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Rubbish or riches? Buying from Church jumble sales in late-Victorian England

Jumble sales are a curiously neglected sector of the second-hand trade. They originated in the rummage sale, which was “a clearance sale of unclaimed goods at the docks”, derived from the French *arrumage*, meaning stowage on a ship (*Oxford English Dictionary*). So, in 1816, a House of Commons Select Committee heard that the Earl of Elgin had bought a quantity of “packages ... [left] without direction” at a custom-house “rummage sale” and thus acquired one of the Parthenon marbles. (He believed the packages contained the marble sculptures he had himself taken from the Parthenon, and then lost track of while imprisoned in France. In fact they turned out to contain articles, including a metope, shipped from Athens by the French Ambassador to the Ottoman Porte.) (Anon., 1816, p. 44).

Rummage, however, also meant lumber or rubbish more generally, and by the closing decades of the nineteenth century rummage sales more usually referred to local charitable endeavours selling second-hand goods to the poor. The Anglican church appears to have taken the lead in the organisation and spread of these events, which were also increasingly known as jumble sales [1]. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the earliest citation of “jumble sale” as 1898 (*Oxford English Dictionary*), but the term was in use at least a decade earlier, in October 1888, when the parish magazine of St. Mary Newington, south London, announced a forthcoming “Jumble Sale”. Furthermore, the announcement assumed readers would know what a jumble sale was, suggesting this was not St. Mary’s first (*St. Mary Newington Parish Magazine*, October 1888) [2].

“Rummage” sales continue in the United States and early English jumble sales were sometimes called by other names that intimate a transatlantic, as well as a maritime, influence, as with the car-boot and garage sales of the late twentieth century. Moreton, in Shropshire, for example, advertised a “Jumble Sale or American Fair” in December 1892 (*The Parish Magazine for Oswestry, Whittington, Moreton, Welsh Frankton, The Lodge, Trefonen and Other Neighbouring Parishes*, December 1892). A month later, Camden Church, Camberwell, announced a “Grand American Rummage Sale”, which was subsequently referred to as both a “Rummage” and a “Jumble” sale (*Camden Parish Magazine*, January and May 1893, January and April 1894) [3]. Such interchange of terms continued into the twentieth century.

Jumble sales were rapidly absorbed into the domestic economies of the poor. In 1891, the editor of an Essex magazine, fearing that “readers may not know what a Jumble sale is”, felt it necessary to “just mention” that it was “a sale of disused articles of clothing, &c., which the working classes are glad to purchase” (*Loughton Parish Magazine*, December 1891). Elsewhere, however, the jumble sale was already a familiar event (see, for example, *St. Mildred’s, Lee, Parish Magazine & Parochial Record*, December 1889, December 1890). Word spread from parish to parish, so that although Camden Church, Camberwell, still had “but a slight acquaintance” with jumble sales in 1893, it knew they had “done wonders in other districts” (*Camden*, May 1893). By 1895, they were still “quite a novelty in Pinner” (*Pinner Parish Magazine*, April 1895), but within a couple of years, from Lancashire in the north-west (*Emmanuel Parish Magazine*, January 1897), to Sussex in the south

(*Forest Row Parish Magazine*, December 1894), and from Shropshire in the West Midlands (*Oswestry et al.*, December 1892), to Essex in the south-east (*Loughton*, December 1891), people were collecting, sorting and ticketing for the parish jumble sale.

The organisers of, and donors to, the late-Victorian jumble sales examined here were the Anglican middle and upper classes, while the customers were from the working classes or “the poor” as they were usually identified in jumble-sale literature. Writing about second-hand goods today, Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe point out that the practice of casting out unwanted possessions depends “on the constitution of ‘deserving others’”, and is often “associated with particular subject positions and class positions” (Gregson and Crewe, 2003, pp. 6-7). This was equally true in the nineteenth century, but while the poor were the customers, I have argued elsewhere that they were not the only beneficiaries. Jumble sales also provided organisers and donors with a convenient, time-efficient way to participate in charitable activity that assisted both the poor and the Church, at a point when increasing occupational and leisure opportunities offered more interesting outlets for their time and energy, and declining middle-class Church attendance was having a negative impact on parochial finance (Richmond, forthcoming).

