses, of which there are now two, really provide all that is implied by that word so dear to the heart of every true Englishman – “Home.”<sup>26</sup>

The nine-page report was dense with text but it was also illustrated with five large photographs of the principal spaces of the interior, including the Smoking Room shown in *Fig. 1*.

This idea of home, presented by *The Lancet* and other publications, as a shared, English, identity that might transcend class boundaries, was also clearly present in the discussion of thematic decorative choices. These were seemingly endlessly mulled over - perhaps because these often cultural reference points were expected to strike a chord with readers, but also because these middle- and upper-class reformers believed in the educative power of the visual and material world. Pictures at the King’s Cross House included Landseer’s ‘Horse-Shoeing’, Henry Wallis’s ‘Elaine’, and a chromolithograph of Millais’s ‘Bubbles’ in the dining room, while Rosa Bonheur’s ‘Horses coming from the Fair’, and ‘Prince Rupert: His Last Charge at Edge Hill’, was hung in the library. *The Economic Review* reported in 1893 that at Vauxhall ‘the walls of the smoking rooms and reading-rooms are hung with excellent prints of the frescoes which adorn the walls of the Houses of Parliament.’<sup>27</sup>

The choice to surround inmates with the same images that hung in parliament (and the relatively high cultural range of the pictures displayed elsewhere – Farrant chose a set of Boydell’s scenes from Shakespeare of 1802 for the Newington Butts House<sup>28</sup>) can be seen as reinforcing the sense of shared Englishness that bound men together, transcending class boundaries. At Whitechapel, the décor of the smoking room rendered this even more explicit, as the walls were dominated by ‘a series of panels emblematic of THE SEASONS’, depicting scenes of productive rural labour. These underlined the message of the much smaller painting

above the fireplace in which ‘a symbolical figure of England sits enthroned while the fruits of the land are brought to her by the cultivators.’<sup>29</sup> The accompanying panels introduced striking images of the male labouring body into this feminised vision of England and Englishness, which, in a space designed for working men, was a powerful political as well as social idea. Lodgers could see this daily but photography showed it to a much wider audience.

Journalists writing about Rowton Houses often made comparisons with hotels and clubs in the West End for upper- and middle-class men. Thus, continuity between domesticity as it might be experienced in privileged male spaces, and what could be offered to the men who stayed in Rowton Houses, was stressed. Resident W. A. Somerville noted that Rowton Houses ‘provided for him, in a humble way, comforts that are enjoyed by those who frequent the great club houses in Piccadilly and Pall Mall.’<sup>30</sup> Periodical writers were in no doubt that the care expended on the decoration and furnishings at Rowton Houses contributed to an atmosphere of warm domesticity. *All the Year Round* noted: ‘At the other end of the corridor is a sitting-room, as pleasant and cosy a room as can be imagined, with a chequered dado of glazed tiles and walls of a soft, warm tint, hung with good engravings. Around each of the two blazing fires is gathered a sociable circle’.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, almost the only criticism of Rowton Houses came from politicians and clergymen, some of whom felt that the Houses made bachelor life too attractive to working men, and discouraged marriage.<sup>32</sup>

The creation of a domesticity that transcended class boundaries was also emphasised by playing up the similarities between the interiors at Rowton House and those of upper- and middle-class homes. *The Lancet* described an area in the reading room of the King’s Cross House that Rowton had apparently christened the ‘cosy corner’.<sup>33</sup> The ‘cosy corner’ was a common staple in domestic advice manuals aimed at the middle classes in this period, and this indicates how transferable some of the language of domesticity could be.<sup>34</sup> The smoking room and library at King’s Cross were also hung with stags’ heads, which Rowton had stalked himself (see *Fig. 1*).<sup>35</sup> Accounts of the opening of the House noted that this included a magnificent ‘royal’ that he shot last year ‘never expecting that he would end his days in a “doss-house”’.<sup>36</sup> The stags’ heads - typically found in masculine spaces such as the library or billiard room in upper-middle-class homes - are an interesting choice for this space. Perhaps Rowton, a keen hunter, had simply run out of room to display his many trophies. Yet the use of these objects also implies that the company sought to blur the distinction between spaces for upper- and middle-class masculinity and those for the working class.

