

# 1 Soho

## London's Gilded Gutter

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'Sex sells and Soho sells sex.'<sup>1</sup>

As a place that 'plays to all the senses',<sup>2</sup> Soho has, throughout its history, been something of an abject space, maintaining a long-standing appeal as simultaneously alluring and threatening, exploiting many of those who work and consume there, while at the same time carefully nurturing its reputation as a place of bohemian indulgence, offering a warm embrace and a sense of belonging in the heart of an otherwise relatively anonymous urban environment. In his Foreword to Bernie Katz's book *Soho Society*, Stephen Fry emphasizes this, highlighting how the area has always offered 'outsiders' a chance to be themselves: 'Soho's public face of drugs, prostitution and seedy Bohemia . . . has always hidden a private soul of family, neighbourhood, kindness, warmth and connection, and those qualities shine through doggedly.' Yet Soho also has an enduring reputation for violence and exploitation. Even Fry, one of its most vociferous defenders, is quick to warn us against being sentimental about Soho, for 'suffering, failure, sickness, despair and loneliness'<sup>3</sup> are also found there in abundance as some of London's most vulnerable people either gravitate to the area or are drawn there by other means, often combining desperation with market forces.

A place of complexity and contrast, Soho's most recent renaissance means that it is now associated as much with high specification ICT and post-production media, and a vibrant restaurant and bar industry, as it is with commercial sex.<sup>4</sup> Urban branding, local community initiatives, and the introduction and enforcement of licensing regulations have combined to 'clean up' Soho, as the twin processes of gentrification and corporatization have arguably sanitized the area beyond recognition – and certainly well beyond the accounts of Soho provided by artists and writers of the mid-twentieth century, a loosely knit group with a reputation for hedonistic living,<sup>5</sup> in a time cited by many as Soho's 'golden age' of bohemia.<sup>6</sup> But as a place to live, work and consume, Soho retains an 'edge' to it that can still be discerned only just beneath its increasingly corporate surface.

A hybrid place, shaped by a number of intersecting yet differential histories, Soho is home to a range of spiritual and political groups, many of which take an active involvement in maintaining the place's ethical openness and sexual eclecticism. In this respect alone, Soho is vulnerable not only to periodic attempts to 'clean up' what is often regarded as its seedier side; its character and location mean that it is also particularly at risk from a more commercial co-optation or corporate rebranding of its radical associations. This chapter explores all of these issues and the ways in which they shape Soho as a working community, particularly for those who work in the many sex shops for which Soho continues to have a global reputation. Behind its ever-changing façade, Soho's streets and shops continue to hold secrets; digging not too deeply beneath its surface reveals a fascinating series of intersecting histories, cultures and working lives that are considered here.

### Historical Soho

The beginnings of London's West End can be traced back to the sixteenth century. Many of the streets that are familiar today can be found on maps and plans dating back to the 1600s, and the layout of Soho's central streets has altered relatively little in the last 400 years or so. In the first decades after the Fire of London in 1666, developers were keen to build on any available land, ignoring Elizabeth I's proclamation of 1582 precluding building tenements within three miles of the City. Speculators bought up land in the Soho Fields, an area between the royal palaces to the west, the City of London to the east and the Forest of Middlesex further north.

As Peter Speiser has described it in his account of Soho as 'the heart of Bohemian London', the area has attracted many remarkable inhabitants and visitors throughout its history. While twentieth-century and contemporary Soho might be thought of as the hang-out of artists, actors and the aristocracy, this association has a long history. The story largely begins in the seventeenth century, when the Duke of Monmouth, James Scott, who was the illegitimate son of Charles II, made Soho his home. Briefly residing at Monmouth House in Soho Square,<sup>7</sup> he is regarded by historians as being largely responsible for Soho's fashionable origins as early as the 1680s. One of Soho's most notorious historical figures is Theresa Cornelys, one-time lover of Casanova, and Soho's first society hostess who reputedly transformed the nature of evening entertainment in London. Under the auspices of the 'Society of Soho Square', the opulence of her masked balls was legendary, attracting nobility and gentry in abundance. As novelist Fanny Burney, another Soho resident (and later

Mrs D'Ablay, after whom the street is believed to be named), wrote in 1770: '[T]he magnificence of the rooms, splendour of the illuminations and embellishments, and the brilliant appearance of the company exceeded anything I ever saw before.'<sup>8</sup> Soho's association with London's fashionable elite was further confirmed in the first half of the eighteenth century, when the sons of both George I and II took up residence at Leicester House, transforming what is now Leicester Square (then Fields) into the focal point of London's social scene. Other renowned residents in the 1700s included the much-written-about Chevalier/Chevaliere d'Eon, the originator of the term 'eonism', and from whom the contemporary 'Beaufort Society', which provides support to trans people and their partners, takes its name.

Yet as has been equally well documented, Soho's reputation started to decline steadily towards the end of the eighteenth century, as London's social elite began to relocate to the larger mansions of nearby Mayfair. Increasingly downtrodden and decaying, Soho evolved into a late Georgian/early Victorian concentration of cheap lodging houses that attracted poverty-stricken residents from other parts of London and further afield, as portrayed in Charles Dickens' (1838) account of Golden Square in *Nicholas Nickleby*. The intensity of Soho's insanitary living conditions was brought home by Dr John Snow's tracing of the devastating cholera outbreak of 1854, which claimed over 500 lives in just ten days, to a water pump in the heart of Soho. Snow made a detailed map of its incidence in the area, thus identifying the polluted pump in Broad (now Broadwick) Street as the source. A recently reinstated monument as well as the John Snow pub, both on Lexington Street, commemorate his decision to have the handle of the pump removed, thereby saving hundreds if not thousands more lives by precluding residents from accessing its water, thought to have been contaminated with excrement from nearby stable blocks. This is the Soho where exiled revolutionaries such as Karl Marx lived in overcrowded rooms in dilapidated tenements, the latter causing widespread premature death and disease. Speiser reports how by 1851 there were an average of 327 inhabitants per acre in Soho, a figure that was higher than in almost any other part of London.<sup>9</sup>

The cheap rents, combined with its reputation as a welcoming and tolerant community, meant that Soho was something of a haven for anarchists such as Marx who were in search of a safe place to live and work. Unable to pay their bills, Marx and his family left the German Hotel on Soho's Lisle Street in 1851 and moved to two small, overcrowded rooms at 28 Dean Street, where they lived for the next five years. It was here that the family's desperate financial situation and insanitary living conditions most likely led to the death of two of their children. Marx's

wife, Jenny, was reduced to begging, initially from neighbours and then from an uncle, to cover the burial costs for one of their children. As a further sign of the times (and the setting), while she was away Marx added to their problems by fathering another child with the family maid, Helen Demuth. Marx, Demuth and Friedrich Engels all agreed to cover this up in order to preserve the Marx's marriage, with all involved pretending for the rest of their lives that Engels was the child's father, until the latter finally confessed the truth to Marx's daughter shortly before he died. It was while living and working in Soho that Marx and Engels drafted *The Communist Manifesto* in the upstairs room of the Red Lion pub on Soho's Great Windmill Street.

In his book *The Rookeries of London*,<sup>10</sup> written in 1850, clergyman Thomas Beames describes the St Giles area that covered much of Soho during this period as one of London's most notorious rookeries. He writes, '[A] dirtier or more wretched place I have never seen. The street was very narrow and muddy, and the air was impregnated with filthy odours.'<sup>11</sup> Peter Ackroyd devotes a whole chapter of his biography of London to St Giles, describing it as 'the haunt of the poor and the outcast'<sup>12</sup>. It was here, the location of one of London's largest leper hospitals, founded in 1101 by Matilda, wife of Henry I, that the Great Plague that devastated London first broke out in the last weeks of 1664.

Beames' aim in writing his book about the rookeries was to raise awareness of the need for a new act of parliament to protect those with little choice but to live in places like St Giles, as well as (in true 'philanthropic' style) to contain the 'malignant spirit' that he warned would inevitably emerge from the inhumane living conditions to which families in St Giles and other London rookeries were subject.<sup>13</sup> This was a sentiment graphically emphasized by Hogarth in his famous depiction of 'Gin Lane' – a comment on the squalid life both encouraged and relieved by cheap drink, set against the backdrop of St Giles, looking towards the 'elevated' spire of St George's, Bloomsbury. Dickens also sought to raise awareness of the plight of families living in some of London's most notorious slums. In his Preface to the 1850 publication of *Oliver Twist*, he highlights the implications of living in London's rookeries for the many children condemned to do so. Referring to the fictionally named but otherwise all too real 'Jacob's Island', Dickens describes the poverty and powerlessness experienced by those living in 'the filthiest, the strangest, the most extraordinary of the many localities that are hidden in London'.<sup>14</sup>

Dismal though it was, the poverty and desperation that characterized St Giles was only one part of nineteenth-century Soho life. Ever complex and contradictory, the mid-Victorian era was also a period in which Soho

flourished, and not simply by exploiting London's most needy and vulnerable. Increasing immigration brought with it cultural and religious variety, with various groups of craftspeople living and working alongside each other. From the early 1700s, a small-scale business and manufacturing sector began to establish itself in Soho as a diverse but distinctive working community; by the mid-nineteenth century this was thriving, largely as a result of successive waves of skilled migrant workers settling there. Hutton (2012) describes how, by the first quarter of the eighteenth century, less than half of Soho's residential population were English, and this declined steadily over the next 100 or so years as the area became more culturally cosmopolitan.<sup>15</sup>