In this article, my main focus is on the poor and how they used Church jumble sales. My chief sources are the reports of sales, between 1888 and 1901, in thirty-three English Anglican parish magazines, several of which covered multiple parishes. Nineteen of the parish magazines examined were produced by London churches, and the remainder, with the exception of one each from Birmingham and Bolton, belonged to rural churches in a group of counties bounded by Shropshire and Staffordshire to the north west, Essex in the east, and Sussex and Dorset in the south. Work is yet to be done on the counties outside this cluster. Since (the revival of Christian Socialism notwithstanding) the late-Victorian Anglican church was strongly aligned with conservatism and Conservative politics (McLeod, 2000, pp. 232-3), my findings, especially concerning class relations, may not be applicable to jumble sales held by other denominations, political groups or organisations. I have also drawn on the social surveys of Charles Booth (Booth, 1902), B. Seebohm Rowntree (Rowntree, 1902) and Maud Pember Reeves (Pember Reeves, 1979), to understand the place of jumble sales and used goods in late-nineteenth-century domestic budgets.

“The poor” is a vague, slippery and relative concept. Like Rowntree, in his 1901 survey of York, I have borrowed from Booth’s London survey, first published in 1889, in which he defined the “poor” as “those who have a sufficiently regular though bare income, such as 18s. to 21s. per week for a moderate family”, and the “very poor” as:

those who from any cause fall much below this standard. The “poor” are those whose means may be sufficient, but are barely sufficient, for decent independent life; the “very poor” those whose means are insufficient for this according to the usual standard of life in this country. My “poor” may be described as living under a struggle to obtain the necessaries of life and make both ends meet; while the “very poor” live in a state of chronic want (Booth, 1902, p. 33).

Booth and Rowntree calculated that the “poor” and “very poor” together comprised approximately 30 per cent of the populations of London and York. They concluded that poverty was principally due to large families, low wages and irregular employment (Rowntree, 1902, p. 299), and

in 1888, the year of the earliest jumble sale I have found, *The Times* had declared unemployment “the fundamental problem of modern society” (Burnett, 1994, p. 147). The preceding two years had seen demonstrations and riots by thousands of unemployed men in London’s Trafalgar Square (Burnett, 1994, pp. 145-7), but poverty was not just an urban problem. In 1903, a small-scale investigation in rural Bedfordshire revealed 50 percent of the population in poverty, while Rowntree’s wider rural survey, conducted in 1912-13 with May Kendal, found that “the vast majority” of agricultural labourers earned wages “insufficient to maintain a family of average size in a state of merely physical efficien[cy]” (Gazeley, 2003, pp. 49, 53-4). Like the USA interwar working-class families studied by Susan Porter Benson, many people in late-nineteenth-century England “were not swept up by the economy of abundance” so often associated with the industrialisation and mass production of the period, but lived in a state “in which scarcity conditioned daily life” (Porter Benson, 2008, p. 153). It is, therefore, no surprise that jumble sales became one of the range of used-goods outlets on which they relied; but what did they buy from them, and why did they buy from jumble sales rather than other providers of second-hand wares?

According to one appeal for donations, jumble sales sold a wide variety of goods, “both useful and ornamental” (*S. James Parish Magazine*, August 1896). Clothes and more expensive household goods – carpets, furniture and curtains – were the most frequently requested articles in the magazines. However, parish magazines were written by, and principally for, the middle classes – the people who organised the jumble sales – and did not necessarily reflect the needs and desires of the sales’ prospective customers, the poor. Yet the magazines do suggest that the sales, and the goods they offered, were not wanting purchasers. Here I focus on clothing and, more briefly and speculatively, carpets, as the most requested items for donation, and place them in the context of working-class domestic budgets and consumption to argue that, in this respect at least, the organisers’ understanding of the poor’s needs and desires tallied, to some extent, with the reality.

Alexandra Palmer and Hazel Clark claim that historically the “principal rationale” of the second hand trade “was as a means for poorer people to acquire fashionable clothes” (Palmer and Clark, 2005, p. 9). However, my findings suggest that for women, at least, jumble sales were among a range of strategies, beyond the shop, including other used-goods outlets and charitable initiatives, to which the poor had recourse for essential clothing, with fashion, if it figured at all, a negligible consideration. It is, though, true that the second-hand trade “provisioned different social groups with otherwise unaffordable quality goods” (Blondé and Van Damme, 2009, p. 4), and with regard to carpets, which remained costly throughout the nineteenth century, my suggestions are more in line with Palmer and Clark’s aspiration theory.

