



ST BARTHOLOMEW THE GREAT
AND CLOTH FAIR

THE SUBJECT OF THIS PHOTOGRAPHY BELONGS TO THE
PROPERTY OF THE
PHOTOGRAPHERS OF THE
LONDON AND WESTMINSTER PHOTOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

ART IN FOCUS

Relics of Old London

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YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART

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RELICS OF OLD LONDON

When the Oxford Arms, a beloved London coaching inn, faced destruction in 1875, a group of friends united to memorialize this center for travel, social life, and commerce by commissioning photographs of the building. Over the following decade, the Society for Photographing Relics of Old London continued to issue photographs of buildings that were abandoned, altered, or soon to be destroyed, to honor bygone and overlooked sites and to rouse public sentiment against such development projects. The series *Relics of Old London* is comprised of 120 carbon prints from glass plate negatives taken between 1875 and 1886 by the commercial photographers Alfred and John Bool, and Henry and Thomas James Dixon. It also includes a historical commentary, written and researched by the antiquarian scholar Alfred Marks (1833–1912), the founder and driving force behind the project.

Relics presents London's history through its endangered architectural past, focusing on the Tudor and Stuart architecture of urban institutions that were growing obsolete in the wake of industrial development, population growth, and new forms of transport. Defending endangered buildings and lost ways of life, the society created a permanent pictorial archive resonant with an antiquarian sense of place and heritage. *Relics* pays tribute to collective memories associated with these buildings, preserving their legacies and cementing their eminence in urban history. Though many of the buildings pictured no longer exist, the collection endures as a historical document and richly realized aesthetic vision. Photographic surveys for the historic preservation of the city's buildings continue today, informed and inspired by the society's immortalization of preindustrial London's architecture and identity.



ABOVE Alfred and John Bool, No. 4, "The Oxford Arms, Warwick Lane," 1875

PREVIOUS G. W. Colton, "The Environs of London" from *Colton's General Atlas of the World* (New York: G. W. & C. B. Colton & Co., 1886), etching, David Rumsey Map Collection

NEXT Henry and Thomas Dixon, No. 79, "The Golden Axe, St. Mary Axe," 1883



PHOTOGRAPHING THE RELICS

Relics of Old London aimed to preserve London's past through modern means. Photography was among the most innovative and fast-changing visual technologies of the time. Alfred Marks selected and researched the subject of each site, but he left the composition of the photographs to the commercial photographers he hired. They overcame obstacles of traffic, crowds, weather, lighting, and perspectival distortions, as well as the technical aspects of the photographic processes they used, to produce views that were true to each unique place. The first twenty-four photographs in the series, by Alfred and John Bool, were taken as wet collodion glass plate negatives. This decades-old technique required large glass plates (of the same size as the prints on display here) to be covered in a light-sensitive solution and then remain wet as they were prepared, exposed in the camera, and developed in a portable darkroom, all on-site. From 1879, Marks replaced the Bools with another pair of photographers, Henry and Thomas James Dixon, who specialized in the use of new and more convenient gelatin dry plates, which allowed shorter exposures under challenging light conditions.

The Dixons also produced all the carbon prints in the series, from the Bools' negatives and then from their own. The choice of the expensive and technically complex carbon print process, in which the image is formed in carbon pigment rather than the inherently unstable silver compounds used to make most photographic prints, was significant. Printing in "permanent carbon" demonstrated the society's commitment to ensuring the survival—in pictures—of buildings otherwise lost to posterity.

PAST & PRESENT

What remains of Old London? How do we see and measure the losses? These photographs of ruptures and remainders in the London skyline evoke the dramatic transformations of the late Victorian metropole. In “Temple Bar,” the ceremonial gate to the City of London looms ominously, a shadow of its former self. Attributed to the architect Christopher Wren, it was dismantled in 1878 and preserved elsewhere until 2004, when it was rebuilt half a mile from its original location. Although the structure’s ornate masonry was cleaned for the reinstallation, the grime that had accreted by the nineteenth century is memorialized in the *Relics* photograph. In “The Oxford Arms, Warwick Lane,” the baroque specter of St. Paul’s Cathedral, also designed by Wren, peers out over the inn’s rooftops. This image is both timeless and expressive of the passage of time: an eternal piece of London’s skyline, tightly circumscribed by the now-lost decaying structure in the foreground. In “The Golden Axe, St. Mary Axe,” a dilapidated house with rare overhanging gables appears shortly before its demolition. In 2003, this neighborhood saw the completion of Norman Foster’s 30 St. Mary Axe, a forty-story skyscraper popularly known as “the Gherkin,” whose curves of steel and glass now testify to the changes of scale on the streets of the City.