The presence of its immigrant communities has continued to transform Soho throughout its history, but especially so in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Soho's history is inextricably connected with, and indebted to, migration into the area. As many historians and cultural commentators have noted, successive waves and generations of French Huguenots, Italians, Russian and Polish Jews, Germans, Greeks and Swiss, and Chinese people have made Soho their place of work and home, all contributing in different ways to Soho's eclectic and enduring character. French settlement in particular has spanned several centuries. It was said that, in the late 1800s, organ grinders on Soho streets could make more money from playing the *Marseillaise* than any other tune.<sup>16</sup> A tympanum above the entrance to the French Protestant church on the northwest side of Soho Square depicts Edward VI extending a welcome and a Charter of Privileges to Huguenots who settled there after fleeing mounting persecution in the 1550s. The number of settlers increased considerably following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV in 1685, and with them came skills in silk weaving, clockmaking, engraving and silverwork, as well as culinary inventiveness. Oxtail soup and savoy sausages, now English 'staples', are both thought to be Huguenot imports. In 1711, the parish council of St Anne's estimated the total population of Soho to be just over 8,100, of whom some 40 per cent were believed to be French.<sup>17</sup> Alongside Soho's significant number of French family-owned and -run businesses, a wide variety of restaurants, bars and cafes flourished with each incoming migrant group, as did social and religious institutions serving the needs of Soho's increasingly diverse community of workers and residents.

The Clergy of St Anne's and parish workers compiled what is undoubtedly one of the most detailed commentaries on Soho's historical narrative, published in the form of *Two Centuries of Soho* in 1898.<sup>18</sup> This fascinating account documents what is perhaps the first attempt to

clean up Soho's streets, described in the *London Chronicle* in 1752. Referring to the plan to pave the City and Liberties of Westminster, the text stipulates that:

All sorts of dirt and ashes, oyster shells, and the offal of dead poultry and other animals, will no longer be suffered to be thrown into the streets, but must be kept until the dustman comes; nor will the annoyance created by coach makers be permitted; and when a house is pulled down, the rubbish must be carried to a proper place, and not left in the streets.<sup>19</sup>

In his Preface to *Two Centuries*, Walter Besant describes Soho as 'one of the most interesting districts of London' and as a place 'known to the fullest extent only by those who work there'.<sup>20</sup> Responding to concerns about Soho's growing reputation for sleaze at the time, the book documents Soho's businesses, social and religious institutions, and amusements over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In a similar vein to Beames' *Rookeries of London* published fifty or so years earlier, *Two Centuries* was something of a 'call to alms', the aim of which was to stir up parochial patriotism, particularly among local business owners, philanthropists and civic authorities. As a work of local history, it capitalized on Victorian social reform and paternalism. One particularly interesting illustration of this is the account given of how, in December 1849, the old Greek-Huguenot Church was 'in danger of being turned into a dancing saloon and music hall' when the Reverend Nugent Wade, rector of St. Anne's at the time, bought it for £1,500 and arranged for it to be consecrated by the Church of England. Given the name St Mary's, it was to be used as a chapel of ease (a church building within the bounds of a parish used by parishioners unable to attend the main church, either because it is too far or, more likely in this case, because it is too full). It is the south side of this church that features in Hogarth's 1738 representation of Hog Lane, 'Noon'. A symbolic gutter runs through the middle of this image segregating the decorous worshippers, Soho's aristocrats and hard-working artisans from the seedy squalor and chaos of their neighbours spilling out of the public house in the left-hand side of the image; taken together these two groups embody the proximity of Soho's extremes, then and since. The gutter was most likely a wry comment on Hogarth's part on how these extremes were inexorably intertwined in Soho then, as now.

Of particular note is the emphasis placed in *Two Centuries*, and echoed in Hogarth's work, on the various reforming institutions associated with the church and other philanthropic parish organizations. The West London Mission, located at Lincoln House on Greek Street, is described in some detail, with emphasis on how the Mission's leaders 'take a liberal

and enlightened view of their work . . . Improving the lot of the people, their aim is to show sympathy with the poor in their struggles and difficulties, and to help them wisely and well.<sup>21</sup> This reflects earlier work undertaken by the founders of the Westminster General Dispensary located on Gerrard Street. At the time Cardwell and his associates were writing, there still hung on the wall of the Dispensary, behind a chair that legend asserts to have been Dr Johnson's, a framed copy of the *Evening Post* dated 19–21 September 1774, in which the founders are reported as committing '[t]o render the Advantages of this Society extensively useful, and to give the Generous and Humane an opportunity of doing much Good . . . with Care, Attention and Humanity'.<sup>22</sup> The progressive nature of much of this work is also documented in the formation of the Hospital for Women, situated in Soho Square. Founded by Dr Protheroe Smith, Assistant Lecturer on Midwifery and Diseases of Women at St Bartholomew's School of Medicine in 1842, with the Prince of Wales as its Patron and the Duke of Westminster its President, this was believed to be the first women's hospital in the world.

The Soho institutions covered by *Two Centuries* include its religious centres such as the Protestant St Anne's church and schools, the Catholic St Patrick's, the French church of Notre Dame, and the French Protestant church, as well as halls, missions and parochial institutions in the area. Also documented are Soho's various medical centres: the Westminster General Dispensary; ear, heart and skin hospitals; the Hospital for Women; and the London Lock Hospital. Various charities and societies (such as the Royal Society for Musicians) are also described, as are the range of social clubs and unions for girls, boys, and working men and women, such as the *Societa Italiana Cuochi-Camerieri* catering for the area's growing community of Italian chefs and waiters.

The Soho Club and Home for Working Girls, established in 1880 by Maude Stanley at 59 Greek Street, Soho Square, deserves a particular mention. The Club's annual report for 1896 shows that 198 girls and young women were admitted that year, with an average nightly attendance of 47. The clubhouse provided recreation facilities and included a library and dispensary, with access to free medicines and a female doctor for all members. The reformist character of the Club is summed up in Cardwell's description:

If it were no more than a strong counter attraction to the course and low pleasures of the Music Halls and Dancing Rooms and a preservative from the temptation to lounge about the streets, it would be an institution of great value. But it is far more than this. It promotes good fellowship amongst our women toilers, it brings about

a sympathy between one class and another, and affords an opening for all kinds of friendly ministrations to those who have little to cheer and brighten their lives<sup>23</sup>.

Some two-thirds of *Two Centuries* is dedicated to documenting the wide range of skilled craft firms situated in Soho at the end of the late nineteenth century. It is the range of artisanal businesses that is particularly fascinating and illustrative of Soho's emerging reputation as the workshop of London's West End. Amongst those described are: artists' colour manufacturers; auctioneers; billiard ball and table manufacturers; black lead makers; booksellers, binders and printers; carriers, leather makers and saddlers; furniture manufacturers and sellers; glass dealers and stained glass artists; livery stables; milliners; musical instrumental makers; print sellers and picture framers; sheet music printers and dealers; silversmiths; solicitors; taverns and tin-plate workers.

Considerable emphasis is placed on the significance of the Soho Bazaar, a successful commercial and social enterprise which opened at 4–6 Soho Square on 1 February 1816 'to encourage female and domestic industry'.<sup>24</sup> Believed to be the first department store in the United Kingdom, the Bazaar's success is credited with its stated aims: 'to encourage home work by getting the best price for it; to provide small business opportunities for those most in need of them', and 'to abolish the middle man, and put manufacturer in immediate touch with the consumer'. In its heyday, the average daily attendance of the Bazaar was reputedly in excess of 2,500 people, and there were often as many as 200 stallholders at any one time. Subsidized refreshments were provided for workers along fifty-foot refectory-style tables.

Cardwell et al. attribute the Bazaar's success, at least in part, to the restrictions it placed on the characters and appearance of its sellers. The latter 'had to produce testimony as to their respectability, moral character and good temper'. Any potential sellers deemed to be 'meanly or dirtily dressed' would be denied entry.<sup>25</sup> Hinting at the gendered nature of the aesthetic economy to come, particularly in the retail sector,<sup>26</sup> Cardwell et al. note the complete absence of male stallholders: 'many of the young ladies are young, and fair to look upon'. The Bazaar became such a Soho institution that, as it began to decline after eighty or so years of trading, one commentator noted: 'one feels as if one were almost about to say good-bye to an old friend'.<sup>27</sup>

A relatively short but significant passage in the section on the 'Institutions of Soho' in *Two Centuries* focuses on growing concerns about the presence of 'disorderly houses' in the area. Frequent references are made to Vestry minutes and to petitions to Parliament asking for special legislation on the subject. With growing concern that the Parish



was 'sinking by the ever-increasing invasion of vice',<sup>28</sup> a Committee was formed to deal with the matter, the result being that Cardwell reports on fourteen convictions being obtained, twenty-four disorderly houses being closed and a further seventy notices being served on landlords running houses of 'ill repute'. The discursive terms of this clean-up are as much in evidence today as they were in 1898:

Apart from the moral aspects of the question, we believe that unless the Vestry had embarked in these energetic measures, a large number of our working people would have been driven from the Parish because they are unable to afford the bigger rents, which vice can pay.<sup>29</sup>

The last, comparatively brief section of *Two Centuries* is dedicated to 'Soho Amusements', describing the growing number of theatres as having a 'demoralizing' effect on the area but, at the same time, emphasizing from the outset Soho's significance as London's 'centre of pleasure'<sup>30</sup>. The notorious history of Carlisle House is described, as is the growing array of visitor attractions in and around Leicester Square, but (not surprisingly, given its reformist tone) it is on Soho 'at the fall of the curtain' that the discussion focuses most of its attention. A somewhat stoical position is taken on the implications of Soho's location at the heart of London's pleasure zone, with the latter being described as a mixed blessing. Echoing the issues noted earlier in this chapter, rising rates are of particular concern, especially in relation to their implications for Soho's working poor, whose trade compelled them to live near their place of work:

A suitable site for a Theatre or Music Hall will always fetch, in mid-London, an enormous sum; rents are consequently rushing up every day and dwellings where respectable artisans might live are being continually pulled down.<sup>31</sup>

This discourse of protective paternalism invokes concerns not just about class but also gender, with the especially harmful influence of 'that which is vile' on girls and young women being noted. These concerns notwithstanding, it is Soho's reputation as a place in which appetites of all kinds could be indulged that carried the area into the next century.

