

# London Oil Jars in the 1840's

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## Introduction

IN HIS two articles <sup>1,2</sup> John Ashdown identified the sites of a considerable number of oil jars, used as shop signs. This article arises out of research prompted by these two articles and explains how 20 oil jars on 13 shopfronts in Central London were identified as existing in the 1840s by examining the series of *London Street Views* published by John Tallis 140 years ago.

## London Street Views

John Tallis, an entrepreneurial publisher, produced a series of views of Central London streets in the period 1838-1847. These views were later collated and published in a book in 1969<sup>3</sup>.

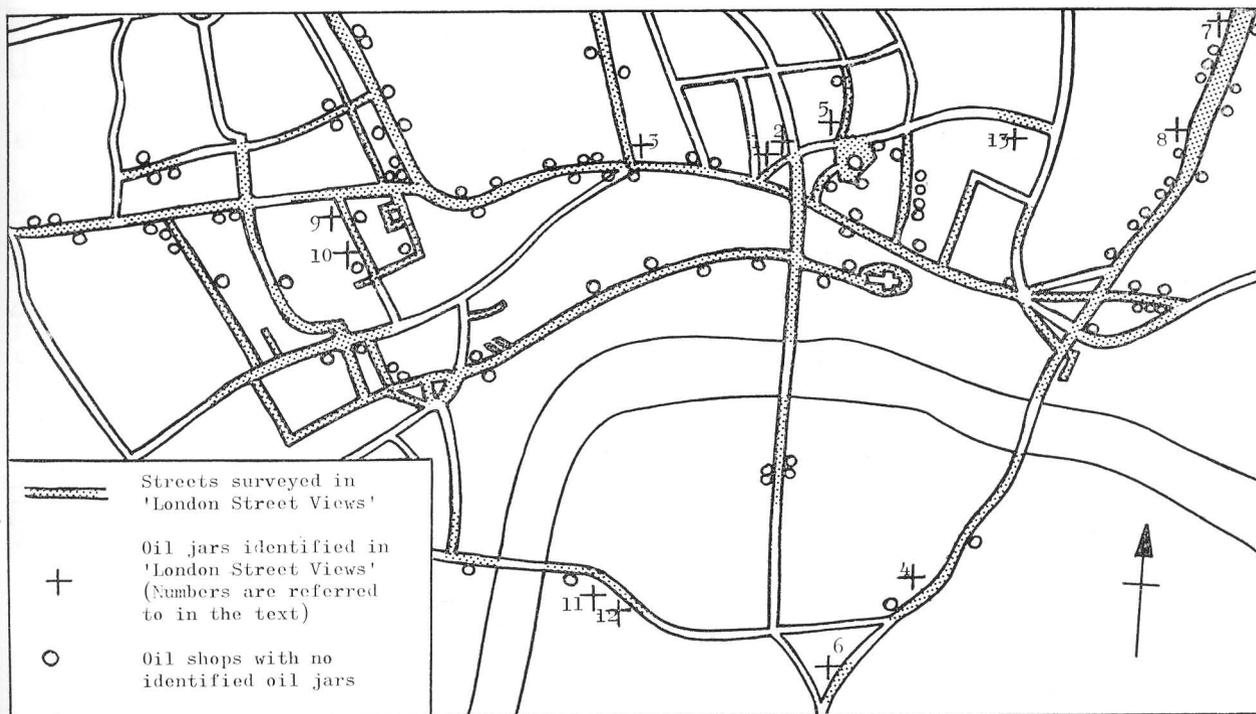
Tallis published his street views in 88 sections,

each of which depicted, in considerable detail, both sides of a street or part of a street. Each shop or house was carefully shown and shop owners were able to have their name and their shop's activities incorporated on the street view, for a fee. Additional notes were added by Tallis or one of his staff. Each view, plus its accompanying text were made up into a small booklet of about a dozen pages and the whole package was sold to the public for 1½d. Alternatively, shopkeepers, especially those who already bought some advertising space, would buy copies of the booklet and give them to their customers.

A supplement of 18 views was published in 1847. The views cover a large proportion of the main

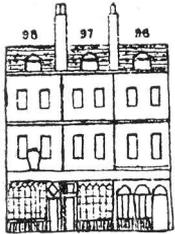
- 1 John Ashdown, "The Oil Jar as a London Shop Sign," *London Archaeol.* 2 no. 7 (1974), 166-170.
- 2 John Ashdown, "The Oil Jar as a Shop Sign: an addendum," *London Archaeol.* 2 no. 10 (1975), 239-240.

- 3 John Tallis, *London Street Views 1838-1840*, introduction by Peter Jackson, (1969), Nattali and Maurice in association with the London Topographical Society.



# Shop Fronts with Oil Jars

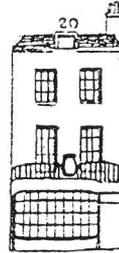
The numbers shown below are referred to in the text.