Working-class housing became the subject of increased official, commercial, and charitable concern during the second half of the century (Summers, 1979, pp. 52-3, Morris, 2001, pp. 528, 530). The 1875 Artisans’ and Labourers’ Dwellings Improvement Act was followed by The Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes in 1884, and further Acts in 1890 and 1900 (Daunton, 1983, pp. 193-4; Burnett, 1978, pp. 131, 136, 180-1; Morris, 2001, p. 527). “[S]alubrious and affordable” housing for “respectable” workers was provided by a variety of enterprises, such as the model dwellings companies which, combining commerce and social welfare, built over 36,000

homes in the capital between the 1840s and 1914 (Morris, 2001, pp. 526-30). Philanthropic experiments like Port Sunlight and Bourneville in the 1880s and 1890s created superior living conditions for industrial workers and in the country, too, there were modest improvements in labourers' accommodation (Burnett, 1978, pp. 178, 131-3). Progress was gradual and uneven, but overall the cost of working-class housing fell and the quality rose, while the introduction of metered gas supplies during the 1880s improved home lighting and cooking (Daunton, 1983, pp. 35, 238-40; de Vries, 2008, pp. 196-7).

In this context, Martin Daunton identifies "the creation of a home-based culture of domesticity" among the urban working classes, in which "the family and home ... came to be seen as a source of assertive dignity" (Daunton, 1983, pp. 265-6. See also Bourke, 1994, pp. 66-7). The working-class home became more "enclosed and private" and acted as a physical expression of the importance placed on family life (Daunton, 1983, pp. 12, 35. See also de Vries, 2008, pp. 196-7). This was manifested in the attention paid to interior decoration and comfort, and, I suggest, carpets became a key commodity in this process. While new carpets remained beyond the means of the majority, pieces of second-hand carpet, such as those available from jumble sales, offered the aspirational poor a means of partially fulfilling their ambitions.

Basic necessities: clothing

Parish magazines repeatedly testified to the success of jumble sales. Camden Church, Camberwell, was so encouraged by the success of its first venture, in 1893, that it began "to arrange almost immediately for another" (*Camden*, May 1893), at which the goods "went like lightning!" (*Camden*, November 1893). The parish magazine reported "the avidity with which men, women, and children contended for possession of the goods and chattels which covered the tables" and the "crowds flocking in" (*Camden*, May 1893). Only occasionally was such anecdotal hyperbole supplemented by more statistical accounts, but where these exist they tend to support the claims. *The Alscot Magazine*, for instance, which covered five rural Warwickshire parishes across a four-mile swathe, reported that "at least 260 persons passed [through] the gates" of the July 1896 Whitchurch Rummage Sale (*The Alscot Magazine*, No. 7, 1896). The Census shows that in 1891 Whitchurch had a population of 194 (Anon., 1893, p. 367), which by 1901 had shrunk to 175 (Anon., 1903, p. 271), so the sale must have attracted customers from neighbouring villages. Furthermore, one of those villages held its own "Rummage Sale" just two months after the Whitchurch event (*Alscot*, No. 11, 1896) and in most cases, as in the Alscot parishes, the sale was repeated at least annually (*Alscot*, No. 6 and No. 8, 1897).

Both Whitchurch and Alderminster offered accompanying social events. At Whitchurch there was an evening dance which was attended by 142 people, indicating that nearly half of the 260 had attended for the sale alone (and the figure may have been higher, since we do not know that only people who had been to the sale attended the dance). But the emphasis, in the Whitchurch notices, was firmly on the sale itself and, similarly, the "Athletic Sports, Theatricals and Dancing" at Alderminster were advertised as "extra attractions" to the Rummage Sale (*Alscot*, No. 11, No. 7 and No. 8, 1896).

Clothing, followed by carpets, furniture and curtains topped the list of most appeals for contributions. As St. Matthew's Upper Clapton put it: "We can dispose of nearly anything, especially Clothes, Carpets, Curtains, etc." (*St. Matthew's Upper Clapton, Service Paper*, April 1898). St. Paul, Clapham, gave a more detailed indication of the eclectic range of items that might be offered when it listed:

The sort of things to send.