### Twentieth-Century Soho

As Walkowitz (2012) describes it in her discussion of the area's cosmopolitan cuisine,<sup>32</sup> Soho had begun to self-consciously market itself as a cultural destination dedicated to food and drink and to catering for sophisticated bohemian palates by the beginning of the twentieth century. A seven-part series of the *Caterer and Hotel-Keeper* trade magazine

focusing on 'Soho and its Restaurants' in 1906 illustrates this, constituting something of a culinary travelogue of the area.<sup>33</sup> Although Soho's 'darker social problems' were acknowledged to be 'more complicated and difficult than in any other district', these were set aside as being of less importance than the place's hybrid cuisine and culture. As Speiser notes, the decline in the number of domestic servants employed in the period after the First World War led to an increase in dining out as a social activity, especially in the capital, which also contributed to Soho's reputation for affordable gastronomy.<sup>34</sup> As Walkowitz reflects, what was interesting about Soho becoming a place known for its culturally eclectic food and drink was that its culinary mix reflects the place's history, culture and politics, the result being 'a hybrid cuisine, neither the ordinary peasant fare previously consumed by culinary workers in their native land, nor the international French cuisine available in grand hotels across Europe and in the West End'. As in so many aspects of its fare, then and since, Soho offered something discernibly different that reflected its character and history as a working community.<sup>35</sup>

Further, this highly marketable version of Soho's cosmopolitanism 'ratified London's capacity to master and contain unsettling multiplicity within a specialized enclave'.<sup>36</sup> This enabled Soho as a distinctive place, and as a working community, to reach out beyond its relatively bounded setting *at the same time* as serving to contain its radical edge in an easily (literally) digestible form. Like Cardwell's earlier account of Soho's craftsmen and -women, Soho workers were once again cast as the heroes of its rich and diverse biography, the 'honest counterpoints', as Walkowitz puts it, to the area's gangs, anarchists and growing number of pornographers. The cosmopolitanism this mix brought to the area came to mark Soho's reputation as a place of both pleasure and peril characterized by a romantic blend of familiarity and adventure.

Perhaps nowhere is this romanticization of Soho at this particular point in its history more apparent than in Arthur Ransome's semi-fictional, semi-autobiographical book *Bohemia in London*, published in 1907, which proffers Soho as a haven of bohemian sociality. Ransome describes Soho as being as much a 'tint in the spectacles' as a physical setting. Maps, he argued, fail to capture the way that Soho is experienced, simultaneously, as something 'strange, tense, joyful and despairing, hopeful and sordid'.<sup>37</sup> As Walkowitz notes, however, where Ransome and the *Caterer* depart from Cardwell's closing notes of dismay is in the emphasis the former especially placed on the creative potential of Soho's growing commodity culture. For Ransome, hinting at the shape of things to come

for Soho throughout the twentieth century and since, what made Soho distinctive was its stimulating atmosphere:

Ambience, décor, conversation, seeing and being seen – these were the cultural attractions of dining out in Soho, rather than the gastronomy itself. . . [I]t was the atmospherics of dining, not physical consumption or taste, that stimulated the imagination.<sup>38</sup>

Contrasting with the promotional efforts of the *Caterer* and with Ransome's rose-tinted romanticism were more pithy accounts of Soho as a place of sleaze, scandal and secrecy. In *The Secret Agent*, also published in 1907, Joseph Conrad portrayed these themes in his novel about political anarchists that serves as an antidote to the privileged bohemia celebrated by Ransome and the *Caterer*. Here the pornography shop owned by the central character Verloc is described as a trap for gullible customers, the 'special atmosphere' of which exudes a culture of fraud. The latter serves as a vehicle through which to question the political convictions and interpersonal loyalties of the self-proclaimed revolutionaries who congregate there; the shadow world that they occupy is materialized in the shop's appearance and is signified by its shady wares. The 'evil freedom' depicted is set against the isolated and fragmented identities of those who live, work and meet there. As Walkowitz has put it, the Soho of *The Secret Agent* is 'a bleak wasteland of unimproved London'.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, as she goes on to note, stripped away entirely are the well-meaning social reformers, artisans and philanthropic employers that Cardwell was so keen to champion, as well as the adventurous diners celebrated by the *Caterer* and Ransome. Conrad replaces the wondrous sense of community these characters embody with more fleeting descriptions of Verloc's shop and the 'strange fish' who frequent it. Through Conrad's depiction of the pornography shop in particular, Soho becomes a place of deceit and degradation and of ambivalent, suggestive meanings: 'it is both a home and shop; it sells two kinds of "shady" wares, political newspapers and sexual commodities'.<sup>40</sup> And the shop attracts two distinct kinds of customers: novices, who are duped into buying overpriced, substandard goods, and more mature men, who turn out to be Verloc's anarchist comrades. We are told that Verloc's young wife Winnie, who serves in the shop, produces 'rage in the heart' of the younger customers. In Conrad's hands, Soho encourages a culture of 'evil freedom', fraudulent and detached from the wider social context.

In combination with Stevenson's earlier account of Soho as the setting for *The Strange Tale of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Bohemia in London* and *The Secret Agent*, at least in literary terms, 'cemented Soho's legendary status

as a site of seedy pleasures and bohemian camaraderie'.<sup>41</sup> Conrad and Stevenson's Soho is a 'bleak wasteland' divested of social reformers, industrious artisans, exotic bohemians and neighbourly community; it is also a place heavily coded with masculinity, a theme to which we will return in Chapter 5. Hyde resides in 'the dismal quarter of Soho', the perfect setting for him, with its 'muddy ways, and slatternly passages'. Compared to the warm, welcoming glow of his own place of residence, Soho seemed, to the upstanding lawyer, Mr Utterson, 'like . . . a nightmare.'<sup>42</sup> Combined with the blurred identities and moralities signified by its 'muddy ways', Stevenson's account of Hyde's Soho emphasizes the latter as a place of 'premature twilight', underneath which its dark and dingy streets contain the capacity to envelope a man bent on concealing his duplicity.<sup>43</sup> Soho's 'darkness' was not just metaphorical however. In 1910, Westminster Council commissioned the Gas Light and Coke Company to install 1,800- and 3,000-candlepower lamps along the streets that bordered Soho. In contrast, the lamp-posts in Soho were fitted with only 90-candlepower lights<sup>44</sup> – once again, Soho's reputation for darkness was both meaningful and material.

As Stevenson also hints, however, towards the end of the novel when Hyde's circumstances and motivations are elaborated upon, Soho's shade also provides a protective cover to those who need it (signified by Hyde's own cloak, perhaps). Its reputation as an anchor point for those who need to hide, and where the unconventional can be themselves, was also firmly established by the early twentieth century. Mort (2010) describes, for example, how the first floor of the famous Lyons' Corner House that opened in 1909 on Coventry Street, on the southern edge of Soho, became an important meeting point for gay men that came to be known as the Lilypond.<sup>45</sup> Other historically important venues such as Kettner's (frequented by Oscar Wilde) and the Chat Noir on Old Compton Street, haunt of Quentin Crisp and his associates,<sup>46</sup> were a significant part of Soho in the early twentieth century and remain so today, if only by reputation or in narrative rather than material form.<sup>47</sup>

Soho's sex industry grew considerably in the early years of the twentieth century, especially during World War I. Its dark corners and narrow streets relative to other parts of London's West End enabled late-night entertainment venues to mushroom, creating 'an atmosphere conducive to transgressive practices and cross-class erotic encounters'.<sup>48</sup> It is the area's historical association with entertainment, much of which challenged or at least played with social norms, that gave Soho its alluring notoriety and which increasingly brought customers into these venues. Walkowitz notes the significance of the role played by restaurateurs in this process, as the renting out of upper rooms enabled sex workers to have

a place to go with clients solicited in the restaurants and cafes and on the streets below. As Arnold outlines, this inter-relationship was not new. The Metropolitan Police Act of 1850 had made loitering an offence, while, from 1858, any house from which more than one sex worker operated was deemed to be a 'disorderly house', and the landlady could be prosecuted. In practice, this meant that publicans often developed a mutually beneficial relationship with sex workers, as they brought in trade for each other, either side of their respective transactions.<sup>49</sup>

