



STRANGE CIRCLES CUT INTO THE GRASS

By Judy Hillman

Turf cutting can often refer to peat cutting from the bogs of rural England and Ireland. But in Victorian London, turf cutting and the sale of small round turfs was one of the many street trades adopted by men and women eking out a living in the barren slums of the surging metropolis. The circular turfs were cut from the green fields and burgeoning development sites on the edge of the already sprawling city. They were then sold in the streets and to shops for people, many of them almost as poor, to line the floors of the cages of song birds. Skylarks, in particular, would normally nest on the ground and were partial to the Dutch shamrock or clover. But owners of other caged birds, such as linnets, canaries, finches and the thrush, also bought the turfs and enjoyed the sound of bird song as a reminder of the countryside they could rarely, if ever, visit.

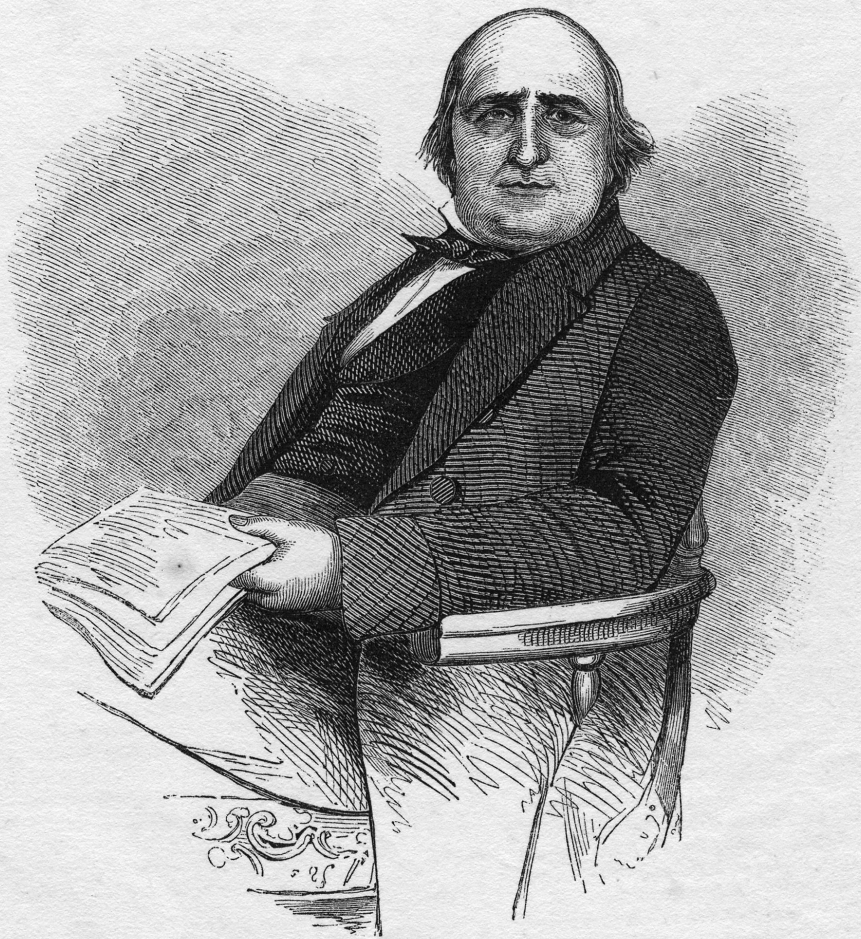
To begin to understand something of this hard physical toil and street trade, there is no better source than Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*.¹ (fig. 1) Mayhew, a playwright and co-founder of *Punch*, became an avid recorder of the capital's social underbelly after exploring the effect of cholera in Bermondsey for the *Morning Chronicle* in 1849. In those days, tape and digital recording machines lay far into the future. Yet somehow he interviewed and recorded, apparently verbatim, the intense flavour of the street economy and brought the hardship of seamier Victorian London to life.

It was possible, just, to survive on cutting turfs, sometimes supplemented by the gathering and selling of groundsel, nettles, snails and even toads (fig. 2). Cutting was very much a male occupation and one turf cutter told Mayhew he believed that there were 40 in the trade with a further 20 selling, ten of them believed to be women.