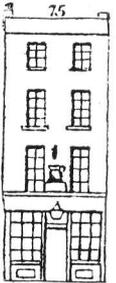
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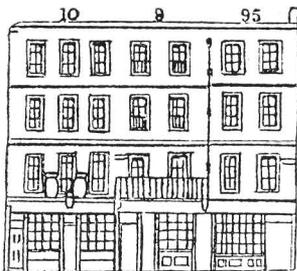
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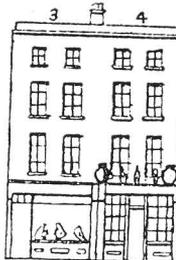
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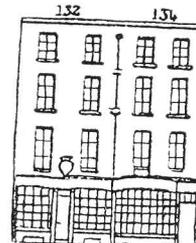
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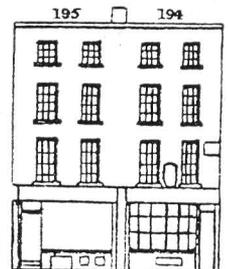
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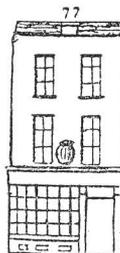
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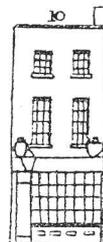
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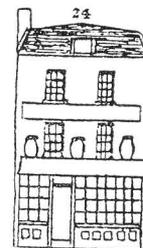
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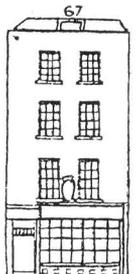
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shopping streets in London and Westminster in the late 1830s and the 1840s. The accompanying map shows all the streets covered in the *Street Views* (High Street, Islington, a part of which was included, is not shown for reasons of space).

Both the original series and the supplement were accompanied by a very comprehensive index, which gave the name and occupation of over 90% of the occupants of the buildings shown.

### Oil Merchants

The indexes for the two series of views list approximately 8,000 shopkeepers and their activities. Of this number, 107 can be positively identified as being connected in some way with the merchandising of oil, being described variously as:

oilman  
oil and colour merchant  
Italian warehouse  
lamp oil warehouse  
oil and hop merchant  
oilman and fish sauce warehouse  
oil and candle warehouse  
chandler and oilman

The majority of these 61 (in all) are described simply as oilman.

The map shows that there are no obvious concentrations of oil merchants. There is, however, a dearth of them in two perhaps predictable areas, namely: 1. the aristocratic area of St James/SE Mayfair, where owners of commodity shops would not have been able to afford the high rents and 2. the essentially office area of the central City of London, where the comparatively low density of households would not have required oil shops.

### Oil Jars

The next stage in this research was to identify each of the 107 oil merchants on the pictorial street views. This revealed 13 shopfronts, on which one or more oil jars could be identified.

Some of the oil jars are rather crudely depicted (notably that one on No 75 Blackman Street), but, nevertheless, the accompanying pictures show quite clearly the existence of up to three jars on each shop front.

Close examination of every shop (not only of those described in the index as oilman etc.) has revealed no additional oil jars. None of the identified oil jars exist any more and, in fact, none of the buildings on which they were fixed are still standing.

These views cannot, however, be taken as proof that other oil jars did not exist in London or Westminster in the 1830s and 40s, for two reasons:

- Tallis' *Views* only cover selected streets
- There is no reason to suppose that his engravings are totally accurate. In fact, as the views were often prepared to tight deadlines,

errors and omissions were quite possible. Therefore, oil jars might have existed on shopfronts other than the 13 mentioned.

### Conclusions

This search of Tallis' *Street Views* has provided considerable information on the existence of oil jars in the centre of London, from which a number of implications can be drawn:

- 1 The existence of oil jars as shop signs in central London was probably, at one time, much denser than John Ashdown's articles implied.
- 2 Redevelopment in Central London has destroyed nearly all traces of oil jar shop signs. In fact, in the area encompassed by Tallis' *Views*, only two shops now show oil jars, these were identified in John Ashdown's first article<sup>1</sup> as 39 Greville St, EC1 and 127 Lower Marsh, SE1.
- 3 Tallis' *Views* open up a fruitful field of research, investigating the preponderance of shop signs in London in the 1840s. In addition to oil jars, a cursory examination of the *Street Views* shows a wide range of signs, including kettles, keys, brushes, pawn brokers' balls, horses, dogs.

The full list of all 13 shops is:

- 1 J. H. Spiller: Oilman, 98 Holborn Hill (now Charterhouse Street), 1 Jar.
- 2 B. M. Tite: Oilman, 86 Holborn Hill (now Charterhouse Street), 1 Jar.
- 3 Edridge: Oilman, 20 Red Lion Street, 1 Jar.
- 4 John Vaughan: Oil & colourman, 75 Blackman Street (now part of Borough High Street), 1 Jar.
- 5 Sheldon: Oilman & GPO, 10 Smithfield Bars (now part of Smithfield Market), 2 Jars.
- 6 Gregory: Oil & colourman, 4 Horsemonger Lane (now part of Southwark Bridge Road), 2 Jars.
- 7 Nunn: Oilman, 132 Shoreditch (now Shoreditch High Street), 1 Jar.
- 8 Rentell: Oilman, 194 Shoreditch (now Shoreditch High Street), 1 Jar.
- 9 Bryan: Tallow chandler & oilman, 72 Wardour Street, 3 Jars.
- 10 Roberts: Oilman, 77 Wardour Street, 1 Jar.
- 11 W. Grey: Oilman, 10 Westminster Bridge Road, 2 Jars.
- 12 Langdon: Oilman, 24 Westminster Bridge Road, 3 Jars.
- 13 Cadd: Oilman, 67 Chiswell Street, 1 Jar.

### Excavation Round-up: late entry

**Perry Hill, Hawkesfield Road, S.E.6.** TQ 366 725. Lewisham Natural History Society (K. White). Trial trenches in back garden revealed post-medieval features and medieval and post-medieval pottery.

### corrections

**Fulham Palace (walled garden).** TQ 241 7599. Directed by K. R. Whitehouse.

**St. Helier Station, Green Lane, Morden.** TQ 2550 6716. Report duplicated by accident. Large quantity of RB sherds found here, and smaller number in gardens 100m to E at TQ 2555 6710.