The Forty Elephants and their Place in British Society

Examining criminality in London and how women operated in organized crime in the twentieth-century is a trending topic in British women’s history, as interest in the subject is rising. Stories from family members or close associates of former gang members have been published as these figures come forth and allow people to interview them. Individuals seem to have always been fascinated with the lifestyles of those living their lives in the shadows, because books, radio shows, television programs and much more have been written about criminal lifestyles. Then when thinking of organized crime, more often the United States associated with this phenomenon. Figures like Al Capone put the business of organized crime on the radar of many people all over the world. However, there was organized crime going on all over the world, including London, England. Thinking of players within organized crime often, women’s roles are marginalized as they tend to be associated with minor roles of molls and alibi providers. Here I would argue that the Forty Elephants as a case study, women of organized crime can be seen just as much of a player in the field, as much as any man. In addition, they should be differentiated because of the cultural differences in how women were looked at as compared to men. As this difference may have contributed to the manner and type of crime the Forty Elephants committed crimes.

First and foremost, it is important to have an understanding of the difference between organized crime and gang activity. Without the basis of understanding different terms an analysis on a subject would be purely subjective and the argument irrelevant. Serious and Organised
Crime Strategy, was presented to the Parliament in 2013 and was the most official legal definition on organized crime in England to be found. There might be another earlier definitions of organized crime, but this was the earliest found, and it came out of England. The sentiments expressed in the definition would seem to hold true throughout time because official definitions such as this do not spring up overnight. The Secretary of State for the Home Department has recorded England’s definition of organized crime to be a, “… serious crime planned, coordinated and conducted by people working together on a continuing basis. Their motivation is often, but not always, financial gain.”\(^1\) The passage goes on to specify that there is a level of violence and bribery that is associated with this variety of crime as well and that the organization of the group is what differentiates organized crime from gang activity.\(^2\) This may have been the same case in the century before as well, because when reading through Brian McDonald’s books Gangs of London: 100 Years of Mob Warfare then comparing it to his second book Alice Diamond and the Forty Elephants: Britain’s First Female Crime Syndicate in the titles alone there is a noted difference in the type of crime. In Gangs of London, it is clear that most of what the male gangs were after was the territory and fought brutally, with seemingly little reason. Then reading through the book on the Forty Elephants, it becomes clear that the females were not in the business of crime to fight over territory but for their own gain in the financial realm.\(^3\) Meaning that the women in the twentieth-century London crime circles should be judged on their own merit, not only for the fact that they are of the opposite sex but also because the manner in which their crimes were committed.

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Using the Forty Elephants from London as a case study, and comparing prominent members of the Forty Elephants’ observable behavior, then contrasting the observable behavior of other women in society we can bring the attention this topic deserves. In the preliminary research, there is an overwhelming number of women turning to organized crime that come from low-income backgrounds that are described as looking for a better life, and mobility within British society. It seems as though the Forty Elephants specifically were women from low-income families that worked in the dressmaking or house service industry. These women were probably looking for a way out of that life especially coming out of the nineteenth-century and the development of the middle class.\(^4\) Therefore, being near the bottom of English society, and seeing a way out of their situation, what did these women have to lose? Digging into the historiography of women in organized crime this pattern becomes clear.

Lorraine Gamman (1994) author of, Gone Shopping: The Story of Shirley Pitts—Queen of Thieves, was able to get to know Shirley Pitts at the end of her life. She wrote the book as if it were "ghostwritten" by Shirley Pitts because of how Gamman chose to write about the various stories she was told. Gamman also did research about the stories told by Pitts, and every fact seemed to line up between the primary and secondary sources. Making this book one of the best compilations of a later twentieth-century crime celebrity and Forty Elephant Queen. Pitt’s account of the Forty Elephants helped to bring light to some of the techniques used by these women, who they were, and how they were able to get away with the crimes they did. Gamman even states that she had to change the names of some of the family members because the friends

and family members are still living.\(^5\) This is a case where the history is not too far gone, and it is still possible to get narratives from the people that lived through the times. This book was used to tell the story of not only Pitt’s life but the other women who were in the Forty Elephants. As time went on the stories of these everyday occurrences did not go away.

