Introduction

London, 29 August 1912

The morning began with a heavy downpour as dozens of special trains arrived early. Their passengers were coming to witness one of the biggest funerals[1] ever seen in the capital in living memory. They poured out of Charing Cross and Blackfriars underground stations and headed for the Embankment. By the time they were marshalled into groups, they were soaked to the skin by the drenching rain. In all, there were 40 bands and 10,000 blue uniformed men and women, strangely, not wearing black ribands but white ones. Banners and flags of every nationality flew as they marched off. It did not seem like a funeral, more a triumphal march.

At Queen Victoria Street the coffin, draped in white, of the 83-year-old man was placed on a horse-drawn hearse decorated in red and purple. Palms surrounded the simple oaken casket and a cap and well-worn bible were placed on the coffin. The mile-long funeral cortège watched by a curious, dense crowd as far as the eye could see – over a million people – wended its way on the five-mile journey to Abney Park Cemetery in Stoke Newington. It took an hour for it to pass at any one point. The pavements were black with umbrellas and mackintoshes as the bands started to play the soulful, moving 'Dead March' from Handel's *Saul*. The steady beat of thousands of feet on the sanded roads was the right accompaniment.

1. This funeral account is based on numerous contemporary newspaper reports.

The hushed multitudes who lined the route reverently saluted the coffin removing their hats as it was borne along. Everywhere people were breaking down and weeping; the majority working men and women. Black shutters were put up as a mark of respect and all shops were temporarily closed. At junctions the crowd stood 20 to 50 deep. Traffic was non-existent and the pavements were impassable. At times, there was hardly space for the procession to pass. An experienced policeman thought the crowd was twice as dense as any he had encountered during Coronation festivities.

At the Stock Exchange, flags flew at half-mast and business was suspended for an hour as its members crowded the roof of the building. Bareheaded clerks and typists flocked to the streets below to watch the spectacle. Past the Mansion House the Lord Mayor appeared on the balcony in his robes and chain and saluted the coffin as it passed. At Stoke Newington, across the High Street was stretched a large banner, with a deep border of purple, which bore the words on each side in black letters: 'The Metropolitan Boroughs of Hackney and Stoke Newington mourn the loss of a noble life'.

Nearer and nearer to the cemetery the crush became greater and ambulance men were soon busy dealing with those who had fainted. Outside the gates, mounted police rode among the vast crowd – a crowd that stretched to London's heart. Some sections sang hymns while they were waiting. Newsvendors were busy selling sixteen pages of pictures and news in a *Daily Mirror* memorial to the dead man.

After three hours the cortège arrived at the cemetery. Suddenly, the clouds parted and the sun shone, drying out those who had earlier been soaked. Inside, there was ticketed admission for 10,000. Amongst the dreadful ghostliness of tomb stones and gaunt pillars women fainted in the crush and were placed on the ground against them. As the warm sunshine bathed the cemetery, the raindrops on the grass glistened like diamonds.

The grave was in the centre of a belt of trees. Nearby, chairs were seated around the coffin on an improvised platform adorned with flowers. The air was heavy with the intoxicating fragrance of costly bouquets – apart from a small posy tied up with a piece of rag which read 'To the General with love from Joey, Jimmie and Joe, Liverpool slums'.

Messages of love and condolence from all over the world, including ones from the Royal Family and the German Kaiser, were read out for one of the greatest and most famous men of his generation. It was quite an achievement, for this was no king, politician or soldier but William Booth, a religious man from a humble background. Quite remarkably,

along with his wife, Catherine, 'God's Soldier' had founded the movement known as the Salvation Army; a movement born in absolute poverty. By the time he died, it was known, loved and respected around the world. Now he was 'laying down his sword'.

His eldest son, Bramwell, led the mourners in singing 'Servant of God, Well Done!' However, 'mourners' was the wrong word for, in Army parlance, Booth was being 'promoted to glory'; his death a joyous occasion to be celebrated. As the bands played, the singers sang, smiling through their tears, occasionally crying out 'Hallelujah'. At the end, the evening shadows were drawing in and the rays of the sun fell on the coffin as it disappeared from view as it was lowered into a grave already occupied by his wife.

In the last years of his life, William Booth had supped with monarchs and presidents; so very different from his early days as a preacher when he had been pelted with stinking fish, dead cats, rotten eggs, a variety of vegetables and mud by mobs, and vilified by the religious establishment.