To understand fully what was involved, Mayhew one day went to Highgate before gam and watched the process. His companion used a sharp pointed table knife to cut a half circle in the grass, complete the other half, fling the sod up in the air and then cut the lower part off to ensure it was flat. He is said to have worked as precisely as does 'a butcher cutting out a joint or chop and reducing the fat'. The sods were then thrown into a basket and in due course a costermonger's barrow. Meanwhile a strange scattering of holes was left behind looking like receptacles for deep saucers – or, after rain, a collection of tiny dew ponds.

Mayhew then went on to Hampstead to find three more cutters at work. The most one interviewee had seen was 14 men at work removing turfs – but that was from a building site. Indeed areas for future development were fair game, particularly between roads and any railings that surrounded private land. The police tended to leave cutters to pursue their trade in such places, although Mayhew found one man who had paid £3 15s in fines for trespassing and also lost his barrow. Of course, some owners or managers of land planned to take advantage of the grass themselves to help create instant gardens in the proposed development or sell it on to other builders with the same purpose.

1. The London Library put me onto Henry Mayhew and a copy of *London Labour and the London Poor*, Volume 1: The London Street Folk, 1851, which credits the London Office, 16 Upper Wellington Street, the Strand and George Woodfall and Son.



HENRY MAYHEW.

[From a *Daguerreotype* by BEARD.]

1. Henry Mayhew, after a daguerreotype by Beard, wood engraving, published 1851
(© NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON)

The turf cutters frequented Shepherds Bush, Notting Hill, the Caledonian Road, Hornsey, Peckham and Battersea plus Highgate as already mentioned. Chalk Farm was said to be 'fairly flayed' of the small Dutch clover or shamrock, so essential to the welfare of the caged skylark. Hackney was by then forbidden as was Hampstead Heath, although some cutting apparently continued there surreptitiously on the edges.

Cutting was also forbidden from commons and greens such as Paddington, Camberwell, Kennington, Clapham and Putney. Primrose Hill was absolutely out of bounds and Mayhew recorded one man as saying: 'Oh, as to the parks and Primrose Hill itself – roundabout it's another thing – nobody ever thought of cutting the turf there. The people about, if they was only visitors, wouldn't stand it, and right too.'

Regular demand was such that the turf cutters were out in all weathers except a deep hoar frost, which blackened the grass and made the turfs unsaleable. It was also claimed that cutters could not work by moonlight because the clover would close up and become invisible.

Mayhew was fascinated by statistics and reported that one cutter removed 25 dozen turfs every Friday (presumably to sell over the weekend), and from six to 17 dozen on other days. This effort would amount on his part to nearly 30,000 turfs a year – out of a city-wide annual estimate of nearly 600,000. About three-quarters of these turfs were sold into shops for between two and two and a half pence a dozen and then resold by the shopkeeper for three to six pence a dozen.

One man, who had lost his job looking after horses at a coaching inn when train travel became popular, walked to London to find work of virtually any sort. He could read and write but just about subsisted on turf cutting after buying a knife and, at least to start with, sharing a barrow and basket. At first he sold into shops but then developed regular individual contacts. 'My best customers are working people, who is fond of birds,' he told Mayhew. 'It's the ready penny with them and no grumbling,' he continued. 'I've lost money by trusting noblemen. Of course I blame their servants.'

This man reckoned he made an average of 9s a week from turf plus perhaps 3s from groundsel, chickweed and snails. His cost of living was such that he could just about survive – paying out 3s 6d for a furnished room and 1s 6d for renting a barrow, which left 7s (plus the 1s earned by his wife for cleaning or 'charring') for living expenses. He had always hoped to buy the barrow but sickness or the need for shoes or some other essential purchase would regularly empty his savings. Over the years, he believed he had spent nearly £14 hiring barrows, which would have cost him £2 2s.

Another man reckoned to walk for about 10 hours or 15 miles a day doing circuits in Marylebone, St. Paul's, Covent Garden (*fig. 3*), the Strand, Clerkenwell and Russell Square on different days.