Brian McDonald’s (2010) book, *Gangs of London: 100 Years of Mob Warfare*, makes a small mention of the Forty Elephants. McDonald’s take on gang activity is important as he grew up in South London where much of this crime took place. McDonald’s uncles were once leaders in the Elephant and Castle gang, giving him an inside perspective on the matters of the male Elephant and Castle gang and the Forty Elephant women. Throughout the book, McDonald lays out exactly where these gangs operated, their various activities, and who the men and women behind the operations were. It provides a short synopsis of what it would have been like to work with the Forty Elephants and is something that he later turned into an entire book.

William Meier’s (2010) article *Going on the Hoist: Women, Work, and Shoplifting in London, ca. 1890—1940*, explains women's roles in British society was what caused them to turn to crime. They had no other outlet for social mobility, especially when they were coming from the lower classes. As a woman their only prospect to move up in Britain was to marry or turn to a life of crime. With an already established place in gang activity with either being in close proximity to male gang members or working with the women were able to take what they learned in other trades mixed with what they were learning from the male gang members to create their own group, which lead them to a life of crime in their own right.

Brian McDonald grew up with stories from his Aunt Ada Johnson, was once a member of the Forty Elephants and was close friends with the famed Queen, Alice Diamond. Even at the end of his second book, he mentions that Alice Diamond may have been sitting in the bar near him as he grew up because he also grew up within the territory of the Forty Elephants. He sees the women at this time as needing to be characterized in their own right and no longer being compared to the male gangsters of the time because of how these women committed their crimes, and how they were sentenced differently. For burglary or other criminal activity, men were often given harder sentences than the women. This was probably due to the social bias of the time where women were the "fairer sex" and could not possibly be as ruthless as the male gangsters. This idea is evidenced in an episode of "Tales of the Scotland Yard" these women were known to be just as ruthless as the men in popular culture. Why did the courts go easier on them? Often it was because they could not get enough evidence on the women, or the women were masterful blackmailers to which their reach cannot be fully discerned.

Often women in organized crime are seen as inferior to men because of how women were viewed the early twentieth century. Attempting to compare the generalized living styles of women in England during the early twentieth century adds a new level of analysis to the historiography. Making this societal class comparison to that can be used to prove why women in organized crime should be looked at in their own right. The Forty Elephants are a perfect example of this not only because of the amount of evidence provided but for how long these women managed to maintain their presence. The current historiography focuses mainly on the

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7 McDonald, Alice Diamond
women involved in the gangs of London, but there is room for a broader analysis that includes comparing all women in society to the women turning to organized crime.

When examining the Forty Elephant their name seems to be a little odd at first. When broken down there is an explanation, because in large part the name is a play on words. The first Queen of the Female crime ring was known to be Mary Carr with several court cases involving her, and known associates. In the late nineteenth century the women in that group were known as the Forty Thieves, as in the tale “Ali Baba and The Forty Thieves” from the *1001 Arabian Nights*. Reading through the story the main character is Ali Baba, a man, whose starts out a typical farmer. He sees the men who are thieves go into a cave and deposit wealth, with a secret word. Ali Baba uses the same word to open the cave and steal as much wealth as his mules can carry. His brother Cassium goes to the cave to try to do the same thing but forgets the secret code as he is rushed when he hears the thieves approach. Trapped, Cassium is killed by the thieves and his body is cut up and hung to deter other thieves. Other events ensue as the thieves discover they had not killed everyone who knew about the cave. Eventually, thanks to the cunning and quick observation skills of Ali Baba's slave Morgiana the thieves are killed, and Ali Baba is the last surviving person to know about the cave. Then the location is passed down throughout Ali Baba's sons, and Morgiana is given permission to marry one of Ali Baba’s sons as a reward for her faithfulness.\(^8\) Without the Morgiana, Ali Baba would have shared the same fate as his brother. Morgiana is then still within a typical woman’s role by the end of the story, but there are several small comparisons in the story.\(^9\) Morgiana is a woman, like Mary Carr and her associates. The story’s focus is on stealing, which is the method of crime used by the Forty Thieves women

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\(^9\) Ibid.
during the late nineteenth-century. Finally, Morgiana's skill set allows her to move social classes from slave to free person, to wealthy. Again, something that the Forties were trying to achieve living in London was to gain a higher social rank. There is a lot to the first portion of the name, but it is one that people would have been able to connect to and draw the comparisons.