In the interwar years Soho's other markets thrived. Walkowitz describes how, in an illustration in a London travel guide, an image of Berwick Street market from above captures how extraordinarily compressed, almost 'bazaar like' the space is. Between 1893 and 1930, Berwick Street market grew from thirty-two stalls to 158, many of them selling women's clothing.<sup>50</sup> The market has long occupied an important commercial and social space in Soho – its messy, crowded layout prevents the free flow of pedestrian traffic that characterizes the West End's wide boulevards, most notably Nash's Regent Street.<sup>51</sup> As one of Britain's oldest markets (yet currently under threat from redevelopment of the space it occupies), Berwick Street market has historically been a 'liminal, carnivalesque' place.<sup>52</sup> Sepia-tinged photographs tend to obscure its dynamism and are better supplemented by the many surviving first-hand accounts of working and shopping there. In the 1920s, Berwick Street market became a fashionable retail space to those 'in the know', selling ready-to-wear clothing (in itself still relatively cutting edge) at a fraction of the cost of garments in the more fashionable shops along Oxford and Regent Streets. This direct selling did two important things: it brought the customer closer to the working conditions of those who produced the garments on sale, and it revealed something of the profit margins attached to the short distance between Soho workshops and the West End retailers. In this sense, because it was so open and explicit, with a vibrant atmosphere<sup>53</sup>, the Market quickly became something of a tourist attraction<sup>54</sup>.

The 'ready to wear' fashion produced by largely Jewish tailors along Berwick Street in the 1920s and 30s were relatively shapeless, tubular style dresses that could be worn by a variety of sizes. While not quite embodying the self-assurance of the flapper, these clothes, and the women selling them, materialized an emerging self-confidence and modern style that set them apart from previous generations of women, and which captured the spirit of Soho at the time. Walkowitz suggests that many of the Market's best customers were local sex workers who were an important source of revenue for local traders who supplied them with hats, dresses and accessories. As Speiser notes, although technically part

of Soho's night-time economy, the sex trade in this sense alone is intimately, and importantly, linked to its daytime business<sup>55</sup> – a theme we return to in Chapters 3 and 4.

The blurring of Soho's temporal economies and of these neighbouring areas is characterized by a dynamic and complex interplay between Soho's function as central London's workshop and its service to the pleasure zones of West End retail boulevards and theatres and to centres of political, legal and financial power only slightly further afield. The theatres established a firm connection to Soho after the creation of Cambridge Circus, Charing Cross Road and Shaftesbury Avenue, forming Soho's eastern and southern borders in the 1880s, effectively creating London's 'theatreland', sometimes simply referred to as the 'West End'. This blurring is also defined by Soho's proximity to the centres of politics occupied formally by Parliament and by the myriad gentleman's clubs in and around neighbouring St James. Soho's proximity to the latter has geographical significance to the area in a way that intertwines with its history of immigration, a connection that is important to note in any account of the area as a working community. As skilled craftsmen and -women migrated to London from Russia, Eastern Europe, France, Italy and China, the combination of cheap rents and being close enough for 'runners' to move quickly between Soho's backstreet workshops and the finer gentlemen's tailors in St James's was what led many migrant families to settle in the area. Gerry Black, who grew up in Soho, describes these interconnections as follows:

The men's trade used jacket makers, trouser makers and waistcoat makers, each of which was a separate trade. They in turn would use pressers, buttonhole and felling hands ... Pressers lived precarious lives and worked terrible hours. If a garment was finished at 7pm and had to be delivered at 9am the following day, the pressers would have to work through the night to finish it in time ... Tailors needed trimmings and within a few streets there were at least nine trimmings shops all of which prospered ... The work had to be taken to shop (it was always called 'shop') three times for fittings and brought back to be worked on and finished. *Hence the importance of being close by.*<sup>56</sup>

Referring to family members who were employed by the Thomas Burberry company that took premises in the Haymarket, west of Soho in 1901, Black goes on to explain how this proximal necessity connected to patterns of migration in the growth of Soho's working population:

My father was a gentlemen's tailor as were all our *landsleit*.<sup>57</sup> We had about fifty cousins, second cousins, third cousins and fourth cousins and nearly everyone was in the trade working for Savile Row. That is why we all lived around Berwick Street and Broadwick Street and D'Arbly Street [in the heart of Soho] ... because we had to be near to Savile Row.<sup>58</sup>

The 1891 London Tailors' Strike resulted in an influx of Jewish tailors from Whitechapel in the East End. Many of them specialized in making waistcoats supplied to upmarket tailors on Savile Row and shirts for Jermyn Street stores in the heart of St James's on the other side of Regent Street. By the start of World War I in 1914, there were seventy tailors in the Golden Square area of Soho alone, mostly in attic workshops that were relatively cheap to rent and (partly because of the number of people crammed into the space) to keep warm enough to work. As Gerry Black describes in his detailed history of Jewish life in London's West End, it was the combination of trade opportunities and cheap rents that attracted craftspeople to the area.<sup>59</sup> As he says, supporting the tailors were cutters, pressers and buttonholers. These workshops provided 'an industrial hinterland' for the tailors and retailers to the north of Soho, along Oxford Street, and to the west, along Regent Street and into St James's.<sup>60</sup> An important feature of this was that Soho's population was largely made up of different ethnic communities who, while not necessarily integrated, lived and worked relatively harmoniously alongside each other. The primarily home-based family-run businesses they operated were all small scale and specialist, complementing rather than competing with each other (a theme we return to later). This contributed significantly to the area's character, but it also meant that Soho did not have a distinctive ethnic or industrial identity or support structure to protect working conditions or workers' rights; some belonged to the Workers Union founded in 1898 and joined the 1912 tailors' strike, but many did not. Soho's growing status as a working community also meant that the increasing number of workshops in the area in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries exacerbated the declining housing stock and further increased rents, stretching the resources of Soho's working poor even more.

Perhaps no Soho institution epitomizes this complex interplay between the area's residential and working communities, its distinctive intertwining of geography, history and industry, and its connections to the sex industry more than the Windmill Theatre. Located on Soho's southern border, adjacent to the theatre district of Shaftesbury Avenue and Leicester Square, the Windmill was significant (and arguably so successful) because its ability to transgress borders was not simply physical but also cultural and sexual. Leicester Square has long since been regarded as the commercial heart of the West End's pleasure zone. The significance of the Windmill's location and its contribution to Soho's notoriety in the early to mid-twentieth century, largely due to the storm created by its public displays of nudity, should not be underestimated.<sup>61</sup> As Mort has put it,

The Windmill occupied a transitional space: a point where traditions of cultural bohemianism and sexual trespass met the wider world of West End mass entertainment and organized leisure.<sup>62</sup>

In 1931, the widow of a wealthy jute merchant, Mrs. Laura Henderson, bought what was then the Palais de Luxe cinema in Great Windmill Street. Often portrayed as a sexually and commercially naive elderly lady, Laura Henderson was in reality (if biographical accounts of her are anything to go by) extremely well connected to London's social elite, an astute investor, and patron of many London charities. With echoes of another well-known social enterprise some hundred or so years earlier, the Soho Bazaar, Mort describes how Henderson's aim in establishing the Windmill was broadly (if profitably) philanthropic: to help with national post-Depression recovery, specifically by employing out-of-work British theatrical performers, whose employment prospects had been severely dented by the growing popularity of cinema (as an aside, the Odeon in nearby Leicester Square was the first cinema in Britain to install a wide screen, in 1953). The Windmill's (equally famous) manager from 1938 to 1955, Vivian Van Damm, brought to fruition their shared vision of tastefully performed erotic entertainment in a theatrical staging focusing on visual display of the female body. Censorship legislation governing the latter meant that women could stand on stage but must not move whilst naked. The professionalism of the Windmill girls, and the commitment of the Theatre's management to the adage 'the show must go on', meant that, famously, the Windmill stayed continually open throughout the bomb raids on the West End during World War II, capitalizing on its achievement in the form of posters proclaiming 'We Never Clothed!'

Indeed, throughout the war Soho became a focal point of entertainment for troops passing through, particularly for the thousands of American GIs based at the nearby Rainbow Corner, a US Red Cross club situated on the corner of Denman Street and Shaftesbury Avenue. One of Mort's illustrations features Windmill girl 'Pat' on the front cover of *London Life* magazine on 19 October 1940, resplendent in stockings, tin hat and Alpine style costume, smiling and knitting. This saucy postcard-style image, a cheeky but ultimately wholesome dedication to the war effort, characterized the culture of the Windmill throughout its formative years and helps to explain both its success and its later downfall. By the 1960s, sexual entertainment in Soho had become much more explicit compared to the relatively quaint erotic tableaux for which the Windmill was known. This was largely brought about by legislative



changes and by property development in the area, as well as changing social attitudes towards sex and nudity to which we return in due course.