RIGHT Alfred and John Bool, No. 19, “Temple Bar,” 1878



A WALK THROUGH OLD LONDON

This group of photographs offers the viewer the experience of walking through the streets of old London. The photographs were taken from eye level, and the strong sense of perspective and depth lead the viewer into the city. While other images in the series were captured from an elevated viewpoint to show panoramic facades, the more intimate and enclosed subjects—alleyways, side streets, and interiors—required the photographers to stand at ground level. The camera's position mimics the eye, lending an immersive quality and human scale to the places depicted.

In J. T. Brown's article "On the Application of Photography to Art and Art Purposes" (1858), he wrote, "The very genius, the very spirit of the place, will speak to future ages as they now speak to us."¹ With regard to *Relics*, today's viewer is historically removed from the buildings, many of which have been demolished. Yet the experiential quality that Brown describes—the "spirit of the place" rendered in these photographs—bridges the historical gap, bringing these buildings vividly into the present.

1. J. T. Brown, "On the Application of Photography to Art and Art Purposes," paper read to the Birmingham Photographic Society, *Photographic Notes* 8 (1858), 12-17.

LEFT Henry and Thomas James Dixon, No. 111, "Great Saint Helen's," 1886

HUMAN PRESENCE

The stated purpose of the *Relics* project was to document historical architecture, not to record contemporary life on the street, as was the aim of the work produced by Victorian social documentary photographers like Thomas Annan or John Thomson. Yet the visual conventions of architectural documentation called for using human figures to indicate scale and to enliven the composition. The majority of photographs in *Relics* are absent of people, suggesting that many sites were deliberately photographed early in the morning when the streets were still. The individuals pictured mostly appear carefully posed. Nonetheless, these images offer a captivating glimpse of the authentic everyday clothing and bearing of men, women, and children who, after over a century, have now become arresting historical relics themselves. In “The Old Bell, Holborn,” a child stands stiffly wearing a hat, stockings, and an apron-like skirt, while the men in “Queen’s Head Inn Yard, Southwark,” have casually rolled up their shirtsleeves. The blur of a passing wagon in “Old Houses, Aldgate” is a rare evocation of the tumult of urban life. Each subject’s gaze tugs the viewer’s eye more intensely into the Victorian present of the image, both enhancing and complicating the attention to the historical architectural detail that Marks and his photographers sought to foster.

RIGHT Henry and Thomas James Dixon, No. 87, “The Old Bell, Holborn,” 1884





COACHING INNS

The first images captured in the *Relics of Old London* series were prompted by the plans to level the Oxford Arms in 1875. Six of the city's oldest coaching inns were eventually photographed for the series. Of these only one, the George Inn in Southwark, remains standing today.

Coaching inns flourished throughout medieval Europe and were integral to preindustrial London's social life. Dispersed throughout the city, they offered important services to travelers, providing overnight lodging and fresh teams of horses. They were social hubs for a diverse community of travelers and locals. Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* begins at one of London's coaching inns. With the rise of the railway system, coaching inns lost their vital function and many went out of business.

By the end of the nineteenth century, those that survived were run-down and threatened with destruction.

Alfred Marks was the son of a coachbuilder, and his family's historic coachbuilding yard was demolished in his childhood. There was undoubtedly a personal element to Marks's nostalgia for these bygone institutions. His scholarly text in *Relics'* letterpress surveys a variety of literary and historical sources to bring the coaching inns to life. With fading signage and hints of horses and people, the inns appear as picturesque ruins of London's history, too important simply to erase from the urban landscape.

ABOVE Henry and Thomas James Dixon, No. 50, "King's Head Inn Yard, Southwark" (detail), 1881



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RENDERING REALITY

In contrast to the ornate archways, fireplaces, and facades highlighted in much of the *Relics of Old London* portfolio, the four photographs on display here bring into view the intersecting planes, geometric patterns, and stark visual contrast of London's streetscapes. Although *Relics* was largely intended to preserve objects of antiquated grandeur, many of the scenes in this group appear strikingly modernist to a viewer today.

The triangular roofs of "Old Houses in Bermondsey Street" create a regular and arresting pattern along a rigid perspective line. The continuous rows of windows in "Barnard's Inn" cut across the plain, monolithic building. In "St. Bartholomew the Great and Cloth Fair," overlapping shadows bisect leaning buildings, forming a series of angles that slice through the entire alley. "Little Dean's Yard" takes this abstraction to an extreme, showing the various angled roofs, wall textures, and layers of building in a series of tonalities that resembles an architectural rendering more than a real street.