As to where the "Elephants" portion of the name came from, there was a long-standing agreement between the Elephant and Castle male gang in London. The male gang received their name like any other at the time with the title coming from the location most its members came from. The Forties were similar in that the women were known to be centralized in the Elephant and Castle area. There was also a working relationship between the two groups as the men’s gang would often act as a fence for the women. As Alice Diamond became the Queen of the Forties the collaboration between the two groups became more significant, and that is when the women became known as the Forty Elephants.\textsuperscript{10} On the other hand, Albert or ‘Bert' McDonald was the one who claimed to have been the one to change the name of the group. Bert thought that as the women casually shoplifted they would “gain weight” and as they came out of the various stores they seemed to be the size of Elephants.\textsuperscript{11} There is no way of telling where exactly the name change came, but it would seem to have come during Alice Diamond's reign as Queen. The connection between the men and women groups became stronger, and many of the Forty Elephant women were from around there as well. It could have been Bert’s comment, but it would seem to be the association rather than the appearance. The Elephants crime of choice though was shoplifting and for several different reasons, that can mainly be linked to rising British cultural changes before, during and after the Industrial Revolution.

\textsuperscript{10} McDonald, Alice Diamond.
\textsuperscript{11} McDonald, Alice Diamond; McDonald, Gangs of London.
A new dynamic emerged between the old money, pre-Industrial wealth, and the *nouveau riche*. These newcomers to the upper class got there based on capitalism and they were not accustomed to the rules of high society. This is evidenced in pamphlets of these rules that were produced in hopes of keeping the strict British class system in place, but that was quickly dying out. Especially because a portion of the class differentiation was based upon what clothes people were to wear, that was a visual indicator of status. Meaning that “knock off” styles were able to be obtained by lower classes of people Not to mention the mass production of clothes allowed stories to carry larger inventories, which made a thief’s job even easier. In the *Crime, Gender, and Consumer Culture*... book one of the authors states that by the 1860 Britain should have been known as the "Nation of Shoplifters." Shoplifting was such a common occurrence that many new laws came out during the turn of the century that tried to curb people's will to shoplift.\(^{12}\) Even the shopkeepers tried to stop the problem by going to a cash only system and not allowing for credit accounts to be opened at their shops, because one of the ways people would shoplift was to use a fake name 'purchase' a good and never come back to pay for it.

Shopkeepers tried to stop the shoplifters by creating secret ledgers of those suspected of shoplifting. Whether these techniques worked is unknown because they were secretive. However, I would assume that these ledgers were moot because shopkeepers were also in on scamming people. Before the notion of set prices or receipts, they would either let people purchase something then later accuse them of stealing. There are several cases of these shopkeepers and shoplifters duking it out in court. The stories at first were then quickly picked up by popular newspapers. This type of reporting fostered a culture of mistrust between the

\(^{12}\) Whitlock.
consumer and the seller, with this mentality the shopkeepers attempted to stop this problem by implementing the all-cash system, but that did little to help.

There was also an unknown element to the duping that shopkeepers would do to their customer as they would create advertisements stating that their shop had caught on fire and the goods in the shop were ‘ruined’ and their prices were marked down. In reality, the shopkeepers would have simply burned some of the less expensive goods and kept a lot of the prices the same. This is documented in a memoir from an old shopkeeper who was nearing the end of his life and published his business dealings in his youth. Compared to the fact that there were advertisements taken out in the popular newspapers about 'fire sales' indicating this practice was a common occurrence and the predecessor to the various holiday sales.