Cast-off Clothing, Bonnets, Boots, Umbrellas, &c. Old Furniture, Strips of Carpet, Floor Cloth, Kitchen Utensils, &c. Curtains and Crockery, Pictures and Perambulators. All things and anything (*St. Paul Clapham*, No. 4, 1892).

At Sydenham, as elsewhere, while both clothing and household items were solicited, the stated object of the jumble sale "was to provide the poor with good clothes at a small price" (*St. Philips, Sydenham, Church Magazine*, January 1891). The poor could often afford clothing only by scrimping on other necessities, especially food. Booth found that "the need to pay for clothes may ... mean a desperate pinch on other things", and believed "a great deal is done with very little money in this direction" (Booth, 1902, p. 139). Maud Pember Reeves, surveying the budgets of housewives in Edwardian Lambeth, found them to be so stretched as to make clothing provision "frankly, a mystery" (Pember Reeves, 1979, pp. 61-2). "Rural mothers and wives", says Barry Reay, "had to 'make something out of nothing'" (Reay, 2004, p. 78).

Numerous families, in both town and country, relied on a combination of strategies to obtain their clothing. In York, for example, Rowntree described "Mrs. Smith, an excellent housewife, with a steady husband and three children at home". Mr. Smith was in regular employment, earning 20s. a week. He kept two shillings to spend on beer, tobacco and his own clothes, leaving his wife 18s. to meet all other household expenses. According to Rowntree, a new dress for Mrs. Smith, would

last for years. For everyday wear she buys some old dress at a jumble sale for a few shillings. Old garments, cast off by some wealthier family are sometimes bought from the ragman for a few coppers; or perhaps they are not paid for in cash, but some older rags and a few bones are given in exchange for them. Garments so purchased are carefully taken to pieces, washed, and made up into clothes for the children ... She regularly pays 6d. a week for sick clubs, 4d. for life insurance, and 3d. per week into the clothing club held in connection with her church ... It was obvious that with such a normal expenditure there was no appreciable sum available for "extras." "Then how do you do, Mrs. Smith," my investigator asked, "when you have to meet any extraordinary expenditure, such as a new dress, or a pair of boots?" "Well, as a rule," was the answer, "we 'ave to get it out of the food money and go short; but I never let Smith suffer – 'e 'as to go to work, and must be kept up, yer know! And then Smith 'as ollers been very good to me. When I want a new pair of shoes, or anythink, 'e 'elps me out of 'is pocket money, and we haven't to pinch the food so much" (Rowntree, 1902, pp. 55-7).

Except for the weekly 3d. paid into the church clothing club – which was less than she paid into either sick clubs or life insurance – Mrs. Smith had no regular clothing budget for herself and her children. The club provided a limited quantity of new clothing once a year (Richmond, 2009, p. 56) and this Mrs. Smith supplemented with second-hand garments from jumble sales and ragmen, turning to the food budget, or her husband's "pocket money" when funds ran short.

Under Booth's definitions the Smith family were "poor" rather than "very poor". This is significant, since the need for jumble sale organisers to maximise profits while providing aid, meant most charged an entrance fee that generally excluded the very poorest, who were perhaps those

most in need of the goods on offer. As at Aldenham, one penny was standard (*Aldenham Parish Magazine*, April 1898), and the fact that customers were willing to pay an entrance fee further testifies to the sales' appeal and utility. Only at Holy Trinity, Southwark, was "some little irritation at the charge of a penny for admission" reported, with "one angry lady ... refusing to come in" (*Holy Trinity, Southwark, Parish Magazine*, June 1895).

Clothing charities, like Mrs. Smith's church clothing club, proliferated in the nineteenth century, providing the poor with either free or, more often, low-cost clothing. Mostly the clothes were new, but always utilitarian, and they came with a moral agenda: recipients were to be "deserving". This might mean nomination by a patron and the exclusion of, for example, drinkers and unmarried mothers. These charities provided many poor families with useful working clothes but, as with the Smiths, not in sufficient quantities to clothe an entire family the year round. Nor did they extinguish the desire for more decorative items, especially for Sundays and holidays (Richmond, 2009, pp. 56-9, 64).