* * *

William Booth was born on the outskirts of Nottingham in 1829, the son of a domestic servant and a builder.[2] His early life was comfortable until his father went bankrupt. Aged thirteen, he was taken away from private school. By all accounts he led a blameless childhood although he once admitted to cheating at marbles! The following year, after his father died, he became apprenticed to a pawnbroker. Week after week, families on the verge of destitution appeared before him, desperate to avoid being forced into workhouses under the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which cut outdoor relief. It was a first-hand insight into the meaning of economic distress.

In the 'hungry forties' there was a serious trade depression in the local Nottingham industries[3] and Chartism[4] was rife. One of its leaders, Fergus O'Connor, was a local Member of Parliament. According to one of Booth's childhood friends, Walter James, 'the distress was very great. Want, misery and bread riots were common in our streets. I know that

2. 'My father was a man given to the acquisition of wealth and indifferent to religion. . . . Mother was a woman of a religious and gentle spirit', *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 11 April 1889.
3. Particularly the lace market.
4. Working-class, male suffrage movement for political reform, which began in 1838 and petered out after 1848.

these things sank deeply into some of our natures and that we boys hung round the Chartist platforms, drank in their wrongs, and wished success to their remedies.'[5] Booth later admitted his sympathies had been with them.

James thought 'Will Booth' was no ordinary lad. He had once told him he intended to do something 'great' with his life. According to James, Booth's religious conversion was a gradual process rather than a dramatic experience like that of St Paul on the road to Damascus.[6] Although born into the Church of England, Booth converted, aged fifteen, to the Wesleyan Methodist chapel and soon became involved in the fervour of evangelical revivalism sweeping the country, inspired by fiery preachers like the American James Caughey, who had visited Nottingham during his tour of England. Booth refused to work on a Sunday and his employer sacked him. He was such a good worker, however, that seven days later his employer begged him to come back.

As a teenager, with other young men, he started to preach in the slums of Nottingham, despite a doctor's warning that physically he was too weak to do so. He later wrote, 'my whole turn of mind was in favour of good works, and of helping people who were in trouble. The streets were a capital school for the preacher for you had to be interesting and striking if you wished to keep your hearer's attention.'[7]

In 1858, Booth was privately ordained and became a minister of the Methodist New Connexion in Gateshead. A dynamic and magnetic preacher, his chapel was known as the 'converting shop'. However, he soon became disillusioned with Methodism and the gulf between its ministers and the poorest of its congregation. He was against charging money for the best pews and felt a church was not a welcoming place. Rather than being a place of passion, joy and celebration, it was too solemn and impersonal. Bureaucracy, too, impeded decisive action from its religious leaders.

Booth believed Methodism and the more respectable denominations were failing to attract the outcast poor – as had been originally intended – few of whom could read prayers or hymnbooks or even had

5. *Wakefield Herald*, 24 August 1912 (from the *Manchester Guardian*).
6. Although in George Railton's biography, *The Authoritative Life of General Booth, Founder of the Salvation Army* (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1912), Booth says his full conversion happened after one particular incident in which he owned up to another boy over an attempted deception.
7. *Wakefield Herald*, 28 April 1912.

suitable clothes to attend the service. It appeared church was only for those who prayed in their Sunday best and contributed to the collection. Those deemed 'too wicked' were not encouraged to come. (As a teenager he had taken a batch of 'ragged dirty urchins' to his local chapel. Its trustees would not let him use the front entrance and said there would have to be special sittings for them.[8]) If people would not or could not go to church or chapel, Booth argued, then the church must go to them. For him, Christianity must be dynamic, active and individual. He still accepted the central tenet of Wesleyanism that the main duty of a Christian was to save souls, which was the key to the salvation of the body and a purer life.

Booth wanted to preach where there was most sin and deprivation, which he believed went hand in hand. For years he wandered around the country barely earning enough to live on. After various postings, he ended up in the East End of London, a squalid filthy area crowded with a jungle of backstreets full of disease. In 1866, a cholera epidemic led to 573 children under five dying in one week. Half a million souls were crammed into lodgings. In his book, *How the Poor Live*, the writer, George R. Sims, describes visiting a family:

> To the particular door attached there comes a poor woman, white and thin, and sickly-looking, in her arms she carries a girl of eight or nine with a diseased spine, behind her clutching at her scanty dress, are two or three other children. We ask to see the room. What a room! The poor woman apologises for its condition. . . . Poor creature, if she had ten pairs of hands instead of one pair always full, she could not keep this room clean. The walls are damp and crumbling, the ceiling is black and peeling off showing the laths above, the floor is rotten and broken away in places, and the wind and the rain sweep in through gaps that seem everywhere. The woman, her husband, and her six children live, eat and sleep in one room, and for this they pay three shillings a week. . . . There has been no breakfast yet, and there won't be any till the husband (who has been out to try and get a job) reports progress.[9]

8. Memory of the Rev. I.E. Page, member of the same Wesleyan chapel in Nottingham. *Hexham Courant*, 18 September 1897.

9. George R. Sims, *How the Poor Live; and Horrible London* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1889) (Kindle), ch. 1.

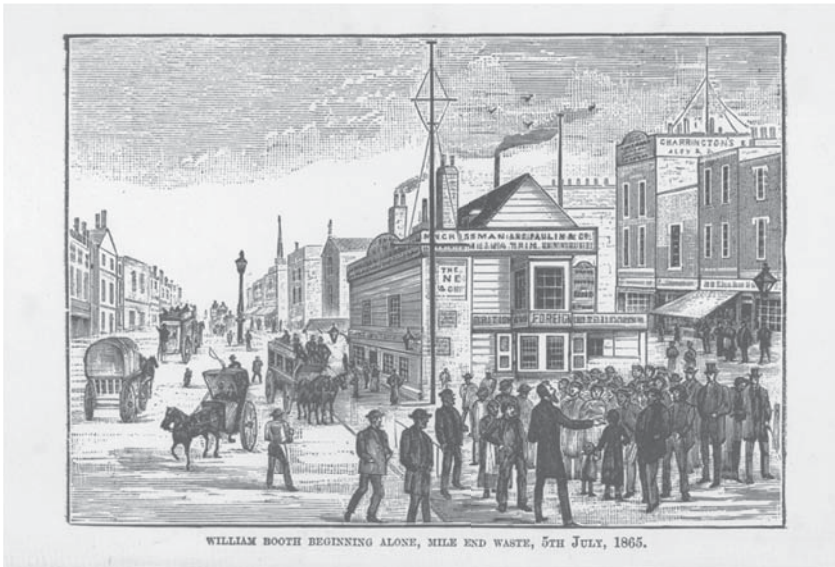

Figure 1. William Booth in the East End in the 1860s.
Source: Twenty One Years Salvation Army (1887).

It was in the Mile End Road, Whitechapel, East London in July 1865 that William Booth, a tall, dark black-bearded man in a frock coat and wide-brimmed hat, made his way 'through ragged match-sellers, Irish flower-girls, and thrust past hulking labourers, women clad only in soiled petticoats. Children with wolfish faces foraged at his feet, gobbling up heaps of decaying plums in [the] street market's garish light'.[10] He stopped in front of the Blind Beggar pub, stood on an old chair with Bible in hand and shouted 'There is a Heaven in East London for everyone.' The patrons replied with oaths and jeers; a rotten egg hit his face. Welcome to the East End! He had found his destiny.

Along with his temperance-supporting wife, Catherine – whom he married in 1855[11] – Booth, depending on subsistence from a well-wisher, started the East London Christian Mission. With beer shops open from early morning until ten at night and every fifth shop selling gin, it was

10. Richard Collier, *The General Next to God: The Story of William Booth and the Salvation Army* (London: Collins, 1965), p. 16.
11. Their honeymoon was spent evangelising in the Channel Islands!

drinkers and the drink trade he attacked most vociferously. If people were to be saved, they had to stop drinking, which encouraged sin, as a first step. Then other 'evils': smoking, gambling, boxing and music halls – more or less the social pleasures of the working-class – could be tackled. However, as one of the early leaders of the Labour Party, Will Crooks, wrote of the East End:

> 'Can you wonder so many of our people take to drink?' And he pointed to the shabby little houses, all let out in tenements, in the street where he was born. 'Look at the homes they are forced to live in! The men can't invite their mates round, so they meet at "The Spotted Dog" of an evening. During the day the women often drift to the same place. The boys and girls cannot do their courting in these overcrowded homes. They make love in the streets, and soon they too begin to haunt the public-houses.'[12]

Sims was more forceful:

> Drink is the curse of these communities; but how is it to be wondered at? The gin-palaces flourish in the slums, and fortunes are made out of men and women who seldom know where tomorrow's meal is coming from. Can you wonder that the gaudy gin-palaces, with light and glitter, are crowded? Drink is sustenance to these people, drink gives them the Dutch courage necessary to live in such styes. The gin-palace is Heaven to them compared to the Hell of their pestilent homes. A copper or two obtained by pawning the last rag that covers the shivering children on the bare floor at home will buy enough vitriol madness to send a woman home so besotted that the wretchedness, the anguish, the degradation that await her there have lost their grip. To be drunk with these people means to be happy. Sober – God help them! – how could they be aught but wretched.[13]

12. George Haw, *From Workhouse to Westminster: The Life Story of Will Crooks, M.P.* (London: Cassell & Co., 1907), p. 25.
13. Sims, *How the Poor Live*, ch. 3.

According to Steven Spencer, 'The modern temperance movement in Britain began in the north in the 1830s and spread across the country.'[14] In a short time, those advocating total abstinence – the teetotallers – had become dominant. They believed drunkenness alone was responsible for the nation's ills and that signing 'the pledge' signified a spiritual as well as moral rebirth. Booth had signed the pledge when he was just seven years old but, by the age of thirteen, had begun to drink a little for his health's sake. By the age of 20, he was teetotal. Catherine, at the age of twelve, had been secretary of her local Juvenile Temperance Society.

Booth was preaching in one of the most irreligious places in the country. Less than two per cent of working men in London attended a church service, even fewer in the East End. His 'church' was to be the open air: on street corners and in squares. His congregation – those who needed the Gospel most but wanted it least: the working-class poor. From them he would recruit an army of reformed sinners to evangelise and convert others: 'I found that ordinary working men in their corduroys and bowler hats could command attention from their own class which was refused point-blank to me with my theological terms and superior knowledge. . . . Their message was one of hope, not condemnation.'[15]

Following conversion, they would 'save' their peers through personal testimony and dedicate themselves to their spiritual welfare. When asked where he would get his preachers from, Booth replied, 'from the public houses, from the gutters'. (His injunction was 'go for souls and go for the worst'). This new breed would have experience of poverty and the difficulty in escaping its temptations. Converts were expected to change their lifestyles radically through personal faith in Jesus. Unlike mainstream religion, Booth made no distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor. Using the analogy of a stumbling cab horse,[16] it did not concern him how it fell, it was just necessary to get it back on its feet. The message was clear: everybody could be saved. Nobody

14. Steven Spencer, Director of the Salvation Army International Heritage Centre in London, email to the author, 26 May 2021.
15. *West Briton & Cornwall Advertiser*, 22 August 1912.
16. Over time he developed the 'cab-horse charter': the right to shelter, food and work enjoyed by every London cab-horse but not by the poor of that city.

was beyond redemption if he or she confessed his or her sins. Heaven would welcome them all. However, the unsaved, he warned, would be condemned to the terror of Hell and eternal damnation.

With piercing grey eyes of almost frightening intensity and an Inverness (tartan) cape thrown over his shoulders, Booth started preaching in a dilapidated tent on a one-time Quaker graveyard in Whitechapel. He struck a charismatic figure. From the start he was regularly abused, ridiculed and physically assaulted (even though he had an ex-boxer as his bodyguard). On several occasions the ropes holding up his tent were cut and he and his followers were pelted with mud, stones, putrid meat, rotten eggs and fish. His wife, Catherine, remembers him coming back home every evening battered and bruised. After his first year he had made only 60 converts. Some of these were temporary and became 'backsliders' – those who went back to their wicked ways.

However, the more setbacks he suffered, the stronger his beliefs became. His hero, John Wesley – who had also taken the Gospel to the people – had been pelted with mud whilst preaching at Oxford University and the early Methodist men and women had often been violently assaulted. (In Exeter in 1745, the women had even been stripped naked, rolled in the mud and had their faces covered with boot polish, flour and dirt.) The Devil was a fierce customer who was going to put up a fierce fight. For Booth it was to be a fight between good and evil. A battle that could not be lost. This is what drove him on.

He started to use military language and spoke of 'attacking' the Devil. He encouraged abstainers to stand outside pubs – 'the Devil's Castles' – and sing 'we will throw down the bottle and never drink again' and recruited young women, 'Hallelujah lasses', to spread the message. Sometimes they would stand outside and 'pray the drunkards out' or bravely enter and distribute tracts denouncing drink and tobacco. Meetings were advertised with colourful posters imitating the rhetoric of the circus and the music hall. It was a clever ploy, for this period was the golden age of the latter; its artistes the pop stars of the day. (He also borrowed the idea of the 'Free-and-Easy' session, an unstructured entertainment with singing and audience participation.) At his earliest meeting places, he reputedly put up notices requesting 'respectable people' to stay away.