Moreover, Rowton Houses were also particularly praised for extending privacy - a quality hitherto enshrined in middle-class domestic arrangements but widely assumed to be

absent from working-class homes - to their inmates. The press welcomed the relative lack of interference in the Houses by outside authorities. When the London County Council failed in its attempt to bring Rowton Houses under common lodging houses legislation in 1899, the front page of the *Illustrated London News* was delighted to report that ‘that institution, inhospitable for the first time in its history, shut the door in the inspector’s face’.<sup>37</sup> *The Newcastle Weekly Courant* shared the London papers’ view that Rowton Houses were hotels for working men rather than common lodging houses (and so exempt from municipal regulation and inspection), noting that such feeling was not only widespread but also transcended normal political and class divisions, as ‘what are known as Radical papers were the stoutest fighters for upholding the status and privacy of the poor men’s hotels’.<sup>38</sup> The press and lodgers applauded the notion that ‘There is no suggestion of charity. Everybody is on an equality’, as one resident put it in 1899,<sup>39</sup> and also the absence of ‘any interference with the religious, political, or social relationships of those who seek and who pay for its hospitality’.<sup>40</sup> One early press account singled out the cubicle sleeping arrangements for particular praise because ‘While the cubicle system insures each lodger privacy at night, the house is yet a democratic club’.<sup>41</sup> The cubicles were not presented as ‘homely’ in the same way as the communal dayrooms (*Fig. 2*). But in allowing individual privacy, said the press, they brought accommodation for the working classes to a newly civilised level. The equation of access to the cubicle with the opportunity for self-civilising chimes with Tom Crook’s recent argument about the appearance of the cubicle in a range of different Victorian contexts.<sup>42</sup> Crook argues that cubicles came about as a result of the wider impulse of ‘Liberal governmentality’, presumably embodied by institutional authorities. Our own findings on this issue, however, suggest that the Rowton authorities were influenced by an ideal of domestic privacy enshrined in the practices of middle- and upper-class home life and powerfully articulated in nineteenth-century culture, as well as the responses of residents to their offerings.

But expectations about the kind of domesticity that these spaces would create were also informed by other, idealised versions of sociability between working men, including the ‘spit and sawdust’ comfort of the public house.<sup>43</sup> Articles often described lodger camaraderie and a general sense of their feeling ‘at home’, occasionally portraying this through engravings of lodgers leaning on fireplaces or relaxing in chairs. The same idea was developed in photographs of carefully orchestrated ‘informal’ groups of furniture - the semi-circle of armchairs casually arranged around a fireplace or unseen corner was a recurring motif - and, strikingly, in *The Lancet* images, the prominent positioning of spittoons, which

can be seen in *Fig. 1*. The camera was also used to mitigate the institutional size of the Houses and to portray them as more intimate communal places for men. These images are quite different from most other contemporary press illustrations of institutional spaces for the poor, such as workhouses (and also prisons), where much more rudimentary furniture - and inmates - tended to appear in rows. Unlike workhouse photographs, Rowton interiors did not show inmates before 1900, and it seems likely that the photographer was deliberately avoiding comparisons with institutional photography as well as respecting lodgers' privacy. Instead, contented lodgers were suggested through the arrangement of furniture, and the placement of board games and newspapers in the dayrooms. Such compositions did not only conjure absent presences but were intended to be suggestive of comfort and 'home'. At King's Cross, for example, *The Lancet* reported that 'a large number of easy and other wooden chairs, some of which, for the benefit of the rheumatic and feeble, are placed around a fire in a recess at one end of the room'.<sup>44</sup>