In their zeal for post-war redevelopment, Westminster City Council published the City of Westminster Plan in 1946. The Plan called for the demolition of much of Soho's built environment, seemingly regarding Soho as 'matter out of place', to borrow from anthropologist Mary Douglas.<sup>63</sup> Soho's narrow, crowded streets, its alleyways and courts, were seen as an impediment to further development of the cleaner West End thoroughfares and boulevards; its remaining industrial dwellings, small-scale retail outlets and artisanal workshops were deemed anachronistic in an urban environment dedicated to consumption and pleasure and to retail on an increasingly mass scale. Many commentators speculated that this signalled the end of Soho.<sup>64</sup> Even though several detective memoirs at the time, such as Robert Fabian's *London after Dark*, fuelled a popular image of Soho as 'London's square mile of vice',<sup>65</sup> many leapt to the area's defence, with the London Correspondent emphasizing that the existence of a thriving residential community, schools and places of workshop, along with over 1,000 small workshops, did not constitute evidence of Soho's descent into dereliction. The Plan's narrow vision of Soho as a route to somewhere else was firmly rejected and its 'double edged cosmopolitanism' reaffirmed, with its heady mix of sights, sounds, smells and styles, its dark and sinister streets and shady people, its very unseemliness, being recognized as its appeal.<sup>66</sup> Although it was not implemented, the Plan highlighted, however, that Soho was under the planners' spotlight as a dangerous slum ripe for urban redevelopment. Yet (in another sign of things to come), in doing so, it also brought to the fore the strength of feeling, and organizational capability, of those who sought to defend its character.

At the same time as a discourse about Soho as dangerous and decrepit gathered momentum, media culture demonized Soho as a 'claustrophobic world of underworld dens, dingy old alleyways and streets' existing solely to provide a place in which pervers, prostitutes and pimps could prosper.<sup>67</sup> Fabian's aforementioned *London after Dark* epitomized the latter, emphasizing that what he called 'the square mile of vice' was less a geographical area that could be easily marked out and more an unsavoury 'atmosphere' pervading this particular part of the West End of London. Acknowledging that Soho's vices were more intriguing and alluring than wholly corrupt, Fabian explained his emphasis on Soho's appeal with reference to its location. As many other writers have done, Fabian attributed the area's charismatic pull to its proximity to the heart of London's power bases, notably its shared

borders with more glamorous parts of the capital frequented by social and political elites.<sup>68</sup>

To offset the negative impact of these combined (and sometimes confusing) perceptions of Soho, local business owners and residents developed their own initiatives championing the area's cosmopolitanism. Perhaps the most notable example of this was the weeklong (and recently resurrected) Soho Fair, held annually between 1955 and 1959.<sup>69</sup> As Frank Mort has put it, by the early 1950s Soho was in dire need of a publicity boost. The Soho Restaurant Association, as the main organizer and sponsor of the Fair, capitalized on the area's reputation for culinary and cultural diversity, with publicity referring to Soho as 'Little Europe'. Rather than ignoring or playing down Soho's association with sex, the Fairs repackaged and rebranded it. Through waiters' races, fashion shows, talent competitions and erotic displays, the Fair celebrated the 'fleshy delights' of post-war Soho.<sup>70</sup> Citing the 'Soho Fair Official Programme', produced for the 1957 fair by the Soho Association, Mort notes an emphasis on two elements as forming the centrepiece of Soho's environmental distinctiveness: sex and food. As Mort describes it, the fairs were hailed as a collective expression of the area's sense of community and diversity, mixing together 'the traditions of the English carnival with [the] wide variety of hybrid and mimetic forms of European culture' that epitomized Soho's cosmopolitanism.<sup>71</sup> Drawing on anthropologist Frank Manning, Mort describes the fairs as a performative spectacle that brought a particular version of Soho into being in the popular consciousness, capitalizing on the area's cultural diversity to 'create an idiosyncratic mood of celebration that could be marketed to local and national audiences via the media and entertainment industries'.<sup>72</sup> Emphasizing the cultural eclecticism of the setting and event, taking centre stage in Pathé news coverage of the 1959 fair 'All's Fair in Soho'<sup>73</sup> are features of semi-naked women which, if the footage is anything to go by, were particularly popular with the assembled crowds. Mort sums this up when he describes how

Soho's carnival girls projected a distinctive erotic style that was assertive, mobile and visually charged, and their performances confirmed a link between sex and Soho's cosmopolitan cultures.<sup>74</sup>

In this sense, as Glinert notes, if Soho in the 1940s provided some comfort from the realities of war, Soho in the 1950s became an escape from post-war austerity:

The war over, Soho, with its potent mix of loose women, foreign foods, shabby narrow streets and exotic attitudes, came into its own. In a grey era of austerity,

conformity, rationing and increasing state involvement, *Soho meant louche, loose, licentious living*.<sup>75</sup>

Indeed, many cultural commentators at the time and since see the 1950s as Soho's heyday, in the twentieth century at least. At a time when British society was at pains to reinstate convention, Soho's inherent bohemianism continued to offer 'the unconventional, the eccentric, the rebellious and the merely different a chance to be themselves'.<sup>76</sup> For the young especially, Daniel Farson wrote in *Soho in the Fifties*, 'Soho is irresistible, for it offers a sort of freedom.'<sup>77</sup> Jazz and blues musician George Melly emphasized this evocation in his introduction to Farson's book, in which he describes the fifties in Soho as 'a dreamlike decade when everything seemed possible' in that 'dodgy never-never land'.<sup>78</sup> Echoing the sentiments of many other commentators before and since, Farson insisted that Soho was as much a 'state of mind' as a physical location, evoking the area as an island in the country's post-war, grey malaise, 'as lively as Isherwood's Berlin, the Parisian left bank and New York's Greenwich Village'.<sup>79</sup> While, as Mort notes, Farson's account drew heavily (and nostalgically) on the romanticism of Arthur Ransome's earlier *Bohemia in London*, it provides an important historical snapshot of Soho at this point in its narrative and an insight into the cultural context at the time.

In particular, Farson's influential account emphasized the social importance of a group of British artists and writers associated with Soho's pubs, clubs and restaurants, notably the York Minster (known as the French House, or just 'the French') and the Colony Club. Attracted by Soho's sleazy reputation and shabby aesthetic, the place appealed to those who hovered on the fringes of polite society and whose work largely depended on it. This group included Robert Colquhoun, Frank Auerbach, Lucien Freud, John Minton and, perhaps most notoriously, Francis Bacon. The much-written-about Muriel Belcher owned the Colony Club. When Francis Bacon signed the membership list on its opening day, the story goes that he agreed to lure some of his famous friends to the club in exchange for a £10-a-week retainer and, most importantly, free drinks.

Bacon and his associates were attracted to Soho's air of sexual excitement and bohemian cosmopolitanism and the extent to which 'many things considered illegal or morally reprehensible were perfectly acceptable in Soho'.<sup>80</sup> As Bacon's biographers have emphasized, it is highly likely that his time in Soho provided sustenance for the artist's conviction that, rather than stimulate the intellect, art should be an assault on the senses.<sup>81</sup> As Ed Glinert describes it, Soho's decadent, licentious hedonism made it 'the perfect backdrop for someone who wanted to remain on

the edge of society'<sup>82</sup> and on the margins of the artistic academy. In Soho 'was an entire community geared not just to pleasure, but to pleasure with . . . an edge'.<sup>83</sup>

Speiser cites cultural historian Roy Porter's summation of the excitement associated with Soho at this point in its history. Worth citing in full, Porter emphasizes the area's capacity to bring together artists, writers and radical intelligentsia, highlighting not just what Soho meant to them but also vice versa:

A culture materialized that was irreverent, offbeat, creative, novel. Politically idealistic and un-dogmatically left-wing, it broke through class barriers and captured and transformed many of the better elements of traditional London: its cosmopolitanism and openness, its village quality, its closeness, its cocktail of talent, wealth and eccentricity.<sup>84</sup>

Christine Stansell's account of the cultural and political significance of New York City's Greenwich Village makes similar points to Farson's story of mid-twentieth-century Soho and Porter's more recent reflections. She notes how, like Soho, Greenwich Village projected a particular geography of the imagination as an intensive, compressed social and sexual environment associated with experimentation and acceptance, attracting creative people from all walks of life, who in turn left their mark on the place itself.<sup>85</sup> Stansell writes about the Village as a place where the radical ideals of modernity became embedded within a particular locale. However, unlike Soho, those who experienced the Village as a bohemian enclave were largely removed from the sweatshops and tenements where migrants to the area lived and worked. As she puts it,

Greenwich Village, as it came to be celebrated, did not refer to an actual neighborhood so much as to a fictive community. It was a selective vision of city life that installed some people in the foreground as protagonists and shunted others to the background or offstage altogether.<sup>86</sup>

Although more sprawling than London's Soho, the relatively compact nature of the Village's layout made for a distilled cultural experience and set of associations. Yet, as Stansell notes, the area was more of a conscious, even tactical, construction (at a time when LGBTQ people were struggling for a place, physically and politically, in US society) rather than a distinctive setting. While this contrasts with Soho, there is one important similarity between the two places that relates to the interrelationship between geography and sociability: in contrast to the wide boulevards of their respective surrounding areas, particularly the block layout in Manhattan, Stansell emphasizes how 'the twists and turns of the streets fostered a kind of purposeful sauntering', just as Soho's courts and alleys,

in contrast to its neighbouring streets and boulevards, influence a particular sociability. As suggested at the outset of this chapter and in the previous section, it is this dialectical relationship between the social and the material, between the people and the place, that makes Soho *work* in the way that it does. Whether revellers or refugees, as Speiser has put it, it is Soho's unique personalities that 'lie at the heart of the area's enduring popularity across the globe'.<sup>87</sup> But, more so, it is the ways in which the people who live, work and consume there intersect with the area's histories, geographies and economies that constitute Soho's character as a distinctive place in a way that arguably distinguishes it from similar areas such as Greenwich Village.

