

9: The Jew Old Clothes Man: 19th century disruptor

Here is Middlesex Street, once called Petticoat Lane, where clothes have long been bought and sold. Over most of the four centuries of the clothing market here, the stuff sold was second hand. The clothes themselves could have a lifespan of decades, expensive tailored originals gradually disintegrating as they descended through various hands, being refitted, refashioned and patched up all the way until reduced to rags.

Those of us with Ashkenazi ancestors who arrived here after 1655 should not think our forebears spent all their time founding shuls, let alone davening in them. Some never went at all. Many though, perhaps most of them, will have worked from childhood to the grave. Therefore, a tour of Jewish London which concentrates only on institutions would be imbalanced. Work must be a focus.

Jews laboured within limits. We have mentioned Jewish stockbrokers, jewellers and butchers, but Jews in these and other trades between the readmission and the middle of the 19th century were all restricted in ways specific to Jews. Where they could work, when and in what way. For instance, most of the 25,000 or so London Jews in 1850 lived around Aldgate in the east.

Yet because Jews could not open shops in the city, a number of kosher meat and fish retailers operated around the long-demolished Clare Market, the site now of the LSE at the Aldwych, almost two miles away from Aldgate by road to the west. Other barriers to Jews working in varied occupations included geographical concentration, lack of education, whether academic at any level or vocational, lack of access to universities and the professions, lack of ability to fall back on church charitable funds accessible to most others, lack of experience of employment, agriculture or industry, lack of investment capital, Shabbat and kashrut observance preventing apprenticeships, language and towards the end of the 19th century hostile trade unions.

So, what did Jews do? A rich if imperfect source is Henry Mayhew who published *London Labour and the London Poor* in the 1840s and 1850s, a collection of observations of street life and interviews with everyone from child acrobats to rat catchers to thieves and cat's meat sellers.

Mayhew observed that between 500 and 600 Jews were in the same street hawking business that their ancestors had followed since the readmission, tramping inherited routes for the buying of old clothes, multiple hats on their heads, crying out, "Old clo!

Old clo!” One we know of was a Moses Moses. No shop was needed, no apprenticeship or large capital investment, rent nor any great linguistic skill. The cast-off clothes might be resold immediately, bartered or patched up in the backyards of the streets around Petticoat Lane and sold retail at the market or even exported. Looking back 50 years to the early 1800s, Mayhew observed that “the Jew's long beard was far more distinctive than it is in this hirsute generation. In other respects, the street Jew is unchanged.”

Mayhew was right about beards, but in fact street hawking was considered less acceptable and more impedimentary by Victorians than it had been under the Hanoverians. The coaching inns where Jewish hawkers had lingered were being replaced by railway stations and as opportunities opened Jews weren't slow in all cases to leave the streets behind. They were beginning to move towards light industry. Cigar making, cap making, glazing and glassware making for instance.

Mayhew seems not to have registered that from the old clothes man developed the Jewish peddler at race meetings or fairs, the Jewish tailor, the Jewish ship's chandler wherever the royal navy or merchant ships docked, the Jewish pawnbroker in market towns, the China and glass dealer, the Jewish watchmaker. Mayhew did though notice sharp practise. He was told by one old clothes man that “he had once bought a bishop's hat of his lordship's servant for one shilling sixpence on a Sunday morning.” Mayhew perhaps preferred to hear such stories of sabbath-breaking illicit sale than anything more wholesome.

The Jews largely excluded from established economic activity didn't intentionally link town to country or create new consumer demands or opportunities for profit, but they did seem to do these things. An unlicensed old clothes man couldn't pay cash for clothes in the city so he would trade cheap crockery instead. To put it politely, fostering aspirational tastes among the servants who were often the most able somehow to find clothes to exchange.

Moses Moses might have been seen by Mayhew in the 1840s selling second-hand clothes from a barrow. But 30 years later in Covent Garden when and where they were permitted to be selling from a shop, Moses's sons Alfred and George the Moss Brothers or Moss Bros fell into leasing clothes as well as selling them. If Moses Moses had in a parallel universe which gave Jews in his heyday the same rights as Christians, enjoyed formal training, and if he had had the standing to borrow for a mortgage to open a shop off Threadneedle Street say, and if he had aspired to and adopted standard retail practises of Victorian London, would his sons ever have thought it proper to lend

clothes for a couple of shillings to hard-up stockbrokers who wanted fashionable party outfits? It is not a new argument that challenges can foster creativity.

Sir David Salomons had forced through change driven by principle. The Moss Brothers drove through change driven by imagination in business and a dose of pragmatism. But the story of Jewish development and improvement in London has never been one solely of formal and legal change. The Jew old clothes man has his place alongside the baronet.