'Home' was not only to be created through the material fabric and spatial arrangements within the buildings; it was also to be shaped by the less tangible notion of liberty. When the first House opened at Vauxhall, Rowton told *The Lancet* that 'one does not wish to have too much regulation at home, and, as I wish this to be a *home* for the working man, I want a minimum of regulation.'<sup>45</sup> Ten years after the first House was opened in 1892, lodgers made their first appearance in three photographs of Rowton House interiors. These were published in George Sims's influential periodical *Living London*, which, through an innovative combination of text and image, introduced readers to life in the new twentieth-century metropolis, including in its many charitable institutions. In two of these photographs of Rowton House, Hammersmith, the Superintendent is clearly identifiable by his clothes and manner but can be seen as more akin to a hotel doorman than the chief authority figure and even appears to enjoy the lodgers' company on the roof garden or 'promenade', as seen in *Fig. 3*. Like the interiors depicted in the company's photographs, this space was 'de-institutionalised' by presenting it as an ornamental garden for relaxation, with flower pots and rockeries, avoiding comparison with the more utilitarian airing- and exercise-yards of the workhouse and prison. However, it was widely reported that each Rowton House Superintendent was a non-commissioned officer who 'often chooses old comrades from his own regiment' when hiring staff,<sup>46</sup> and it is possible that these photographs were supposed to portray Rowton lodgers as men at ease with their sergeant. Through a combination of urban social observation and dramatic performance, *Living London* succeeded where the



institutional photographs failed - in picturing order without regulation, which Rowton equated with 'home'.<sup>47</sup>

### **'Shut up you bloody swine!': Life within Rowton Walls**

But did the Rowton men accept or resist the hopes of those who designed the spaces they lived in? Were they even aware of them? These questions are complicated by the nature of the surviving evidence. The second half of this chapter attempts to discover the thoughts and feelings of Rowton House residents, through examining personal accounts and crime records. It would be too simplistic to suggest that the two stories presented here are about representation on one hand, and experience on the other. Cultural imaginings of spaces often impinge on their occupants and, in the case of Rowton Houses, some of the writers who helped present the houses as a domestic haven also lived there on a daily basis. Many short personal accounts of Rowton life appeared in the press, some clearly written by 'slumming' journalists, donning the garb of the poor and spending a night at Rowton House for the sake of a story;<sup>48</sup> and others by longer term residents, jobbing writers who were able to turn their residential experiences to their advantage. Rowton residents also corresponded about the houses in the press. This chapter places these writings alongside other kinds of records, principally autobiographies and crime records. Published autobiographies offer a picture of Rowton life that was not deliberately constructed for the periodical press. Of course, these narratives are also shaped by the long processes of memory and the needs of editors and publishers, and therefore are far from offering an uncomplicated version of experience. Autobiographies must be read with an awareness that past experiences are reconstructed in relation to a later self, often as part of a life story in which great difficulties are overcome en route to personal success. We consider these alongside records of crime from the press, police accounts and the criminal courts. These sources carry their own interpretative issues: newspaper accounts are often salacious whilst excluding taboo-breaking subjects; police records, shaped by the needs of busy institutions, are often minimal; while witnesses often testified to what they thought a court wanted to hear. However, brought together, they present a very different picture of life in Rowton Houses.

The class make up of Rowton Houses was more complex than their creators intended. Although the houses were aimed at working men, in 1899 *The Review of Reviews* suggested that such was the extent of the middle-class occupancy of Rowton House, King's Cross, that working men 'are looked down upon, and made to feel themselves inferiors and interlopers.'<sup>49</sup> The 1901 census suggests that this wasn't quite the case at Vauxhall - here

‘general labourer’ was the most frequent occupation listed, although there were also a significant number of more ‘middle class’ occupations, including clerks and shopkeepers, as well as an estate agent, a book keeper and accountant. A number of Rowton residents (such as the poets William Mackenzie and W. H. Davies) were working writers, who found the cheap accommodation and space to write during the day very useful; these residents were far more likely to leave a written record and so their thoughts are disproportionately represented in our accounts of Rowton life. For that reason, court and police records are useful, as they are one of the few sources in which the voice of the more ordinary resident emerges.