In contrast, requests for jumble sale donations suggest that the purchaser's moral character, and the suitability of goods to his or her social status, were rarely considerations. Indeed, the jumble sale was predicated on the surrender by wealthier parishioners, to the poor, of their unwanted possessions. This perhaps reflected increasingly liberal Anglican ideas at the close of the century, which took a less judgmental stance than earlier decades on who was eligible for charitable assistance and the type of goods it was appropriate to give them (Richmond, forthcoming). But this liberal ideology overlapped with, rather than simply replaced, traditionally paternalistic views, and jumble sales were often run by the same people who organised other parochial charities that did restrict the kind of clothes supplied. The key to this seeming contradiction may lie in the fact that whereas many other parochial charities were long-established, jumble sales were new and it may have been easier to introduce a new attitude with a new institution than to risk offending long-standing supporters of the older charities by changing the terms on which they operated.

Alternatively, the condition of much jumble-sale merchandise may have obviated the need for such censorship. The report of a turn-of-the-century Northamptonshire sale claimed, "There were big boots, little boots, old boots, new boots, parisienne toques, gymkhana hats, Sunday suits, work-a-day clothes, travelling trunks, skates, shrimping nets, and what not" (*Cranford Magazine*, January 1900), but how much of this should we take literally?[4] Were there really, for instance, "new boots" on sale, or was the reporter simply extemporising to convey the quantity and diversity of goods on offer?

While St. Paul's Balsall Heath noted that "kind friends sent us much good clothing" (*St. Paul's Balsall Heath Parish Magazine*, January 1894), many appeals for donations emphasised quantity rather than quality. Camberwell was far from unique when it claimed that "anything and everything, broken or bent, worn or torn, old or new, will sell" (*St. Luke's Camberwell, Parish Magazine*, July 1894). And the fact that Sydenham felt it necessary to point out that "we do not want bottomless pails, empty mustard tins, or the contents of the dust-bin", suggests it had previously received such detritus (*St. Philips*, November 1891).

Organisers determined the utility of second-hand items in clear class terms. In Camberwell, for instance, readers were asked to begin "hoarding up ... anything, however old and worn, and which

may be considered no long usable in a large house” because “poor people are glad to purchase ... such commodities” (*Camden*, January 1893). In Loughton the magazine delineated the benefits to be gained from a forthcoming sale: “*first*, it will enable many of our parishioners to clear out of their houses a good deal of old rubbish; *secondly*, it will be a great benefit to our poorer brethren in giving them an opportunity of purchasing at a very small cost many useful things” (*Loughton*, December 1891). There appears to have been some form of alchemy in process which, in the space of two phrases, transformed “rubbish” into “useful things”.

Doubtless location was a key factor in determining the condition and quality of goods on offer. When Camden Church appealed for donations, it ventured the possibility that some readers “may have friends in wealthy neighbourhoods where Rummage Sales are not needed and who would therefore be glad to let us have any ... [unwanted] articles” (*Camden*, August 1893). A sale that depended on donations from people who, though not “poor”, had to budget carefully themselves, was unlikely to offer particularly rich pickings. And despite the contemporary “thirst for fashion” and novelty, so clearly manifested in the rise of the department store (Entwistle, 2000, pp. 131-2, 232-4), many middle-class women extended their own budgets by buying and selling used clothes, rather than simply giving them away, and, it seems, renovated or remade garments to lengthen their use (Burman, 1999, pp. 40-41).

The condition of the garments by the time they reached the jumble sale may, therefore, have left much to be desired. Rowntree’s report incorporated 13 budgets showing the “minimum necessary annual cost of clothing for a [working-class] woman”. This included only one dress and in four instances this was bought at a jumble sale (Rowntree, 1902, pp. 395-6). These dresses were for everyday wear which, as Maud Pember Reeves discovered, claimed very low priority in the household budget and could be extremely shabby: “The women seldom get new clothes ... The men go to work and must be supplied, the children must be decent at school, but the mother has no need to appear in the light of day” – she could shop after dark if necessary (Pember Reeves, 1979, p. 64).