These fire sales could be seen as a way of duping the customer into paying more originally for a product than what it is worth. Department stores will mark up the prices of clothes because some people will unwittingly pay for it, as they think the product is worth that. Most people want to feel like they are getting a deal, and they will wait for the sales to come around even though they are really just waiting for goods to be sold closer to the actual value. Now there are teams of people in the clothing industry that play off of this way of thinking because they will build sales into the price of clothing. If there is a sale on clothing at a store, it is typically only offered on certain brands, that percentage off was probably calculated into the cost of the clothing. This method allows for the company to make the profit they were looking for. Another comparison would be when food places offer combination deals, such as if the customer buys a meal and side they can get a drink for free. Well, the drink is where the business

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is making the most amount of profit on, or their cost of the drink is low offering it ‘for free’ is not costing them anything. In reality, the profit margin on the total sale should easily cover the cost of the drink meaning the company does not lose anything on the sale. In a way, it is a form of legal trickery that many people fall for in their everyday lives.

Documented cases of shoplifting from stores during the postindustrial time, there is also a relationship in the larger sense between the growth of the British economy and the rise expectations in the standard of living. With the rise of consumerism, women's place in society was typically seen as the homemaker, while the men still expected to be the ones to bring home an income. A sentiment present in the nineteenth-century despite the Industrial Revolution and more work opportunities opening up for women, but often women made less money and were forced to leave jobs after getting married.\textsuperscript{14} They were then expected to stay home, shop, make the house and such.

Specifically getting back to the mass production of goods left some loopholes in the system that was fairly easy to take advantage of. England's shift from at home work to factory work caused a shift in criminal activity and gender-related activity. There was also an increase in consumer culture making a black market available for women to sell clothes they stole at a discounted price. Clothes were also a huge part of the class identity and being seen as a higher-class person, especially for women could help them to land a rich husband and get out of poverty.\textsuperscript{15} Women were not expected to be capitalist themselves, they were the consumers while the men created the products women loved. In British writing, at the time women were often out shopping and consuming with their friends, and in a way, it became part of a woman's identity. If

\textsuperscript{14} Purvis.  
\textsuperscript{15} Purvis.
women were not able to afford or live up to the societal norms, they would turn to other avenues in order to obtain these items. Making the black market of stolen goods to be a lucrative one.

This idea was capitalist because there is a market for unobtainable goods with a high demand. Therefore, if you can steal an item making your cost zero, other than the risk taken by committing the crime, while your profit will always be over one hundred percent, it seems like a no-brainer industry to turn to. Society is what is driving the demand and keeping your name in the paper is almost like a calling card. You are known to be a successful thief like in Shirley Pitt's story her family fell from wealth and they needed clothes that they were not able to afford her mother turned to the Forty Elephants to solve this problem. They probably knew them anyway as they lived close to the gang territory, but there is a business model there. In reality, there is free press everywhere for these women, and there are laws and stereotypes that they are working that help prevent them from being caught. The police agencies attempted to bring the Forty Elephants in to catch these women, their names were all well known, but a lot of the time Alice Diamond and her associates were effective, and police often could not obtain enough proof to bring the Forties in on any charges. There was a working business model the Forty Elephants had going for them, and why change what they already had. If anything, the more notoriety Alice Diamond, and her associates received the more people were able to be recruited and more money the Forty Elephants were able to bring in. All in all, there was a nontraditional business model and a gap that the women of the Forty Elephants were able to take advantage of.

The twentieth-century was a time of change all over the world. Society was evolving at a rapid pace due to technological change and the political world was becoming ever more intertwined. Some of these things affected people at the most basic levels, and the largest crime