Although these records show that many men arrested for criminal offences gave their address as a Rowton House,<sup>50</sup> recorded crime *within* the houses seems to have been relatively low. In the police notebook compiled by Booth investigator, George H. Duckworth, who accompanied Sergeant Sales on his patrol of Lambeth and Kennington in June 1899, it was stated of Rowton House, Newington Butts, that there was ‘very seldom a row’ and that the House had appeared ‘only once in the police court in 18 months.’<sup>51</sup> Rowton Houses do not appear frequently in either the reports of local police courts or the central criminal courts.<sup>52</sup> The crime and law sections of *The Times* between 1892 and 1914 include quite a few Rowton residents who were charged with committing crime, but only one case of a resident charged with stealing from other inmates.<sup>53</sup> There is evidence that in order to protect the privacy of inmates and the reputations of the houses, petty crimes may have gone unreported, and the House authorities were sometimes reluctant to assist the police.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Old Bailey transcripts reveal that superintendents policed the houses themselves.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, a few cases of serious crime in Rowton Houses did come before the Old Bailey between 1892 and 1914 which reveal that communal life in the houses was sometimes a world away from the cosy domesticity imagined by their creators.

It should be stated that with the notable exception of writers who depended on the reading rooms and library to continue their professions, most personal accounts did not dwell at length on the quality of the interiors or their facilities and were mostly unconcerned with things visual. They concentrated on more pressing matters, such as food and the lack of it, the retention of possessions, and the comfort or otherwise of the sleeping spaces. Above all they were concerned with the presence of other lodgers – physical, aural, and olfactory.

The ability to feel ‘at home’ might be dependent on the possibility of semi-permanent residence. From the early days lodgers were able to renew their cubicle tickets day by day, or week by week.<sup>56</sup> Early accounts of life in the Vauxhall House suggest that the majority of residents were booking rooms on a weekly, rather than a nightly, basis.<sup>57</sup> Long-term residents

might expect to return to the same cubicle, but this could not be guaranteed. When a porter was accused, in 1898, of ejecting a lodger from bed too violently, it was stated in his defence that he was protecting another lodger, who 'lived permanently at Rowton' and who claimed that the bed belonged to him.<sup>58</sup> A distinction was made between long-term residents and those who had just arrived for a night. However, as most cubicles had to be vacated during the day and could not be locked from the outside, inmates had little opportunity to establish continuity of possession through the display of personal objects or small decorative acts. The cubicles of weekly lodgers could also be searched for stolen goods. Old Bailey records describe a lodging house thief who, when apprehended by a policeman living undercover at Rowton House, King's Cross, for three weeks during 1908, was found to have 'a number of sheets wrapped round his body, and in his room was found a stick with a hook at the end with which he abstracted men's trousers from adjoining cubicles so that he might rifle the pockets.'<sup>59</sup>

Weekly residents received a key to a locker where personal things could be stored, longer term. Each had only one key (which court records indicate was often shared) but it is clear from Old Bailey cases that Rowton staff sometimes demanded that lockers be opened if suspicions arose as to what they were used for. Lockers were often the first port of call for the police if they suspected a Rowton resident of harbouring stolen goods. Several reports of trials in the police courts note that such items were found in the lockers, including, alongside jemmies and braces used for breaking and entering, invisible ink, a stolen concertina, a box of cartridges for use in a case of suspected attempted suicide, several cases of items used in counterfeiting currency, a stash of 2,457 cancelled stamps and chemicals for removing postmarks, and a 'quantity of tea'. But the lockers could also be secret, long-term repositories for personal items, prized by their owners but hidden from the world. In 1913, the eighty-one year old Horace W. Burleigh died, having been a resident of the Rowton House at Vauxhall for seven years. His locker, when opened, was found to contain 'hundreds of letters and photographs from different young girls.'<sup>60</sup>

For some early Rowton residents the ability to feel 'at home' was created not necessarily by ownership of a particular material space or belongings, but rather by continuity of residence and exchange and interaction with those around them. It was relationships with others - and the position of other bodies in space - that informed how comfortable they felt in the Houses. For W. A. Somerville, a struggling journalist who made a semi-permanent home at King's Cross in the late 1890s, the ability of the House to seem homelike lay in the atmosphere and social interaction that it allowed. He emphasised how it was 'More cheerful than the solitude

of a private room', and that 'Lord Rowton ... has provided a home where [the occupant] can pass his time in rational manner, where he may read books, write letters, and above all mix with what he pathetically calls "his mates".'<sup>61</sup>