Six of the remaining nine dresses in Rowntree’s budgets were described as “second-hand”, which may simply indicate the different terminology the contributors used, or may denote their differentiation between jumble sale goods and those obtained from other second-hand outlets. If the latter, it is difficult to determine the basis of the differentiation, but price does not appear to be a key factor. The four jumble sale dresses each cost between 4s. 6d. and 7s. 6d., compared with between 4s. 6d. and 8s. 6d. for the second-hand ones. Also, there is nothing in Mrs. Smith’s description of her “old dress”, for “everyday wear” bought “at a jumble sale for a few shillings”, to suggest that jumble-sale clothes were of better quality or in better condition than those obtained from other second-hand outlets. The more noticeable contrast is between both the jumble-sale and other second-hand dresses and the remaining three, each of which were new and cost 10s. 0d. (Rowntree, 1902, pp. 55, 395-6).

Rowntree also gave fifteen budgets for men’s everyday clothing, in fourteen of which the coats, vests and some trousers were “second-hand” (Rowntree, 1902, pp. 393-4). There was no mention of jumble sales, although many requests for donations specifically included men’s clothing. Perhaps no jumble sales were held when these men required clothing, or the second-hand clothes

included jumble-sale purchases. But taking into account Pember Reeves's findings about the need for many men to be reasonably well-presented at work, it is possible that potential working clothes were too dilapidated for a "respectable" man by the time they reached the jumble sale. Alternatively, despite the mention of "work-a-day clothes" in the Cranford report (*Cranford*, January 1900), the style and fabric of middle-class men's discarded garments may not have been suitable for the occupations in which many working-class men were employed. A competent needlewoman could potentially alter her own shabby jumble-sale dress to achieve a better fit or style, but alterations to men's outerwear required tailoring skills beyond the capabilities of most housewives (Ugolini, 2007, p. 209).

Rowntree's budgets aside, there is little concrete information on the price of jumble sale goods, with most magazines reporting only generally on the "merely nominal" (*St. Matthew's*, May 1889) or "very low prices" (*All Saints, Clapham Park, Church Magazine*, May 1898). St. Mary Newington claimed that "Dresses which cost pounds went for shillings, and boots and shoes which cost many shillings went for pennies" (*St. Mary*, January 1889), but it is difficult to know whether this was really the case or just more rhetoric. Rowntree confirms that jumble-sale dresses could indeed be bought for shillings, but what they had originally cost is another matter.

Jumble sales appear to have been eagerly attended, but neither the social surveys nor the parish magazines provide any evidence that the poor preferred them to other second-hand outlets. Jumble sales may simply have extended the range of used-good markets, rather than offering better quality, variety or prices. But even if jumble sales were preferred, the ability to buy clothes from them probably often rested simply on one occurring at the same time as the need for a particular garment. Tight budgets left even the most prudent housewives little opportunity for speculative purchases against future need. This also meant that many people had no clothing in reserve, so when a garment wore out it required replacement as soon as possible and could not wait for the next jumble sale.

The quality and condition of the goods on offer probably varied, not only between but within jumble sales. This, whatever its literal veracity, appears to be what the Cranford report is aiming to convey with its juxtaposition of working clothes and "Sunday suits" (*Cranford*, January 1900), and it seems some rather more exotic items did make their way to the jumble sales. At St. Mary Newington in November 1888:

All the things which were to be sold, were rapidly sold, with the exception of an ermine cape. Princes and Judges wear ermine, it has gone out of fashion with Ladies, and there are not any Princes and Judges in Newington. A purchaser has been found for this, elsewhere (*St. Mary*, January 1889).

While an ermine cape seems, even to the report's author, an unusual item of jumble sale merchandise, there appears to be little reason for invention and its very oddness, the focus on it and the claim of a subsequent buyer strengthen the reliability of the report.

Less clear is why the cape did not sell, although the price may have been prohibitive, and for women like Pember Reeves's housewives, struggling with budgets that left them too ill-clad to show themselves in daylight, an ermine cape was an irrelevance. Yet most people, except the very poorest, had something different for non-working days (even if it did spend most of its life in the pawnshop), and there is nothing to indicate that just because the York women bought their day-to-day dresses at jumble sales they did not sometimes buy holiday clothes there too – Rowntree's budgets dealt only

with the minimum of necessary clothing. It is difficult to imagine there were never any gems among the “rummage”, even if the majority of the items were old and worn. Furthermore, the emphasis on requests for carpet in jumble sale appeals also suggests they were not frequented solely for basic necessities.