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16 Gamman.
running rampant all over Britain was shoplifting. The nation was once known for their ability to industrialize and sell mass produced goods all over the world, Britain at the time was even deemed the "Nation of Shop Keepers." Digging further into the notion of an entire country identifying themselves based on consumerism, along with a long history of class conflict leads to an interesting dynamic between people. A book by Catherine Horwood, *Keeping up Appearances: Fashion and Class between the Wars*, focuses on the interwar period of World Wars I and II. However, this is an easy comparison to the earlier part of the century and is usable in this context because this paper will attempt to map out the change in class structure. Her documentation of the change shows where Britain was going at the time and what type of society they were coming from. One’s clothes would give away what status a person held, in Horwood's introduction, there is a cartoon that shows this notion perfectly as the artist give their commentary on how when the lower class was able to afford or make similar clothes to those of the upper classes. More specifically though women’s fashion trends are more easily noted because the rapidly changing trends and options to be had by females. As women turning to organized crime were coming from the lower classes and dressmaking fields there is a clear relationship between wanting to move up in class and how women were supposed to dress to indicate their status. Meaning if one had the clothes they would be more accepted into the upper classes, and while they turned their skills into a business and turned a profit they were able to blend in not only with financial standing but dress etiquette as well.

Not only how society viewed these two groups differently, but men and women commit crimes differently. This is also evidenced in how men and women being sentenced was

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documented and written about. However, there is potential that the classes of women or the goals of women were different than the men. By coming from different backgrounds and having a different mindset in the world of organized crime it is impossible to judge the two groups with the same criteria. By defining what organized crime in England was, what types of women turned to organized crime, and discovering their motivations to turning to crime rather than being involved in a more traditional role it will help add to the historiography as proof that women and men were playing in the same underground world, but with slightly different motivations.

The sentencing that the women received was often lighter as compared to the men because they were women and society did see them differently. Even though many of the Forty Elephant women spent a great deal of time in and out of jail, their sentences were often lighter. The sentencing tended to be between three and nine months at a time, but on some occasions, the women were given sentences of a year and a half or more. The sentencing always depended on the type of crime committed, where it took place, and if they used their real name or not.\textsuperscript{19} Men from the Elephant and Castle gang, on the other hand, were lucky to get anything under six months. Granted the crimes the men were committing were often more violent than those of the Forties, who was mainly known for shoplifting.\textsuperscript{20} However, even as the women were convicted of violent crimes the longest sentence that was recorded in the books by McDonald was about two years, and some of the crimes the women committed could be seen as on the same level with the men. Often times then the victims the men hurt were left hospitalized, or they used firearms during their attacks which again could have added to their sentences. Men were judged differently in the eyes of the law due to the difference in criminal activity.\textsuperscript{21}

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\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{20} McDonald, \textit{Gangs of London}  \\
\textsuperscript{21} McDonald, \textit{Gangs of London}; McDonald, \textit{Alice Diamond}.
\end{flushright}
There was another way this could be looked at based on class identity. One of the other accepted facts about British women lingering from the Victorian Era was that in order to be feminine you had to be the "guardians of respectability and virtue." These two ideas are vague in nature but according to the dictionary one is considered respectable if, “the quality of being socially acceptable.” To be socially acceptable is a fluid term and depends on the time one is speaking of. Generalized socially accepted behavior is difficult to observe throughout history because what is acceptable in one century might not be later on. One also has to keep in mind is that there is hardly ever a distinct marking point where a social change occurred unless it came from a prominent figure in society. As far as social records go, shoplifting was typically seen as an unacceptable social behavior. Although unaccepted by general society did not stop people from shoplifting, nor did it stop the demand for lower priced goods. If one thinks about United States meat production, Americans often do not want to think about where their chicken and steak dinners are coming from, they just expect them to be in a grocery store nicely packaged for cooking. Comparing that to the shoplifting in the 1920-30's in England, people wanted the brand name products that they were able to obtain through shoplifting, but they did not want to admit where they obtained these goods or their association with Forty Elephants. To be virtuous is slightly more complicated as there is a long-standing religious element that is even mentioned in the second definition listed in the dictionary. Within the context of social society the assumed definition is most likely, “behaviour showing high moral standards,” and not, “the seventh-highest order of the ninefold celestial hierarchy,” from traditional Christian angelology. It is

