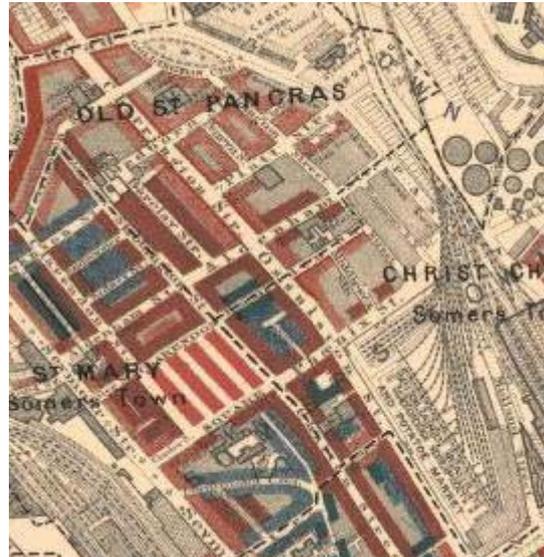


Booth's view of Somers Town in 1898

Charles Booth's study of poverty in London in the 1890s is most famous in the colour-coded maps it produced. Equally interesting are the notebooks of Booth's street tours with local police which give a pen picture of an area. Booth toured Somers Town with Inspector Bowles on 15th November 1898, and as **Thomas F. Wilson** lived in almost every street in the district at some time in his life, the following extracts recreate his environment:



“Once south of Oakley Square and passed its protecting line of respectability – Werrington Street – a bit of “the real Somers Town” is reached, and the small block bounded by Seymour [now Eversholt] Street, Johnson Street, Stibbington Street and Aldenham Street is one of the worst areas remaining in the whole of the sub-division. It has improved somewhat, and the police give it a fair character as regards criminality. But it remains a dark, if not very black corner of London.

JOHNSON STREET: the west end is the worst, west of Clarendon Street. 3 and 2½ storey houses; towzled haired women, standing at open doors, bare-armed; dirty children, and the houses with too many broken windows, stuffed with temporary mendings. But nothing is charged against the street worse than roughness and drunkenness. This end goes from dark blue barred to dark blue [Very poor, casual. Chronic want.]. East of Clarendon Street things improve somewhat, and several of the houses are clearly occupied by well-to-do folk, including a showy undertaker's establishment. From dark blue barred to purple [Mixed. Some comfortable others poor.].

South down STIBBINGTON STREET: 3 storey houses with a few shops. Medburn Street Board School gradually extending on the east side, and this extreme west end of the street, like the extreme south, somewhat better than the middle between Johnson and Aldenham Streets but the whole remains purple [Mixed. Some comfortable but other poor.].

West are BRIDGEWATER STREET and SIDNEY STREET: short streets, 3 storey houses very much alike in character. “Rather rough at times” drunkenness etc, most doors open, but perhaps above dark blue standard [Very poor, casual. Chronic want]; children as a rule decently clad. Incline to dark blue for both, instead of the light blue [Poor. 18s. to 21s. a week for a moderate family.] of map for Bridgewater Street and dark blue barred of Sidney Street.

ALDENHAM STREET west of Stibbington Street: 3 storey houses; “more of a thoroughfare than Johnson Street but very much the same class of people in it, as in the better end of the latter”. Purple as map [Mixed. Some comfortable other poor.].

Much the same in character is CLARENDON STREET: 2 and 3 storey houses; a few shops at north end; purple as map [Mixed. Some comfortable other poor.].

Parallel on the west is LITTLE CLARENDON STREET: a narrow thoroughfare of bad repute, although even here Bowles thought that there was not much crime. It is however the worst spot in the immediate neighbourhood and a good many prostitutes and amateurish thieves are living here. The houses are small, 2 storeyed, and do not look so poor as those of Sidney Street. Perhaps the gains of vice show themselves, but there is much obvious dark blue [Very poor, casual. Chronic want] and this should be the colour of the street with a black bar, instead of the unrelieved black of the map [Lowest class. Vicious, semi-criminal.]. The local name for the street is "Little Hell", and prisoners on being charged not infrequently describe themselves as living in this bye way of the nether regions. The ground landlord of this street, as so much of Somers Town, is Lady Henry Somerset, and in Little Clarendon Street Bowles said she was the house landlord as well, collecting rents through an agent. Subsequent information goes to disprove this statement.

SEYMOUR STREET: south of Johnson Street has smaller shops; the buildings are 3 storeyed, and the whole of the rest of the street is rightly coloured pink [Fairly comfortable. Good ordinary earnings]. The coffee house at No 174 is suspected as a brothel."

On 23rd November 1898, Booth was out once more with Inspector Bowles, and assessed the street where Thomas F. Wilson and his family lived at the time of the 1911 Census:

"EQUITY BUILDINGS: a queer little paved cul de sac; low one storey two-roomed cottages, with a little wash-house and yard behind; been done up during last year. Doors open straight into rooms; some dark blue [Very poor, casual. Chronic want.], but many of the houses appeared to be very full of furniture; rents from 6/6 to 7/-; leave light blue, as map [Poor. 18s. to 21s. a week for a moderate family.]."