“Luxury” goods: carpets

“[O]ld carpets or bits of carpets ... are always in great demand”
(*Aldenham*, July 1900)

In the late nineteenth century, carpet held significance and value far beyond its practical, insulatory properties. “Statisticians”, says Asa Briggs, “treated it as the symbol of comfort, and designers treated it as a symbol of taste” (Briggs, 2003, p. 197). During the second half of the century, even with mechanisation of manufacture, doubling of British production and falling prices, carpet remained an expensive commodity (Bartlett, 1978, p. 64; Benson, 1994, p. 39). Despite advertisements for low-cost carpets (Church, 2000, p. 638), even after a price war in the early 1890s, the cheapest rarely sold, wholesale, at less than 3s. per yard (27 inches wide) (Bartlett, 1978, pp. 42-5). Carpet became fashionable among the middle classes, but remained beyond the reach of most poorer families. As late as 1946 a government enquiry found 52 per cent of working-class households to be without carpet and another 29 per cent with carpet only in one room (Bartlett, 1978, p. 63). Only technological advances after the Second World War brought cheap carpet to the masses (Attfield, 1994, p. 206).

In Arthur Morrison’s 1896 tale of the Jago, a fictional rendering of the Old Nichol slum area of East London, Dicky, a native child, surveyed the room opposite – and so different from – that of his own family. The room was inhabited by the Ropers, industrious outsiders who, “fallen on evil times and out of work”, had been forced to move to “the blackest pit in London”. In the Jago they were “[c]ollectively ... disliked as strangers: because they furnished their own room, and in an obnoxiously complete style”. Dicky had never seen a room like it: “Everything was so clean ... Also there was a strip of old carpet on the floor” (Morrison, 1995, pp. 1, 32-3). As Morrison’s tale played out, slum clearance loomed over the Jago, echoing the increasing philanthropic and government focus on working-class housing. Although there was a gulf between plans for improvement and their realisation (Burnett, 1978, p. 142), workers’ expectations were rising and the increased value placed on home and family was manifested in increased expenditure on household goods (Church, 2000, pp. 636-7; Benson, 2003, p. 146; Edwards, 2005, p. 154).

In the homes of most workers, the kitchen doubled as the living room, but in those of the most prosperous, which Rowntree reckoned to be twelve per cent of York working-class homes (Rowntree, 1902, p. 148), there was also a parlour. Cramped living conditions notwithstanding, this “almost sacred ... choice apartment” as Londoner Fred Willis put it (Daunton, 1983, p. 277), was not for everyday occupation, but “chiefly used on Sundays or as a receiving-room for visitors who are not on terms sufficiently intimate to be asked into the kitchen” (Rowntree, 1902, pp. 148-9). The parlour, both through its contents and its disuse, implying surplus, acted as the showpiece and material expression of the family’s prosperity (Johnson, 1988, p. 37; Edwards, 2005, p. 159). It might, for instance, have

contained “a piano and an over-mantel in addition to the usual furniture, not to speak of ornamental mantelpieces of imitation marble and brightly-tiled hearths” (Rowntree, 1902, p. 148). Here, too, in contrast with the usual kitchen linoleum, which was hardwearing and easy to clean, a carpet was necessary to achieve the desired atmosphere of comfort and prosperity (Rowntree, 1902, p. 148; Daunton, 1983, p. 279). Journalist James Haslam, describing a 1910 Lancashire cotton-spinner’s parlour, detailed a profusion of furniture and ornaments amid which he isolated the telling sentence: “There was a carpet on the floor” (Daunton, 1983, pp. 282-3).

The homes of the less prosperous – the majority – also strove for touches of comfort (Edwards, 2005, p. 218). In the combined kitchen and living room there might be, said Rowntree, “perhaps a couch, covered with American cloth”, and “coloured plates from the *Graphic* or other Christmas Supplement” on the walls (Rowntree, 1902, p. 151). Burnett remarks that “a home-made rag hearthrug on the linoleum [was] more likely than a carpet”. However, the “status symbols” to which the inhabitants aspired “were much the same as in the artisan class”, even though “their achievement [was] much less common” (Burnett, 1978, p. 170). One of the homes described by Rowntree was inhabited by a labourer, earning 18s. a week, his wife and baby daughter. Rowntree wrote censoriously of the wife’s inability to budget, which left her malnourished, and of her own and the bedding’s dirty appearance. Yet, despite the dirty bedding, she clearly took pride in her two-roomed house. The furniture, said Rowntree, was utilitarian, but there were “a few pictures and prints on the wall ... some ornaments on the mantelpiece ... clean muslin curtains in the window” and on the red-brick floor some “strips of old carpet” (Rowntree, 1902, p. 277).