The mid- to late twentieth century is a particular period in its history that illustrates this well; it is a time that has been widely written about and much romanticized, so much so that it is 'almost a legend'.<sup>88</sup> To the hero of Colin MacInnes' *Absolute Beginners*, Soho is the place where 'all the things they say happen, do'<sup>89</sup>; he argues that it is 'the most authentic' of all London quarters, a place where 'vice of every kind' can be found. Contrasting the vivacious life of Soho with neighbouring Leicester Square, 'You don't go into Soho to see films', he says, 'because Soho is a film.'

The masculine character of this period is not lost on Frank Mort, who notes how Soho became something of a social and sexual odyssey, particularly for young men. Judith Walkowitz emphasizes that what undoubtedly compelled the latter was Soho's notoriety as 'a wide open place'.<sup>90</sup> Memorably satirized by Tony Hancock in his 1960 film *The Rebel* and portrayed more authentically in the 1959 film *Beat Girl*, it was the coffee-shop culture that formed the basis of Soho's music scene in the 1950s, with the 2i's coffee bar on Old Compton Street claiming to be the starting point for rock and roll music in the United Kingdom. Named after the original proprietors, Freddie and Sammy Irani, the 2i's had a tiny stage in the basement that undoubtedly played a major role in the emergence of the British music scene.

If it was aristocrats who made Soho fashionable in the seventeenth century, and artisans and their cuisine in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, by the mid-1950s it was Soho's artists who made it such a desirable place to be, and much of this attraction revolved around Soho's many bars, restaurants and coffee shops. Hutton cites a 1951 edition of *The Soho Guide* that refers to over 400 restaurants in Soho at the time.<sup>91</sup> The first Gaggia espresso machine came to Britain in 1952, to a coffee shop on Frith Street, launching the fashion for Italian coffee and culture, food and fashion. As Mort describes it, Soho was systematically

marketed as a special place in the 1950s, with 'the district's double character as dangerous and compelling' combined with its reputation for sexual excitement being incorporated into media treatments that promoted Soho as an eccentric and enticing part of the capital's culture.<sup>92</sup> The *Soho Guide* cited by Hutton refers to the various groups of people who populated Soho at the time and to its simultaneously shady and seductive qualities:

Agents, publishers, song-pluggers, crooners and band leaders talking about picking up royalties for broadcasts on air. There are barrow boys with wads of cash and the Greyhound Express, movie men from Wardour Street with loud ties and cigars, small time prize fighters with their managers, racecourse touts, waiters, beggars, drinking clubs, rehearsal rooms and the sound of Le Jazz Hot . . . bookshops with thinly veneered pornography, postcards in windows that somehow manage to hint at immorality and perversion in the most innocent of phrases. *This is the Latin Quarter of London, vice ridden, glamorous, dirty and yet romantic, where the streets are shady on both sides of the road.*<sup>93</sup>

As well as an area (and a time) in which to see and be seen, Hutton's *Story of Soho* emphasizes that Soho in the fifties was very much a working community. Contrary to the popular belief that it was inhabited solely by writers, artists, musicians and so on, as he puts it, '[T]here was a more mundane side populated by ordinary people trying to make a living.'<sup>94</sup> Among them were the hundreds of people who worked in Soho's many bars, restaurants, cafes, delis and shops. Many of the area's food stores specialized in bread, cheese, sausage or coffee. Again, Soho's geography served as a contrast to other forms of retail emerging in London at the time; the fast pace of self-service supermarkets did not suit Soho, where customers took their time to savour the aromas of its small-scale shops, to interact with proprietors as goods were weighed and measured in the same way that they had been for hundreds of years, and 'to take in all that was going on around them', as Hutton describes it.<sup>95</sup>

Alongside these family-owned stores were other more specialist shops that proliferated in Soho in the 1950s and early 1960s as part of the area's burgeoning sex industry. The Irving Theatre became Soho's first non-stop striptease show when it opened its doors to members in 1957. Licensing regulations at the time required a minimum forty-eight-hour waiting period between a member joining and being permitted access. However, the owner of The Irving, a London Barrister named Dhurjati Chaudhuri, found a pragmatic solution: he paid the regularly imposed £100 fine, easily covered by the profits that quickly accrued. Hutton describes how nightly queues to join the 'Members only, licensed bar' that the sign outside advertised 'snaked around the street'.<sup>96</sup> Competitor clubs, more explicit than the Irving, quickly opened up, including the Nell

Gwynne on Meard Street in the former premises of the fashionable Gargoyle Club. By the end of the 1950s, there were over a dozen strip clubs in Soho, with a combined membership of around 200,000 and annual box office takings believed to be in excess of £2.5 million; as Hutton succinctly puts it, hinting at the scale of the emerging sex market in Soho, 'the profit margins were immense'.<sup>97</sup>

By the 1960s, Soho's Carnaby Street became the focal point of so-called Swinging London, with the opening of John Stephen's various shops and the music and fashion scene that revolved around it acting as an important cultural catalyst. As Speiser has emphasized, Soho's edgy history, its growing commercialism and its emerging youth culture combined to produce 'an atmosphere not to be found anywhere else'.<sup>98</sup> For a relatively brief period, one of the most run-down streets in interwar Soho became the fashion and retail centre of the world; Soho was an integral part of Britain's youth culture, just as the latter became central to Soho, with its growing number of clothes shops, coffee bars and nightclubs.

It is these kinds of cultural depictions and associations that have been vital to Soho's capacity to continually reinvent itself. Judith Walkowitz notes how media depictions of Soho in the 1960s have been crucial to advancing the commercial appeal of the district, and Frank Mort has highlighted how successive waves of publicists, artists and writers have repackaged Soho for new habitués, almost invariably drawing on the area's historical inter-connections<sup>99</sup>.

But like all romanticized legends, Soho has its dark side. Even amongst the relatively privileged circle of Daniel Farson and his associates, Soho lifestyle took its toll in the form of alcoholism, suicide, early death and wasted talents. By the 1970s, Soho was once again 'in the grip of vice', as Summers puts it, with its sex industry entering a new, aggressive phase<sup>100</sup>. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, pornography, prostitution and live erotic entertainment, much of it staged in clubs owned or controlled by Paul Raymond, were defining features of Soho's sexual culture in what was an extremely concentrated market environment. Many have argued that in the 1970s and 1980s, commercial sex effectively took over Soho. Long-time Soho resident and film producer Colin Vaines somewhat nostalgically describes the atmosphere of Soho during these decades:

Dirty, smelly, noisy Soho was an unbelievably exciting mixture of pubs, restaurants, cafes and markets. And the people! Spotty, chain-smoking youths wheeling handcarts piled high with film cans narrowly avoided being hit by taxis as the most multinational and multicultural mix of people I'd ever seen surged around the streets. But let's face it, for a teenage boy, Soho had one other key attraction: it was very, very naughty. Red lights were everywhere and every other entrance seemed

to be a strip club, massage parlour, sex cinema or sex shop selling magazines and 8mm home movies. Displays inside and outside the shops, sometimes plastered on entire walls of buildings, were as graphic as the law – or rather, the notoriously corrupt ‘porn squad’ of the time – would allow.<sup>101</sup>

And the area's global reputation as a hotbed of vice lingers on. Since the mid-twentieth century, Soho has maintained a reputation as being one of the most famous red-light districts in the United Kingdom and one of the best-known areas of concentrated commercial sex in the world. The area became increasingly synonymous with the porn trade in the 1960s and with the commercial sex business that grew up in and around the Raymond Revuebar. Located in a seedy alleyway called Walker's Court (currently under redevelopment), the bar formed the basis of Raymond's growing neon-lit business empire. Fully aware that Soho has always walked a fine line between the erotic and the sleazy, many of Soho's biographers have argued that Raymond's era marked a period in its history in which its reputation tipped into that of the tawdry and tatty. As Ed Glinert has put it:

Despite the whiff of glamour, the local sex industry [in the 1960s and 1970s] was more seedy than sophisticated, laced with the fear of casual violence, an atmosphere expertly evoked by Michael Powell in the 1960 film *Peeping Tom*.<sup>102</sup>

Various forms of commercial sex proliferated in Soho throughout the second half of the twentieth century, most notably strip clubs, sex cinemas,<sup>103</sup> pornography and sex shops.<sup>104</sup> The presence of sex workers has been more than tolerated in Soho throughout its history, with ‘men coming in and out with the regularity of a conveyor belt’<sup>105</sup> (which suggests, of course, that those working within them were subject to the same degree of automation). Sex work and workers are widely accepted as an intrinsic part of Soho village life,<sup>106</sup> yet the peep shows, strip clubs and sex shops associated with ‘sexpreneurial’ figures such as Raymond and Murray Goldstein<sup>107</sup> have been regarded with scepticism if not outright scorn by others who live and work there. As one retired clock-repairer interviewed by Summers put it, ‘you accepted the prostitutes as fellow tradespeople’, but the sex shops have not (until relatively recently) been accepted as part of Soho's working community.<sup>108</sup> This can be explained in large part because, with the sex industry en masse, came not only rent increases but also a darker, more worrying side to Soho life, in the mid-twentieth century especially: organized crime.<sup>109</sup>