As his Mission grew and expanded outside London, and became the Christian Mission, so did the opposition. By 1869 his open-air meetings were regularly harassed by police, landlords and pub-goers. Outside

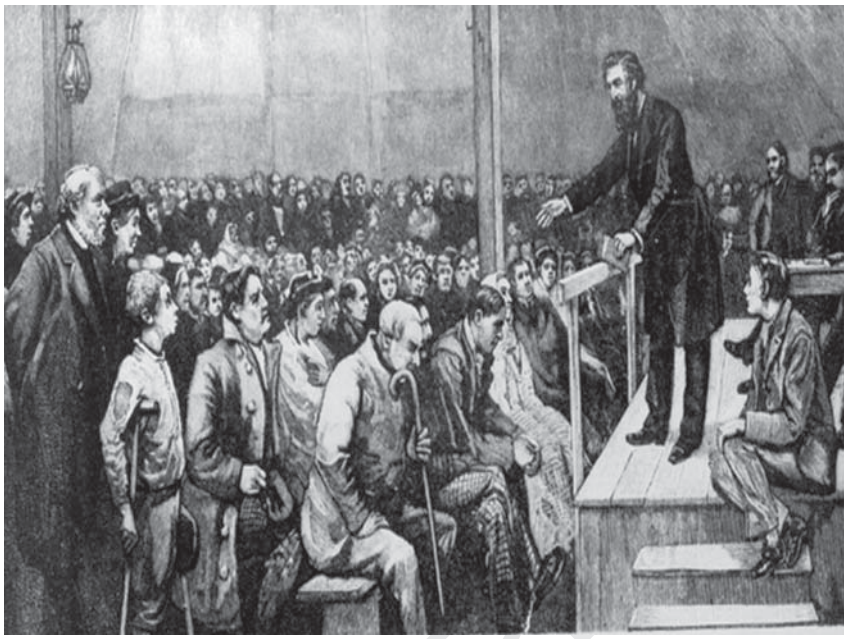

Figure 2. William Booth preaching in a tent in the East End.

London, the harassment was just as fierce. At one meeting in Harrogate, Yorkshire, local employees of Sanger's Circus pelted the missioners with clods of earth. They beat a big bass drum in front of the speaker whilst cymbals were clashed behind him. Then brought an elephant and two camels into the tent. The meeting ended in chaos.

Booth realised he needed buildings not just tents – his own was blown down in a storm – if he was to protect his followers. In any case, in winter the chilly winds drastically reduced attendances. So, he started to hire disused beer shops, warehouses, music halls and theatres for meetings. They became the Army's sacred spaces. The choice was deliberate. In urban areas they were among the best-known buildings in a neighbourhood, visited far more by the working-class than churches. Nonetheless, they were just as susceptible to sabotage as the tents and street meetings:

> For week-nights, we secured an old wool warehouse in one of the lowest parts of Bethnal Green. I remember the windows opened out into the street. When crowded it became oppressively hot; especially in summer. If we opened the windows the boys

> threw stones and mud and fireworks through, and fired trains of gunpowder laid from the door inside. But we got used to this, and we shouted 'Hallelujah!' when the crackers exploded and the powder flashed. It was an admirable training-ground for the development of the Salvation Army spirit.[17]

The War Cry described an attempted sabotage in a hall near Penge, Surrey:

> Presently a queer-looking man presented himself for admission. It wasn't his face nor the colour of his coat that attracted the 'weather-eye' of the doorkeeper, but the 'nubbly' appearance of his sides and chest.
>
> 'Can't let you in my friend. No accommodation for livestock inside,' said the doorkeeper, after having passed his hand over one of the protuberances and he quickly withdrew it.
>
> The man's coat was lined with pockets, and sewn up in each was a live rat. An attack on the gas-meter had been planned, and the rats were to be liberated when the lights were lowered. They succeeded in putting out the lights, but the rat part of the scheme did not come off, thanks to the vigilance of the doorkeeper.[18]

In 1867, for £120, the Christian Mission bought a run-down beer shop, the Eastern Star, notorious for its 'immorality' in Whitechapel Road – a road with no trees only pubs, known as 'Labour's Boulevard' where thousands passed every evening – as its first headquarters. It is not surprising that its entry into the East End ruffled the feathers of other religious groups. In 1868, the Reverend John Richard Green (later a historian) denounced it because funds intended for the relief of East Enders were being handed over to 'a single ranting revivalist of the name of William Booth':

> The breakfast and sewing classes and meetings to which people are asked to subscribe are held in his chapel, among his 'experience meetings' and his 'fellowship meetings'. We have known instances where decent and respectable poor

17. *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 21 August 1912.
18. *The War Cry*, 23 July 1898.