The caged birds, including nightingales and even sparrows, were snared with nets or limed twigs on the edge of the city, in large part by Flemish weavers from Spitalfields. Nightingales might cost as much as £2 for two birds and a pair of song birds was considered a more than acceptable present between an engaged couple (*fig. 4*). Sparrows cost a mere 1d each. Caged birds were particularly popular with men who held betting competitions to see whose bird could or would sing the most number of notes over a fixed period of time. They trained birds to sing or 'jerk' for as long as possible and, according to reports in Charles Knight's *London*, at least one bird was said to have jerked 150 times in 15 minutes and a linnet to have continued to the point it collapsed off its perch.

Henry Mayhew died in 1887 and was buried in Kensal Green. However, even at the time Mayhew carried out his interviews, the fashion for caged birds was beginning to wane. And of course, the fields of grass on the edge of London were giving way to streets of brick terraced housing. Not that turf cutting has entirely vanished, although removing grass will not these days be regarded with such leniency. As recently as August 2014, two women were caught, or rather recorded, on CCTV rolling up and making off with newly laid garden grass over a period of 40 minutes. One of the women was jailed. Then, later in the year, young thieves broke into a community centre in Camden Town and tried unsuccessfully to

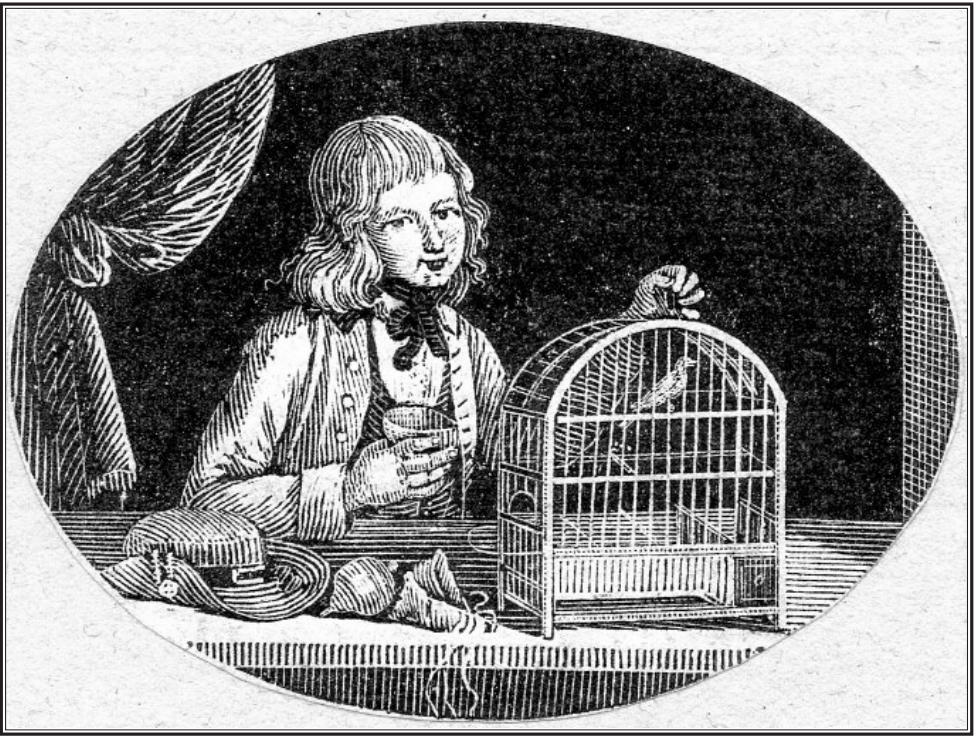


2. The Groundsel Man. *"I sell chickweed and grunsell, and turfs for larks.*

That's all I sell, unless it's a few nettles that's ordered. I believe they're for tea, sir. I gets the chickweed at Chalk Farm. I pay nothing for it. I gets it out of the public fields. Every morning about seven I goes for it. I've been at business about eighteen year. I'm out till about five in the evening. I never stop to eat. I am walking ten hours every day – wet and dry.

My leg and foot and all is quite dead. I goes with a stick."