The end of the 1950s marked the beginning of a new phase in the history of Soho and for Britain's sex industry more widely. The Obscene Publications Act (1959) was intended to tighten up on the previously unworkable obscenity laws. With the Street Offences Act (1959),



designed to clear prostitutes off the streets, sex workers retreated not only into the 'nether regions of bare, dimly lit staircases'<sup>110</sup> still very apparent in Soho today but also, in doing so, into the 'protection' of pimps and organized criminals, many of whom owned properties used by sex workers to service clients. Until this point, as Barbara Tate (2010) describes it in her autobiographical account of the working lives of 'West End Girls', sex workers routinely solicited outside on the streets and in the many courts and alleyways between the larger buildings. An outcome of the Wolfenden Report (1957), the 1959 Act made soliciting for sexual purposes in public places a criminal offence. On the one hand, this made Soho a (relatively) safer place for sex workers, enabling them to screen potential clients before admitting them onto the premises, including through the use of CCTV and other security devices. If those who had been offended by lines of sex workers on the streets thought that the 1959 Act would result in a 'clean-up', however, they were naively mistaken, at least in Soho's case:

Almost overnight, Soho acquired an uglier face, tacky and sordid. The poorly drafted legislation did not preclude the working girls transferring their trade to clubs, cafes and hostess bars. Within weeks there was an outbreak of outlets devoted to the sale of sex. The gangsters and dodgy entrepreneurs sniffed the chance of making some serious money.<sup>111</sup>

Commercial sex was (and remains) perfectly capable of seeking out and saturating new opportunities to unite supply and demand, and Soho post-1958 epitomizes this. By the early 1960s, Soho's persistent organized crime problem became even more intertwined with its sex industry, as the area established itself as a prime location for protection rackets and pimping. Summers sums up the effect of the Street Offences Act on Soho's sex economy:

Unable to solicit for customers on the streets, prostitutes now had to rely on pimps to tout for them or to meet their clients in special 'hostess' bars, strip clubs, saunas and bogus massage parlors set up expressly to bring prostitute and client together.<sup>112</sup>

The 1958 Act, nicknamed a 'pimps charter' for the reasons Summers suggests, had yet another beneficial effect on the sex industry from a property owner's perspective: 'near beer' bars (immortalized in the Kinks' song 'Lola') sprung up all over Soho serving overpriced non-alcoholic drinks masquerading as expensive cocktails. As Summers puts it, 'the government had virtually presented the vice barons with a license to print money', enabling the owners of properties such as strip clubs and hostess bars to become increasingly powerful and rich. Perhaps the most well known was the aforementioned Paul Raymond, who bought the

Windmill Theatre and many other Soho properties occupied by the sex industry throughout the 1970s.

In yet another irony, while sex work was taking place upstairs, and in the dingy basements of strip clubs and near beer bars, the pornography business, hitherto largely tucked away in the back rooms of a handful of book shops and specialist magazine shops, like the one owned by Verloc in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, now came into its own. The Obscene Publications Act of 1959, combined with a relaxation of censorship laws in Denmark and Sweden during the mid- to late 1960s, meant that hard-core pornographic material became widely and openly available in Soho's previously relatively constrained sex shops. In his discussion of the so-called Soho sex barons of the 1960s and 1970s, Martin Tomkinson argues that pornography came to dominate Soho's commercial and cultural landscape at this point, with Soho being one of the few areas where hard-core material was widely available.<sup>113</sup> This was another unforeseen consequence of a legislative change brought about largely by the *Lady Chatterley* trial, introduced ostensibly to enable well-established authors to be able to include more detailed descriptions of sex in their work without running the risk of prosecution.

If the Street Offences Act (1959) was a licence for pimps and property owners in Soho, the 1959 Obscene Publications Act was an open invitation to the area's pornographers, many of whom wasted no time in exploiting it. Many claim that pornographic material overwhelmed Soho by the end of the 1960s, as 'the number of sex establishments mushroomed, and their displays became notably explicit'.<sup>114</sup> Organized crime, police corruption and rent extortion meant that commercial sex rapidly became a multimillion-pound business that seemed to engulf Soho at this point in its history, as the area and the industry became synonymous. As Hutton describes it:

The face of Soho was changing. Small shops were swallowed up by a sea of outlets devoted to the sex industry. Mucky bookshops, strip clubs and clip joints<sup>115</sup> swept all before them . . . as a hardcore pornography boom developed.<sup>116</sup>

It is notable that property owners such as Raymond benefited from the increasing value of Soho property not simply as their strip clubs and pornography businesses flourished but also as landlords. As Soho became more gentrified, thanks to an escalation in land values, rental and property prices generated huge profits.

An enthusiastic supporter of Thatcherism, by 1992 Raymond took the title of the richest man in Britain from the Duke of Westminster, with an estimated personal fortune of £1.5 billion.<sup>117</sup> As Hutton has put it, Raymond became one of Britain's wealthiest men throughout much of

his life 'on the back of displays of female flesh',<sup>118</sup> not simply in his own clubs and bars but also through his burgeoning property portfolio. It is perhaps ironic, as Mort notes, that Raymond's business empire benefited so excessively and directly from the Wolfenden Report's recommendations enacted through the Street Offences Act 1959, which 'effectively restructured the sex trade'<sup>119</sup> in Britain. Because of the concentration of commercial sex venues in Soho, the Act's impact was most likely felt more here than anywhere else in the country. As a result, Raymond became the self-styled 'Duke of Soho' and the recognized face of commercial sex in London and well beyond. His expansive business strategy had, and continues to have, major consequences for Soho's development and for the commercial sex industry more generally. As Kirk Truman has recently put it, Raymond's legacy still haunts the streets of Soho today. While the Revuebar closed in 2004, the centre of Raymond's empire of erotic entertainment, sex, publishing and property lives on in the form of The Box, Soho. Billed as London's 'seediest VIP venue', the Box 'remains true to the Raymond Revuebar's legacy, serving up nightly helpings of titillation, nudity and sex'.<sup>120</sup>

Raymond's explicit tactic was to own, rent and control as much of Soho's property as he could in order to promote the area as a sexual marketplace 'organized around his own goods and services'.<sup>121</sup> His wealth and empire spread across Soho as he began to purchase the freeholds of buildings throughout the neighbourhood. He created Soho Estates, amassing around 400 properties in the Soho area. The result, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, was that the sex industry in Soho became something of a 'cluster economy'. But unlike more recent incarnations of this clustering, Soho (as Raymond's commercial manor) became increasingly heteronormative, hyper-masculine and seedy: 'the underside of the West End's sexual economy'.<sup>122</sup>

### **Soho Today**

It is against this backdrop, one of growing concern about Soho's future, that in November 1972 a community that had been evolving for over 300 years met to form The Soho Society. Through hard lobbying, members of the Society managed to get Soho declared a conservation area, as evidenced today by the many blue plaques and other artefacts of the area's cultural history that punctuate its urban landscape. Instead of comprehensive redevelopment, the Soho Society championed small-scale renovation based on the preservation of Soho's character as London's oldest urban village. Working with local residents and

businesses, ridding the area of its 'plastic vice', as founder member Bryan Barraclough put it, was not a moral crusade for the Society but a matter of community survival.<sup>123</sup> Of primary concern were the rent increases resulting from so many properties being taken over by the sex industry, increasing rents to way above what local residents or businesses not connected with commercial sex could afford. As Theodore et al. (2013) suggest, organized responses such as these to local struggles around affordable housing, living wages and the environment point to progressive alternatives to neoliberal urbanism and to a revived community solidarity in city centre locales that has the capacity, en masse, to challenge the unfettered 'rule of markets'.<sup>124</sup>

In 1982 and 1986, after heavy community pressure from the Soho Society, Westminster City Council brought in licensing legislation for sex shops and establishments providing sexual entertainment. Under the new legislation, the Council could fix the number (and cost) of licences, so that any business operating without a licence could have its stock seized and be subject to a fine and eventual closure. Glinert describes how, prior to the combined effects of the Soho Society and legislative intervention, Soho had descended into 'a sea of sleaze and sordid sex', having become 'a byword for seediness'. Arnold indicates that in the 1960s there were just under sixty sex shops in Soho<sup>125</sup>. Glinert estimates that at the end of the 1970s there were at least 200; by the end of the following decade, after the introduction of licensing, only thirty-five remained. And the number has decreased considerably since – there were around twenty-four licensed and unlicensed shops when I began researching Soho in 2008, and at the time of writing eleven (all licensed) sex shops are currently trading.