Alfred Marks gave his photographers very specific instructions about what to capture. In attempting to convey the close quarters of the Cloth Fair and the massive stretch of Bermondsey roofs—Marks's chosen architectural details—in a formal composition, the photographers also drew attention to the pure form and function of these buildings.

LEFT Alfred and John Bool, No. 17, "St. Bartholomew the Great and Cloth Fair," 1877

A MATERIAL ARCHIVE

Upon its compilation, *Relics of Old London* was not framed and hung in galleries but stored in two boxed volumes of mounted images, more suggestive of a city archives than museum walls. When displayed in photography exhibitions, the prints were placed on a table for viewers to look through by hand. The photographers chose to produce the images as carbon prints because of their archival function as lasting records of buildings destined for destruction as modern London developed. Carbon was understood to be much less light sensitive than the cheaper photographic materials used to make more everyday prints. In addition, the accompanying letterpress included detailed scholarly excavations of the layers of history in each site photographed.

One of the primary uses of urban photography was to document the built world, which, according to many Londoners, was changing faster than the camera could capture it. Forces like industrialization, population growth, and urban renewal transformed the cities of Victorian England into unrecognizable sites of Dickensian squalor and architectural grandeur. *Relics of Old London* represented the first attempt in Britain at a photographic survey of historic buildings. But this considered presentation—in portfolios of green morocco leather, with gilt lettering—reveals that this archival project also presented the photographs as beautiful, expensive objects. These volumes highlight an aesthetic of the antiquarian that underscores the material archive of early historic preservation.

The nineteen carbon prints on display in this exhibition have been selected from *Relics of Old London* (London: Society for Photographing Relics of Old London, 1875–86), a leather portfolio with 120 carbon prints mounted on card, drawn from the Yale Center for British Art’s Paul Mellon Collection.

OBJECT LIST

Alfred Bool (1844–1926) and John Bool (1850–1933),
No. 1, “The Oxford Arms, Warwick Lane,” 1875

Alfred and John Bool, No. 4,
“The Oxford Arms, Warwick Lane,” 1875

Alfred and John Bool, No. 6,
“The Oxford Arms, Warwick Lane,” 1875

Alfred and John Bool, No. 16,
“St. Bartholomew the Great and Cloth Fair,” 1877

Alfred and John Bool, No. 17,
“St. Bartholomew the Great and Cloth Fair,” 1877

Alfred and John Bool, No. 19,
“Temple Bar,” 1878

Henry Dixon (1820–1893) and Thomas James Dixon (1857–1943),
No. 29, “Barnard’s Inn,” 1879

Henry and Thomas James Dixon, No. 45,
“Charterhouse, Grand Staircase,” 1880

Henry and Thomas James Dixon, No. 50,
“King’s Head Inn Yard, Southwark,” 1881

Henry and Thomas James Dixon, No. 54,
“Queen’s Head Inn Yard, Southwark,” 1881

Henry and Thomas James Dixon, No. 55,
“Queen’s Head Inn Yard, Southwark,” 1881

Henry and Thomas James Dixon, No. 57,
“St. Mary Overey’s Dock, Southwark,” 1881

Henry and Thomas James Dixon, No. 58,
“Old Houses in Bermondsey Street,” 1881

Henry and Thomas James Dixon, No. 61,
“Little Dean’s Yard, Westminster,” 1882

Henry and Thomas James Dixon, No. 77,
“Old Houses, Aldgate,” 1883

Henry and Thomas James Dixon, No. 79,
“The Golden Axe, St. Mary Axe,” 1883

Henry and Thomas James Dixon, No. 87,
“The Old Bell, Holborn,” 1884

Henry and Thomas James Dixon, No. 111,
“Great Saint Helen’s,” 1886

Henry and Thomas James Dixon, No. 112,
“Tennis Court, James Street, Haymarket,” 1886

Art in Focus is an annual initiative for members of the Center’s Student Guide Program, providing curatorial experience and an introduction to all aspects of exhibition practice. Student curators select objects for exhibition, write text panels and object labels, and make decisions about installation under the mentorship of Center curators and staff. In researching and presenting this exhibition, the students were guided by Chitra Ramalingam, Research Associate and Lecturer in History; Linda Friedlaender, Senior Curator of Education; and Jaime Ursic, Assistant Curator of Education. The student curators are Rose Davis, BR ’18; Zoe Dobuler, TC ’17; Emily Feldstein (Head of *Art in Focus*), PC ’16; Claire Goldsmith, ES ’18; Sergio Infante, CC ’18; Austin Johnson, PC ’16; Caroline Kanner, JE ’17; Anna Meixler, ES ’16; Nicholas Stewart, JE ’18; and Ari Zimmet, CC ’17.

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