(FROM HENRY MAYHEW'S 'STREET TRADERS, LONDON LABOUR AND THE LONDON POOR', PUBLISHED IN 5 VOLUMES, 1865)



3. Thomas Shepherd, *The N. W. Façade of the New Covent Garden Market*, engraving,
from T. H. Shepherd & James Elmes,
Metropolitan Improvements; London and Its Environs in the Nineteenth Century (London: Jones & Co. 1827)
(PRIVATE COLLECTION)

4. Thomas Bewick, *Fable of The Nightingale and His Cage*, 1784
(PRIVATE COLLECTION)

remove newly laid artificial turf. Fortunately for the centre these turf cutters failed because they found their haul was too heavy to transport back over the fence.

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Bibliography:

A number of books on Victorian London quote Henry Mayhew extensively and enlarge the picture of metropolitan life at that time.

These include:

The Wayward Genius of Henry Mayhew by Henry Mayhew and edited by Karl Sabbagh (2013);

Victorian London, The Life of a City 1840-1870 by Liza Picard (2005);

Dirty Old London by Lee Jackson (2014).

I also explored *Bell's Life in London* (1842, published by Temple Smith in 1970);

A Strange Company – The Art and Mystery of Song Bird Torture by James Greenwood (1874);

Old and New London, Volume II,

by Walter Thornbury

(published by Cassell Petter and Galpin, 1878);

and *Knight's London* in 6 volumes

(no printing date but c.1841-1843)

surveyor, John White, envisaged housing around a public park:

When I have considered the advantages which the inhabitants of the metropolis derive from their free access to the Parks and Kensington Gardens, I could not but admire the wisdom and liberality of the age when they were so appropriated; and the reflection has induced me to hope that two years hence, when the lease of Mary-le-Bone Park expires, the officers of the Crown will be inclined to a similar appropriation of that beautiful and convenient portion of public property.¹

However, White's proposals were eclipsed in 1811 by plans from the Regent's favourite John Nash, which were accompanied by a highly persuasive report. For Nash, the remodelling of the old park would be the culmination of a grandiose urban development scheme, which included the formation of Trafalgar Square, Waterloo Place, Portland Place and Regent Street – a *via triumphalis*, leading the Prince from Carlton House Terrace to a new summer palace located in the heart of a new landscape.

In his report, Nash noted that 'the preferred parts of London were those near to the parks', and predicted a substantial return on the Crown's investment. But while 'open Space, free air and the scenery of Nature' would be fundamental to the development, there was no sense in which they would be available to all: they were expressly 'allurements or motives for the wealthy part of the Public to establish themselves there'.²

In alluring the wealthy, Nash took pains to exclude the poor. Just as Regent Street would create a *cordon sanitaire* 'between the Streets and Squares occupied by the Nobility and Gentry' and 'the narrow Streets and meaner houses occupied by mechanics and the trading part of the community',³ so Nash designed the Park to ensure it was approached only from the new wealthy quarters to the south, with 'no proper means of entrance from the poorer estates on either side'.⁴ His plan for terraces and villas in a private park was an early

'THE EXCLUSIVE SPIRIT' AT REGENT'S PARK By The Perambulator

As we look forward with fear and loathing to the post-public era now dawning, the story of the early years of Regent's Park should remind us of the way in which the notion of the public landscape had to be forged, beaten into existence from highly resistant materials. It has a place of honour in the history of public parks, but in fact public access never formed part of the original vision for Regent's Park. On the contrary, it was designed on the basis of an exclusion of the public, which became increasingly unacceptable; its early years were characterised by mounting indignation and by a long campaign to secure that free public access.

In the early nineteenth century the Crown estate was looking at the development potential of the farmland north of the New Road, the former Marylebone Park. Early ideas, such as those of the Duke of Portland's

1. [John White] *Some Account of the Proposed Improvements of the Western Part of London...* London, 1814, Appendix 1.

2. Ann Saunders, *Regent's Park from 1086 to the Present*, London: Bedford College, 2nd edition, 1981, p.69.

3. Peter Ackroyd, *London: the Biography*, London 2000, p.520.

4. Saunders, *op.cit.*, p.70.