To a certain extent, the carefully designed interiors did allow Rowton residents to interact in a communal fashion, recreating some of the qualities of 'home' that we might expect to find in a shared, family space. Colonel Lionel James, the war correspondent who spent a week at the King's Cross House in the 1900s, was struck by the warmth of the central hall: 'It was heated by a monster coke brazier, rectangular in shape, that stood in the centre of things.'<sup>62</sup> James himself, from a different class background to the majority of the inhabitants, felt rather put off by the circle around the fire: 'crossing-sweepers, pavement artists and other gutter-snipes who were combining the operation of drying their boots and socks with the toasting of kippers, bacon and bread.' He concluded that this reaction was however, unfair, as it was 'fulfilling the purpose of the institution.'<sup>63</sup> Others were more comfortable with communal cooking – this domestic practice, which would have taken place in the family home, was commonly reported amongst residents. In the early 1890s, two decades before he became the 'Red Vicar' of Thaxted, Conrad Noel, a Christian Socialist and member of the Independent Labour party, had spent some months living in the Vauxhall House. Looking back to his youth with some affection, he recalled how 'We cooked our meals in a common frying pan, which reminded me of the giant's pan in pantomime. We either bought our food outside or at the counter - eggs and bacon or a rasher of ham.'<sup>64</sup>

While Rowton inmates were unable to decorate, the cubicle system did at least afford them a degree of privacy and separation from their fellows at night. The cubicle storeys at Rowton Houses were designed to control the spread of fire and disease, but they also afforded some privacy and order. After initial experiments at Vauxhall, made by the company's first architects, Beeston & Burmester, all the cubicles of subsequent Houses had a window to the outside under their occupiers' control. At King's Cross, built by the new company architect, Harry Measures, *The Lancet* reported that the cubicles varied in size but that the 'minimum is 5 feet by 7 feet 6 inches, giving an area of 37 square feet 6 square inches.'<sup>65</sup> The wooden partitions between the cubicles were 7'6" high (leaving a gap of 1'6" at the top) and 6'6" high at the front between the cubicle and the corridor (leaving a gap of 2'6" at the top). Apart from a bed and bedding, each cubicle contained a chair, a shelf, a clothes-rail and a utensil (chamber pot). The arrangements were the same at subsequent Houses<sup>66</sup> and, with the exception of the new 'special bedrooms' or 'superior cubicles' (which were glazed at the top), the minimum cubicle measurements were the same in the last House at Camden Town.<sup>67</sup>

As well as affording individual privacy, the cubicles had an impact on the relationships between the men who slept at Rowton Houses. If the provision of separate cubicles was governed by moral concerns, the company did not say so. In fact it had initially sought 'to enable men who were associated in their work to sleep together' by having some rooms at Vauxhall with several beds in them. Sir Richard Farrant, who became Chairman of the Company on Rowton's death in 1903, recorded in 1904 that 'When the house was opened, however, it was soon found that these rooms were not so popular as the separate cubicles, and we had therefore to alter the arrangements and have separate cubicles entirely'.<sup>68</sup> John C. Schneider's study of urban lodging houses in North America in the same period also finds that the 'men seemed to prefer the cubicles because they offered privacy and the semblance of a hotel atmosphere' despite the presence of chicken wire at the top of the tiny cells.<sup>69</sup>

If the moral implications of cubicle living were elided by Rowton Houses, they were a key concern of those who built residential institutions elsewhere, particularly boys' public schools. Reporting favourably on the opening of the first House at Vauxhall, *The Manchester Guardian* associated the cubicle system with other institutions, noting first that 'the sleeping arrangements are those of a ship's cabin',<sup>70</sup> and, later, that they were comparable to a 'monastic establishment on a huge scale'.<sup>71</sup> Cubicles probably facilitated rather than inhibited illicit liaisons within the institution, as Matt Houlbrook certainly finds to be the case in Rowton Houses after 1918.<sup>72</sup> Unfortunately there is very little evidence of the nature of sexual relationships between men in Rowton Houses before this date. Legal records of homosexual activity yield little and are rarely linked to a precise location.<sup>73</sup> Anecdotal accounts of Rowton life are unsurprisingly silent on this taboo subject, although one inmate complained that sleep was impossible because of 'sundry grunts, and other indescribable noises', which may be a veiled reference to masturbation or sex between two men.<sup>74</sup>