> have been dragged to this place and forced from very hunger to listen to the vulgar ravings of this man and his supporters. Of course, his 'labours' are already crowned with success. He boasts of having converted a thousand people; we wonder he has not converted tens of thousands. A theatre is filled every Sunday morning with 1,500 mendicants [tramps] who are allowed a breakfast on condition that they remain to 'hear the gospel.'. . . The best comment is the plain fact that poor sufferers may be refused all assistance if they decline to listen to the doggerel parodies of Scripture, the vulgar rant, and the revivalist rhapsodies of such a person as William Booth.[19]

However, according to Booth, he had not originally intended to start a new movement:

> When I began my irregular warfare in Whitechapel in 1865, I was possessed of the idea that I could safely send my converts to join the existing churches of the locality; and, in fact, I did so. It was only when I found that my protegés were not very warmly received – to put it kindly – and that they were therefore in danger of lapsing for sheer want of comradeship and oversight that I resolved to draw them together . . .[20]

There were many missions operating in the East End, however, Booth seems to have been more successful in raising funds, even advertising for contributions in postage stamps.[21] His plans were grandiose, on one occasion asking for donations so he could take 5,000 poor people, connected to the Mission, to Southend for a break.[22]

In the spring of 1870, Booth bought the 'People's Market' in Whitechapel and changed its name to the 'People's Mission Hall'. This became the Mission's new centre of operations and for the first few years the Army's annual conference was held there. It was large enough to seat 1,500 in its main hall and had ten smaller rooms and a coffee house in its complex. On its opening Sunday night, it was overflowing with crowds locked out. Reputedly, 150 sinners confessed their sins.

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19. *Cheltenham Examiner*, 29 August 1912.
20. *West Briton and Cornwall Advertiser*, 22 August 1912.
21. *Daily Telegraph & Courier*, 17 December 1870.
22. *East London Observer*, 25 July 1874.

By 1874, the Christian Mission was a national institution, essentially democratic, with groups of societies deciding policy at an annual conference. However, in 1877, as leader of the fastest and strongest national revivalist force in nineteenth-century England, Booth told the conference they needed a director to tell them what to do, not leadership by conference. His suggestion was accepted. The will of one man was to be supreme. Next year, with the encouragement of his eldest son, Bramwell, he changed the Mission's name to the 'Salvation Army', to reinforce the idea of a continuous war against the Devil. It was to be a militant evangelism expressed in military metaphors. The name change, in 1878, was perfectly in sync with the prevailing Victorian militaristic jingoism and the expansion of the British Empire. Appropriately, a favourite music hall ditty, MacDermott and Hunt's *War Song*, written that year, introduced the word 'jingoism' and proclaimed:

> *We don't want to fight but by Jingo if we do,*
> *We've got the ships, we've got the men, we've got the money too.*

'Yet', according to Chris Hare, 'Booth was no friend of the Victorian Establishment; his Army was to be an army of the poor and luckless, the same "dangerous classes" that respectable opinion so feared.'[23] Becoming an army would lead to enormous ridicule and uproar on the streets; streets already experiencing tension due to urban poverty[24] – caused by increasing industrialisation and the great trade recession of 1877–80 – as rural workers flooded into towns and cities looking for work. Nevertheless, the historic decision to change the name would prove to be a masterstroke. It gave the organisation a distinct identity, separate from the thousands of other 'missions' in the country, and would lead to its rapid expansion as a fully-fledged army of salvation. During the meeting which announced the change and ratified control of the movement in Booth's hands, 'roughs' outside the hall rattled cans, blew horns and placed smelly objects near the ventilators.

23. Chris Hare, 'The Skeleton Army and the Bonfire Boys, Worthing, 1884', *Folklore* 99, no. 2 (1988), pp. 221–31.

24. By 1851 Britain's population was, for the first time, predominantly urban.