

## “Human Sympathy is a Strange Thing”: An Overview of Abject Poverty in 18th Century London.

by Lucy Inglis

**A**bject poverty.\* Two words as overused as ‘awesome’ by gamers and ‘stunning’ by estate agents. They are also inseparable, as with ‘impending’ and ‘doom’. In the same way that impending means only ‘in the near future’, abject means ‘low in condition or status’ but when coupled with poverty, abject becomes pejorative and ‘contemptible’.

Those who discuss abject poverty in the 18th century rarely do so with an awareness of the negative connotations attached even to the phrase itself. Very often, historians and enthusiasts concerned with poverty and the nature of the poor during this period are distracted by emotive stories (of which there are many) and the lack of safety net we have become so used to since the introduction of the welfare state (hardly a panacea). I do not count ‘the parish’ as an equivalent net, and particularly not for the urban poor. It was during the 18th century that charitable institutions began to play a much larger part in London’s landscape, from the Lock Hospital to orphanages and ‘improvement’ societies replacing care previously supplied by almshouses or the parish, which were no longer able to cope with the burgeoning population. However, there was a lag between the crisis of need and the mechanism of organised charity becoming effective; it is into this gap which the urban poor of 18th century fall.

When we discuss ‘the abject poor’ of history, they are usually little more than a ragged and groaning miasma, toothless and crippled, often drunk but always desperate. We forget that even when brought low, the individual remains and that every individual interacts with both their own situation and the world around them in a unique way: some beg with a shelter to go to and some refuse to beg when sleeping rough in poor conditions.

Extensive studies of the poor during the main body of the 18th century are very rare, but that is not to say they do not exist, and what they reveal is a clear picture of the nature of poverty in London during the Georgian period. One of the largest studies comes late in the century, in 1796, when Matthew Martin opened the beautifully-named Mendicity Enquiry Office at 190 Piccadilly. His idea was simple, but effective: he produced 6000 numbered tickets, each promising the bearer three pence upon its presentation at the Mendicity Enquiry Office. To earn their 3d. the bearer had to submit to an interview Martin had devised to shed light upon both the causes and conditions of desperate poverty in London.

The findings of Martin’s survey are fascinating; in under eight months he filled dozens of volumes with the stories of over two thousand adults and their three thousand dependent children. Notably, he excluded 600 individuals because although they confessed themselves to be paupers, they did not consent to being labelled as beggars (slightly more than a fifth of the total and a significant and intriguing statistic). Now, whilst two thousand is clearly not a comprehensive survey of what I would term Poor



*Beggars, by John Thomas Smith (1766 - 1833)*

London, it is a large and impressive group and the data is therefore valuable.

What emerges from the volumes is that the vast majority of Martin’s poor were women, and not only women but single mothers. The numbers are telling: 192 men to 1808 women. Over one thousand of the women professed to be ‘married’, almost six hundred ‘widowed’ and 127 were single. Of the men, 20% were ex-Army or ex-Navy and amongst the women, 240 claimed a connection with one or the other (roughly fifteen percent). The children seem to have belonged exclusively to the women, although there are accounts of male lone parents (not always fathers, sometimes brothers, uncles and cousins) in London during the 18th century.

Martin used his data to draw various conclusions, most of which appear sound. He concluded that men were stronger than woman, with more resources (according to the labour market of the day). Pregnant women or mothers were not required in service and he noted that many of the widows were of an ‘advanced’ age and thus not able to work. Above all, a woman was likely to be thrown into a state of advanced or abject poverty by the burden of children for which she received no support. Private charity was soon to recognize this, and establishments such as Coram’s Foundling Hospital strove to relieve such women of this burden.

## Abject Poverty in 18th Century London (cont.)

Many of these women resorted to casual and unskilled labour, picking up the leftovers from market stalls after they had been cleared for the day. Their children were employed picking coals from the foreshore, or sorting rubbish. Martin's Mendacity Studies are one of the few to make transparent how large the poor female population was. Other studies and particularly anecdotes focus upon the male poor population. The male beggar would emerge during the late Elizabethan period and continue through history as a figure at once pitiful and sinister, culminating in characters such as Fagin and Magwitch during the 19th century.

This threatening stereotype is seen clearly in an Old Bailey case of 1740 when John Collett went out begging on the London to Hampstead road. He had not eaten in a day and his wife was at home awaiting the delivery of their child. He approached Mary Curtis and asked her for money. She drew out a shilling and a ha'penny and gave him both, although making clear the shilling was required for her own transport home. After Collett had moved away, a man known to Mary approached her and asked if Collett had robbed her, and she answered in the affirmative. Upon identifying Collett, she fainted and was clearly terrified. Collett would appear in the Old Bailey fighting against a hanging, which he did successfully. Mary Curtis had been carrying a further sum in guineas which she confessed she had not felt pressured to give over. The ambivalent nature of begging by the male poor was felt throughout all those who gave and the impression of 'money with menaces' was a constant theme of those who commented upon private charity.

So, whilst making up less than ten percent of the begging population according to Martin, the male beggar was the greatest 'threat'. Indeed, it is the male beggar most heard of in anecdote. London's begging pitches were richest in Lincoln's Inn and Charing Cross, where many complained of being waylaid by endless beggars, but this impression of a hard and uncharitable rich grinding the faces of the unfortunate poor isn't quite accurate: London was a city of charitable souls. Guides to etiquette inform readers of the gross ignorance and ill manners displayed by gaping at the poor and thereby heaping indignity upon misfortune and the instances of private charity are myriad: ranging from William Ponsonby, Earl of Besborough (Lady Caroline Lamb's grandfather) who stopped to give alms to a widow with two children in the street, cleaning the coins on his own handkerchief when they fell into the dirt, to the reader of *The Spectator* who was moved to complain:

*"As for my part, who don't pretend to more humanity than my neighbours, I have oftentimes gone from my chambers with money in my pocket and returned to them not only penniless but destitute of a farthing, without bestowing of it any other way than on these seeming objects of pity."*

\*The abjectly poor population of London for the purposes of this article are those living from one day to the next in poor lodgings or upon the street. Their main income is deemed to have been private or public charity and they had no regular occupation outside casual 'professions' such as street-selling, sweeping crossings, kennel-raking and mudlarking.

### About Lucy Inglis

Lucy Inglis is a historical blogger, writer and speaker. Her award-winning blog is *Georgian London*. She is writing a book, also called *Georgian London*, which is to be published by Penguin in 2012.