Walkowitz describes how, by the end of the 1980s, Soho seemed to have turned a corner, as the licensing system appeared to have kept the vast expansion of the sex industry in check.<sup>126</sup> The resulting effect is complex. Some argue that Soho has since become overly (and unnecessarily) sanitized and gentrified, citing dramatically increasing rental and property prices in the late 1980s and 1990s, combined with the growing presence of high-street chains and the ongoing closure of local businesses, as evidence of its decline. Erin Sanders-McDonagh et al. argue that Soho has effectively been lost to the sanitizing effects of 'hegemonic gentrification', resulting in the area becoming a playground for the super-rich. Citing the motto of Soho Estates – that the area should be 'edgy but not seedy' – they also draw from the English Collective of Prostitutes. The latter responded to a police raid in 2013 of a number of flats used by sex workers, ostensibly in order to 'rescue' victims of trafficking,<sup>127</sup> by emphasizing how 'if the "girls" go, the whole character of this historic

area will be lost forever . . . smoothing the path towards gentrification'.<sup>128</sup> But this is not necessarily irreversible, all-encompassing or even new, and Soho remains much more than simply 'another case study in the diverse nature of gentrification'.<sup>129</sup> Throughout its history Soho has been at the mercy of those driven to clean it up, or to clean up on it, and often both; arguably this is when it thrives most (as the formation of the Soho Society in 1972 suggests). Writing in the 1920s, well ahead of what many cultural commentators regard as Soho's bohemian 'heyday', Alec Waugh lamented that Soho was not what it had been, describing the place as 'a dingy and rather pathetic sham' of its former self, over-commercialized and faux-bohemian.<sup>130</sup>

Other commentators have maintained that the introduction of licensing governance in the 1980s, combined with a purge of protection rackets in the area, marked a turning point in Soho's recent history, one that has opened up space for a different kind of sex industry, and sexual ethos, to flourish. Summers closes her historical account of Soho with a note of optimism that reflects this latter view, when she argues that 'Soho has come full circle. No longer the social pariah of London, it is once again the "in" place to be.'<sup>131</sup> Chinatown has grown socially and commercially. With its distinctive pagoda-like entrance, the area is now a major tourist attraction and a culinary and cultural centre. The work of the Soho Society and local business initiatives such as the 'I Love Soho' campaign and social media groups such as Stephen Fry's 'Save Soho' have all combined to breathe new life into the area. And changes in the sex industry have had their own impact as well. As we will discuss in more depth in Chapter 5, although the industry remains heavily male-dominated, important elements have embraced gender fluidity and sexual multiplicity. The sector, and the area's, underlying hegemonic, heteronormative masculinity has been challenged, with a growth of interest in and support for organizations that celebrate LGBTQ lifestyles and provide a focal point for queer communities to flourish.

While to say that Soho constitutes 'the epitome of hard-core hedonism'<sup>132</sup> might be overstating the case, Soho became something of a magnet for gay men in the 1990s, with Old Compton Street rivalling Manchester's 'gay village' as a centre of leisure and consumption as bars and lifestyle stores multiplied, and these continue to have a notable and important presence. Of Old Compton Street, Ed Glinert simply says, '[G]ive thanks.'<sup>133</sup> Again, this reinvention built on Soho's historical associations – Quentin Crisp described how, as 'a reservation for hooligans', he felt safer in Soho than anywhere else, recounting in *The Naked Civil Servant* how the landlord of the Coach and Horses asked anyone who persistently made fun of him to leave.<sup>134</sup> And yet the area's

characteristic openness also makes it vulnerable. On 30 April 1999, a neo-Nazi sympathizer, David Copeland, asked the barman of the Admiral Duncan pub on Old Compton Street for directions to the nearest bank, leaving a bag containing a bomb packed with nails in the bar. When the bomb exploded fifteen minutes later, three people were killed and scores of others were badly injured, sending shock waves through the community but also mobilizing its strength and solidarity. The latter was on display once again in June 2016, when a candlelit vigil along Old Compton Street paid tribute to those who lost their lives during a mass shooting at a Latin Pride event at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida.

But this sense of community is also, at least in part, what makes Soho particularly vulnerable to corporate overdevelopment. Coinciding with its 1990s renaissance was Soho's affirmation as a centre of media and cultural creativity. Soho has a long historical association with theatre and music, and its connection to the film industry was further strengthened by the growth of post-production film studios and distribution companies in the area. Hedge funds and other financial and corporate services businesses have also begun to emerge, trading on Soho's edge and its cachet as a deviation from the norm. The exclusive international chain of members' clubs, Soho House, also cashes in on the area's history and reputation, retaining its name in other cities across the world to signify these associations (whilst remaining entirely separate from the wider community in which it is situated, in the heart of Soho). But again, this apparent 'gentrification' is nothing new: trading on the area's 'exotic' associations began at least with Theresa Cornelys' Society of Soho Square masked balls in the 1700s. Today, as well as clubs such as Soho House and the Groucho, businesses seemingly unconnected to the sex industry, like 'Strip' sportswear and the 'Nudie' jeans repair shop cite Soho's enduring reputation for sex as a semiotic reference point.

Summers signs off with a further note of optimism when she says that 'Soho is no longer synonymous with sleaze but with style'. However, thinking about Soho in terms of a perceptual or aesthetic shift from sleaze to style does not, to my mind at least, quite capture the area's historical complexity, its materiality and meanings, or its contemporary appeal. For many, it *is* Soho's sleaze, even an increasingly sanitized version of it, that characterizes its style and reputation and which explains the place's magnetic capacity. When *Soho: A History of London's Most Colourful Neighbourhood* was published in 1989, Summers noted how in the 1970s there were 186 sex establishments in the seediest parts of Soho. A decade on, as already noted, only thirty-five licensed strip clubs, hostess bars, peep shows and sex cinemas remained, and these were concentrated largely around Brewer Street and Walker's Court. This concentration

remains the case today, but the numbers have reduced considerably, and the traditional shops situated in these areas are under increasing commercial pressure. The small area in and around Walker's Court illustrates this. At the time of writing, the area is a building site, with only two sex shops, a tattoo parlour and The Box nightclub remaining open for business. Development plans are in place for a hotel, a revolving theatre and a reconstruction of the Madame Jojo's nightclub that formerly operated on a site in Brewer Street. As a semiotic effort to capitalize on the setting's seedy history, the Raymond Revuebar neon sign advertising 'Erotic Entertainment' is apparently being remade; 'like a Bond villain's lair', the headquarters of Soho Estates will also be re-sited there.<sup>135</sup> An article in the *Evening Standard* that describes the development makes reference to the demolition of 'a couple of old Soho walk-up brothels ... more romantic as an idea than the grubby and sad reality' to make way for a new theatre entrance; new walls will be faced in glazed, handmade bricks to contrast with the plastic-ribbed curtains and blacked-out windows more characteristic of 'old Soho' (and required by licensing conditions introduced in 1982). The whole plan seems to be driven by a mimetic desire to capitalize on Soho's edgy past, but of course this carries with it the risk of crushing its contemporary character in the process, creating the whole area as a clichéd simulacra much like other themed neighbourhoods or living museums.

As already noted, during the years I have been researching this book, the number of premises with sex establishment licences, including sex shops, has reduced dramatically. Yet Soho continues to have a global reputation for sleaze and commercial sex.<sup>136</sup> Undoubtedly there have been huge improvements in Soho, many that have made it a much safer place for those who work and live there. As a working, residential community, Soho is not only stable; it is thriving.<sup>137</sup> Concerns about the effects of licensing, and particularly about the area's gentrification, sanitization and corporate overdevelopment are widespread, however.

These concerns manifest themselves not least in opposition to the effects these combined processes have on rates and rents in the area. Just as the sex industry squeezed out small, family-run business in previous decades, more recently Soho's latest renaissance has resulted in yet another rapid escalation in property prices, so much so that few of the long-standing family businesses remain in an area that seems to be increasingly populated, commercially at least, by refurbished offices, fashionable boutiques and chain restaurants. As a result, an important part of what made Soho distinctive is being irretrievably eroded as the 'casual, haphazard feel of the district is [all but] disappearing'<sup>138</sup>. With all Soho's many gains, there are losses. Despite her optimism, Summers

notes that it is the traditional craft industries – so important to Soho's history – that are most at risk.

These combined processes have been led not just by the market but also by government policy and legislation. The Use Classes Order, passed by Westminster City Council in May 1987, abolished the classification of property solely for light industrial use, so that, when leases expire and premises change hands, landlords can turn what might have been a light industrial workshop into office space without obtaining any necessary permission. As office space commands higher rental income than industrial space, this has further perpetuated the erasure of Soho's distinctive character as a working community. As Summers (1989) acknowledges, these changes are by no means unique to Soho. As she also emphasizes, however, and as Stephen Fry has put it more recently, through this process of gentrification 'something extremely valuable is being lost',<sup>139</sup> not least a richness and depth that has taken hundreds of years to, quite literally, 'craft'.

Yet despite, or perhaps even because of, all this, Soho continues to thrive on its atmosphere as an urban village and as a close-knit community. Soho is nothing if not resourceful and resilient. Summers ends by asking whether Soho's vitality and individuality will survive. The Soho Society works continuously to prevent the area from becoming over-sanitized, as do its vociferous supporters within the cultural and creative industries, not to mention Soho's own working population. In the chapters that follow, and in the stories told within them by some of the men and women working in Soho's contemporary sex industry, the aim is to show how, somewhat paradoxically, Soho's simultaneously loved and hated sex industry seems to be playing an important part in ensuring its survival as a thriving, working community of outsiders.