This was, however, a partial privacy. Anyone who used a cubicle for an assignation, might be spotted by an over-curious fellow resident. The cubicles were open at the floor and ceiling, with steel mesh on top, after early attempts at 'fishing' by fellow lodgers showed the cubicles to be insecure. As the opening between the cubicle partitions and the ceiling measured eighteen inches (just under 50cm), it was possible to see into neighbouring cubicles by standing on the bed. This is revealed by a case of fire setting, tried before the Old Bailey in October 1893. George Edwards, a resident at the Vauxhall House, was tried for setting light to things in his cubicle. Frank Clark, a fellow resident, described the incident in court. He located the flames by jumping up onto his bed and looking into the adjacent cubicle.<sup>75</sup>

The cubicle partitions were also completely ineffective as barriers against sound. Coughs and snoring were ubiquitous, and figure in many accounts.<sup>76</sup> An observer at the Vauxhall House in the 1890s noted: ‘The noise of snoring was loud, but louder still was the persistence banging on the wall, accompanied with cries of “Shut up, you bloody swine!” so that sleep was generally impossible.’<sup>77</sup>

The privacy of the cubicles was also compromised by the power of porters and superintendents to enter at any time, and sometimes lay violent hands on their occupants. The Rowton authorities were criticised by some inmates. James writes of the ‘overbearing dragooning’ of officials.<sup>78</sup> The manager at King’s Cross, ‘an Ex-Sergeant-Major of the Guards’, also figures rather equivocally in Mackenzie’s *Rowton House Rhymes*.<sup>79</sup> Many staff had previously worked in the army, and, despite the claims of some residents that the Houses were not adequately policed, were clearly capable of enforcing physical discipline.<sup>80</sup> This is demonstrated by two instances in which Rowton porters were brought before the courts. William Allen, head porter at King’s Cross, was charged at Clerkenwell Police Court in 1900 with the manslaughter of John Neate, a 41-year-old former bank clerk and Rowton resident.<sup>81</sup> A verdict of ‘death from apoplexy’ was reached, but the court was of the opinion that Allen had used more violence than necessary.<sup>82</sup> In 1898, Henry Beckenham, the assistant porter at Vauxhall was charged with having assaulted Thomas Barrett, a hammerman resident at the House. Beckenham was accused of having entered Barrett’s cubicle at two in the morning, seizing him and pulling him from bed, and hitting and kicking him, because another resident, Arthur Smith, had apparently said that Barrett was in his bed. However, Beckenham’s actions were upheld by the court, which supported Smith’s assertion that ‘the porter used no more violence than necessary in ejecting him.’<sup>83</sup> What this shows is that it was acceptable for a porter to enter a man’s cubicle, and indeed to violently lay hands on him if his behaviour was deemed inappropriate. The thin cubicle walls offered only partial protection from the presence of other bodies and the threat of physical violence, sanctioned by the institution itself.

Fellow lodgers could also pose a material, and sometimes, physical danger. The Parliamentary Committee on Vagrancy in 1906 noted the presence of former prisoners in Rowton Houses, stating that when ‘men leave prisons [they] use one form of institution and another’, often drifting between the Casual Ward, the common lodging house and Rowton Houses.<sup>84</sup> Other cases supported the accusation that Rowton Houses were used by ex-convicts. Yet serious crimes, including large-scale, theft were unusual. We have identified only one case that was brought before the courts against a Rowton resident for stealing from

other inmates. On Christmas Day 1906, Peter Hall, a thirty-eight year old labourer and resident at the Newington Butts House, came before the police court at Lambeth for breaking into 80 lockers over a period of six weeks and stealing ‘a considerable amount of property.’<sup>85</sup> It was noted by the court that he had been out of work for a long time. But petty theft (perhaps not large enough to be reported to the police) seems to have been commonplace. As we have seen, the design of the cubicles was altered in the 1900s to prevent theft from over the top of the cubicle. By 1904, it had also become necessary to lock the library books away behind glass doors. Nevertheless, according to a Rowton resident after the First World War, the threat of losing one’s possessions here was far less than in a common lodging house.<sup>86</sup>

