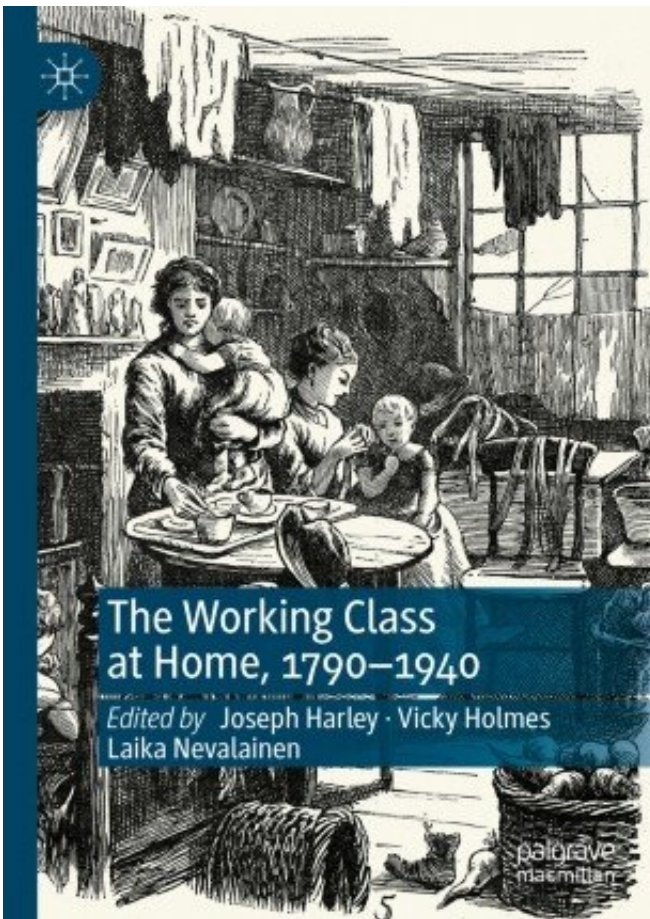


New book debunks myth of 'Dickensian poverty'

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Credit: Springer/Palgrave MacMillan

A new book reveals that the perception of 19th-century British working-class homes as being sparse and squalid is far from being universally

true, and popular writers of the time, such as Charles Dickens, are partly to blame for stereotypes that still exist today.

Co-edited by Dr. Joseph Harley of Anglia Ruskin University (ARU), alongside Dr. Vicky Holmes and Dr. Laika Nevalainen, "The Working Class at Home, 1790–1940" (Palgrave Macmillan), attempts to set the record straight by detailing the lives of working people and how they made a "home" in some of the most trying circumstances imaginable.

Much of these preconceptions of widespread deprivation is due, in part, to the highly polemical accounts of leading intellectuals of the 19th century such as Charles Dickens and Friedrich Engels.

Dickens' books were predominantly bought by the middle classes, who had a voracious appetite for the tales of workhouses and [extreme poverty](#) that feature throughout his work, while philosopher and political activist Engels was determined to show how the conditions of the [working class](#) had declined following the introduction of machinery.

In his influential *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Engels wrote: "We must admit that 350,000 working-people of Manchester and its environs live, almost all of them, in wretched, damp, filthy cottages, that the streets which surround them are usually in the most miserable and filthy condition."

Meanwhile, in "Life and Labour of the People in London," social reformer Charles Booth wrote: "A row of houses falls into bad repute, due merely to a few undesirable tenants who, if they are not ejected, render the neighborhood too hot for anyone with a taste for decency ... Everything is filthy, and the stench very bad."

In the new book "The Working Class at Home, 1790–1940," the book's contributors show how far from living in perpetual poverty, the working

class made the best of their situations to create relatively comfortable environments, whether they called home an attic room with no bed, a ship, or even an asylum. "Home" was central to their lives and the working-class understood the space on multiple levels.

In a section examining the English poor between 1790–1834, Dr. Harley shows how people accumulated a sizable range of possessions and furnishings, although the level of comfort they enjoyed was often precarious and fluctuated depending on their immediate financial situation.

Paupers, for instance, amassed a range of "luxury" goods which were associated with decoration, status, vanity, and appearance. Clocks and watches were found in over a quarter of households, while mirrors, known as looking glasses, appear in a third of pauper inventories from this time, allowing their owners to maintain their appearance and also light their homes more efficiently.

Tea goods were found in around three quarters of pauper homes, showing that tea had gone from a rare luxury to a national drink during the 18th century. One inventory showed that a pauper in Little Wakering, Essex, owned a range of tea paraphernalia including a silver spoon and silver sugar nippers.

However, by analyzing pauper inventories and pauper letters, Dr. Harley shows how material gains could be precarious for the very poorest, with families going through several cycles of being materially rich and materially poor over their lifetimes. Possessions were often pawned or sold during difficult periods, such as sickness, to provide households with the resources to instead acquire the most basic items.

Dr. Joseph Harley, Lecturer in History at Anglia Ruskin University (ARU), said: "The concerned reformers of industrializing towns and

cities painted a picture of severe deprivation, of rooms that were both cramped yet bare at the same time, and disease-ridden spaces from which their subjects required rescue.

"Even today, working-class abodes of this period continue to be perceived as being unhomely and devoid of the most basic of furnishings, material comforts, and cleanliness. However, this image is wrong and implies that working-class people didn't have the ability, desire or means to create moderately comfortable domestic spaces.

"The material wealth of the poor was, of course, smaller and much more modest than that the middle classes but for the poor themselves, the changes that took place in this period were significant and their homes contained myriad possessions.

"Our new book does not deny the existence of squalor. Instead, it demonstrates that such contemporary depictions do not represent the typical experience of the working class at [home](#) during this period."

"[The Working Class at Home, 1790–1940](#)" is published by Palgrave Macmillan and is co-edited by Dr. Vicky Holmes, Dr. Laika Nevalainen and Dr. Joseph Harley.

Provided by Anglia Ruskin University

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