One appeal for jumble-sale donations spoke for many others when it claimed “to know that the hunger for old carpets ... was by no means satisfied when everything was sold, and there is no doubt that if we had had twice as many ... we could have sold them all” (*Aldenham*, August 1899). John Benson agrees with Burnett that the poor yearned for material possessions, but “were almost bound to be frustrated in their ambitions” (Benson, 2003, p. 159). It is possible that jumble sales provided the opportunity to alleviate some of that frustration through acquisition of a strip of the coveted carpet. There is nothing in my findings to show that the poor preferred jumble sales to other outlets as a source for old carpet. Rather, I would suggest, its desirability, and relative scarcity, meant that carpet was eagerly sought wherever it was offered for sale.

Conclusion

We no doubt look forward to the time when such an institution as a Jumble Sale will be superfluous (*sic*), but unfortunately that time is not yet (*St. Matthew’s*, May 1893).

Anglican jumble sales appear to have emerged in the late 1880s and been quickly integrated into the budgeting strategies of the poor. They were a source of both necessary items, particularly clothing, and desirable, but non-essential, commodities such as carpets, coveted for their symbolic value in a period of increased focus on home and family. As such, jumble sales responded both to continuing poverty and the increased desire for consumption among the poor. Prices seem to have been similar to those of other second-hand vendors and the quality of goods variable, and although jumble sales appear to have been eagerly attended by the poor, I have found no evidence that they

preferred them to other used-goods outlets. While there seems to have been little concern about moral regulation of the goods, the sales generally excluded the poorest individuals – and thus, perhaps, the ‘undeserving’ – through the imposition of admission fees.

The longevity of jumble sales attests to their popularity, but we still know little about them. Further work is needed on the quality, condition and cost of jumble sale merchandise and this might provide more precise information about what customers bought and why they chose jumble sales for these purchases rather than other second-hand outlets. It might also tell us more about the age, gender and income of the customers. Many parish magazines refer to female purchasers, but there are occasional tantalising references to men and children (*Camden*, May 1893), which raise questions about who bought what and for whom. There is also further work to be done on the differences between rural and urban sales; reports of the latter rarely hint at the associated conviviality indicated by the dancing and sports attached to the rural Warwickshire sales discussed above. It is possible that economically, too, the sales were of greater significance to the rural poor with limited access to other purchasing opportunities, than to their counterparts in towns and cities where a broader range of second-hand and new goods’ retailers were available.

The sales examined here brought the different classes into contact, yet reinforced the gulf between them by meeting the needs of the poor with the redefined refuse of the better off. This was emphasised through a tiresome jocularity which characterised many jumble sale reports, and served to distance the authors and readers from the purchasers. St. Matthew’s Upper Clapton, for instance, thanked “the many donors who sent such a capital lot of articles – mostly ‘real antique,’ and as may be imagined from the sum they fetched ‘of great value’ ” (*St. Matthew’s*, July 1890). Doubtless the irony would have been lost on the poor, for whom scrabbling among the “rubbish” of wealthier contemporaries was a serious business, a chance to obtain essential clothing and small luxuries to eke out tight budgets and make their families and inadequate homes a little more comfortable.

Notes:

1. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* “jumble” entered the language in the seventeenth century (*Oxford English Dictionary*).
2. Parish magazine titles are given in full at first citation and abbreviated thereafter.
3. Not all “American” sales or fairs were jumble sales. While that held at St. Jude’s, Kensington, in 1894 was a sale of “old clothes, old furniture, &c.” (*St. Jude’s, S. Kensington, Parish Magazine*, April 1894), the one at Camden Church in 1900, was more akin to a garden party or fête, aimed at the middle classes (*Camden*, May 1900).
4. My thanks to Mr. Steve Garton for alerting me to this source.

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