Small, everyday thefts, particularly of foodstuffs, created a culture in which the inmates relied and preyed on each other simultaneously. Food was a particular target. A 1910 article warned that: ‘should the unfortunate novice happen to turn his back a moment upon his supper, it is promptly “lifted” by “one of the old guard”, as they are known, and he goes supperless to bed.’<sup>87</sup> Conrad Noel remembered that when cooking: ‘it was difficult to guard one’s particular portion in the pan from some hungry tramp, who sometimes seized it if one was not on the look-out.’<sup>88</sup>

For the inmate who wrote anonymously for *The Charity Organisation Review*, the cosy domesticity that Rowton had hoped to create had failed to materialise - instead, the house actually encouraged a culture of shabby shiftlessness and cadging.<sup>89</sup> Yet the possibility of theft seems to have been viewed almost humorously in many accounts. Mackenzie devoted an entire poem to the theme in ‘My Friend – Mr Spunge’ which makes light of the story of a man who, feigning literary interests, cadges small amounts of money from the poet for some months until Mackenzie stumbles on his post office book.<sup>90</sup> But the cadger’s performance is celebrated, as much as it is denigrated.

The degree to which an inmate might feel this sense of threat varied. For younger, more vulnerable lodgers, this culture could be a source of considerable anxiety. The sixteen-year old Jack Smithers, a Rowton resident in 1907, recorded his dislike of, and unease in, the Houses in his autobiography. According to Smithers, even keeping hold of soap whilst washing in the communal wash rooms required constant vigilance:

if you are lucky enough to be possessed of a piece, then watch it, even while you are washing your eyes. Your eyes would smart, for they had to be kept open whether the soap got into them or not. The small cake of soap might be imagined to have a spring somewhere inside it, which automatically went into

action as soon as one's eyes were closed, for at the least carelessness that piece of soap would vanish as quick as light.<sup>91</sup>

Smithers's account of his brief stint at Rowton figures in a larger story of family breakdown. His father had been a successful publisher, but had rapidly slipped down the social scale, leaving Smithers and his mother destitute and homeless on his death. Deserted by his mother, Smithers was forced to take shelter at (probably) the King's Cross Rowton House. The inadequacies of the house are thus compounded in the narrative by Smithers's loss of his familial home and his sense of class slippage. Nonetheless, we can read this as evidence of how more vulnerable inhabitants might have responded to their surroundings.

By the late nineteenth century, large-scale residential institutions were a commonplace feature of the British landscape, both urban and rural. The idea of the institution had become a powerful metaphor, and certain styles of building and architectural features were associated with it. A description of the Hammersmith Rowton House, in a Sheffield newspaper in 1900, took the architect (Harry Measures) to task for not moving away from the architectural features of the institution: 'a vast pile of terraced windows and those flanking towers significant of exactly what Rowton House is not – a prison, a workhouse, or a lunatic asylum.'<sup>92</sup> As we have seen, the Rowton directors resisted these references, and sought to represent the Houses' interior spaces as 'domestic'. Nonetheless, when residents committed their experiences to paper they were unable to break away from institutional comparisons. Comparisons with the prison were frequently made by slumming journalists,<sup>93</sup> and also by longer-term residents.<sup>94</sup> One short-term inmate in the mid 1900s, although positive about some aspects of the Houses, remembered: 'I hated, however, the clanging bell in the morning and the raucous voice of unquestionable authority that informed us that we had half-an-hour in which to be clear of our accommodation ... It was something, I imagined, short of a prison routine'.<sup>95</sup> Ex-public schoolboy and writer Brian Lunn, who chose to stay at the Camden Town House on short-term trips to London in the 1930s in order to have more money to spend on alcohol, made a more unusual comparison. He too was piqued by the bells, as they reminded him of his schooldays at Westminster.<sup>96</sup> Even the legions of journalists who praised the domesticity of the Houses to the skies were unable to completely escape from the idea of the institution. Throughout these texts the resident men are referred to as 'inmates' as well as lodgers, betraying an unspoken alignment with the prison, workhouse and asylum.



## Conclusion

Rowton Houses were popular, successful and often nearly full. They were a considerable improvement on common lodging houses, and even the earlier model lodging houses of the era. For many single men, they were clearly the best available option. There was a marked contrast, however, in the way in which they were often imagined in the press, and the way in which inhabitants seem to have experienced them on a daily basis. Discussions of Rowton House interiors in the press suggest that the company and journalists collaborated in portraying life at Rowton as essentially ‘domestic’ according to established middle-class ideas and expectations about what this should be. The language of late-nineteenth-century middle-class domesticity was used to describe spaces at Rowton that it was hoped would civilise and normalise working men. A careful reading of the company’s photographs reveals deliberate attempts to de-institutionalise the space.

But there are clear limits to this reading of life at Rowton Houses. From what we can tell from the available sources, Rowton residents managed to feel at home, or at least achieved a sense of comfort and security within the Houses, not through identification with imagery or interior design, but through continual residence, and through familiarity with the buildings and their routines and with some of their fellow lodgers. Rowton inhabitants did not resist the version of the institution that was portrayed in the press or conveyed on the Houses’ walls, but they had other more pressing concerns. Security and comfort was produced, or removed, by the presence of other bodies in space – it was the other lodgers, and the staff, as well as the rules that governed them, that were important in this equation. The cubicles offered a partial privacy at best. And while these may have allowed some sexual assignations, they were also vulnerable to the gaze of neighbours and to the entry and potential violence of the porters. Those who felt most uncomfortable pointed to the noise and disruption created by others, and to the material threat of theft. When describing Rowton Houses, lodgers were often unable to break away from the now powerful metaphor of institutional life – ultimately they viewed themselves as inhabiting an institution rather than a home.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Death of Lord Rowton’, *Times*, Friday November 10 1903, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> R. Farrant, ‘Lord Rowton and Rowton Houses’, *Cornhill*, 16, (January-June) 1904, pp. 835-844, p. 835.

<sup>4</sup> L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987). Although criticised by Amanda Vickery, see A. Vickery, ‘Golden age to separate spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women’s History’, *Historical Journal*, 36:2 (1993), pp. 383-414.

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- 6 J. Hamlett, *Material Relations: Middle-Class Families and Domestic Interiors in England, 1850-1910* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).
- 7 M. J. Daunton, 'Public Place and Private Space: The Victorian City and the Working-Class Household', in D. Fraser and A. Sutcliffe (eds), *The Pursuit of Urban History* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), pp. 212-233; G. Crossick, 'The Labour Aristocracy and its Values: A Study of Mid-Victorian Kentish London', *Victorian Studies*, 19:3 (1978), 301-328; V. Kelley, *Soap and Water: Cleanliness, Dirt and the Working Classes in Victorian and Edwardian Britain* (I. B. Tauris, 2010).
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- 9 See L. Taylor, *The Study of Dress History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 64-89. See also J. Hamlett, 'The British Domestic Interior in Cultural and Social History: Review Essay', *Cultural and Social History* 6:1 (2009), pp. 97-107 and K. Harvey (ed.), *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).
- <sup>10</sup> J. Attfield, *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), p. 75.
- 11 D. Miller, *Acknowledging Consumption: A Review of New Studies* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 1.
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- 13 J. Styles, 'Lodging at the Old Bailey: Lodgings and their Furnishing in Eighteenth-Century London', in J. Styles and A. Vickery (eds.), *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700-1830* (New Haven, CT: 2006), pp.
- <sup>14</sup> A. Vickery, 'An Englishman's Home Is His Castle? Thresholds, Boundaries and Privacies in the Eighteenth-Century London House', *Past & Present*, 99:1, pp. 147-173.
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