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22 Purvis.
23 McDonald, Alice Diamond; Gamman.
worth mentioning though the connection of religion and the Victorian Era because the head of the state in England is also the head of the church. The lingering idea that women are to be the moral leaders of society fits well because Queen Victoria was often seen as a pragmatic ruler who was not afraid of ensuring things were up to her standards, whether it be policies, design, appearances, even her final burial. Victoria’s ability to change the role of the British monarch and make the royal family more accessible to the public caused this new flurry of excitement where both men and women were attempting to mimic the styles of the Head of State and her husband. The reign of Queen Victoria marked an era of great social change, and her observable behavior was the standard for all women. Therefore, she is a figure needing to be mentioned because she was the embodiment of social acceptance and virtue. As the Forty Elephants women are compared to the Queen and other typical members of high society there was a difference in the way the two groups of women behaved. Meaning the Forty Elephants women were creating a new definition of women's roles in both the crime world and in the typical world.

Pat Hudson then goes on to explain that when women were put in front of the court they were in a "double jeopardy" situation because they were not only deviant in front of the law but women also found themselves outside the boundaries of society. Calling it "double jeopardy" might not exactly be the correct phrase, but it points out that committing a crime as a woman was particularly damaging as it was socially accepted that men were going to commit crimes and women typically would not. Now that does not mean the law is supposed to go easier on women, but if women are consistently prosecuted for crimes like shoplifting or violence that would make the society as a whole look bad. Hudson roots her argument about the lack of prosecution of

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27 Hudson.
women as it came to prostitution sentencing in the later part of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{28} Typically prostitution was a crime committed by a woman, whereas McDonald helps to show that women in organized shoplifting were treated differently as well. Seeing how men and women in the underground crime world were prosecuted shows the discrepancies that would often be in the favor of women. Eventually, the law would catch up with many of these women, but it never did enough to deter the Forty Elephants from continuing to commit crimes. The harsher sentencing given to the men rarely deterred them either, especially when the members were already in the ring and had felt the rewards of being a social deviant. There were a high risk and reward that made these socioeconomically struggling people with little hope of moving up in British society attracted to the life of crime.

Sentencing for women like Alice Diamond did not get worse as time went on due to the aliases that she was known to use during the trial. How exactly McDonald was able to figure out these aliases is not made clear through his book, but descriptions of the women convicted for shoplifting often match that of Alice. She was a tall woman at the time, most men according to McDonald were on average five foot six inches and Diamond herself stood at five feet eight inches.\textsuperscript{29} Therefore, she was recognizable, even something of a celebrity as she was mentioned in a radio episode of "Tales of the Scotland Yard." With this type of evidence then it became assumed that Diamond was known to use names like Alice Black, Diana Black, Alice Blake, Mary Blake, or Dolly Blake. All with seemingly excellent back stories as one of her characters had been married to a husband that had left her six months previous, as to hopefully gain sympathy from the judge for her actions. At the time women without husbands were seen as

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{29} McDonald, \textit{Alice Diamond}. 
charity cases because a woman in British society was not seen as having the ability to making one's own money.

Under the law only one small protection was given to the Forties, the other form of protection came from the Elephant and Castle gang. According to McDonald, the Elephant and Castle gang was the most notorious and largest gang in London, hitting their peak between the world wars. The analysis of the male group would be where a bias might pop up because of his family ties to the group. Essentially the men were some of the first to terrorize the shops in the west end of London as well as their racecourse cheating. The group was also known for their violence against other gangs and in 1919 they were able to take out the Titanic gang, officially giving themselves one of the ‘best’ reputation in the area. They were also known for their alliances with the other gangs in the area that allowed for a better racketeering operation at the race courses. Racecourses were areas of violence, pick-pocketing amongst other behaviors that would attract the rougher crowds. Men would take away at the payout booth with the day's earnings after brawls would break out in front.

With all of the violence, gangs saw an opening to offer protection to the racecourses. Yet another form of business in the criminal world. Another parallel with the female crime syndicate, the men saw a problem in society and found a way to create a market to profit off of it. The alliances were not just between the women and the gangs, but other male lead gangs would team up. There was never exactly one lasting idea that kept the gangs together, but the rivalry, enterprise, and political unrest would often be reasons for the different groups to come together. The Forty Elephants although typically associated with a branch of the Elephant and Castle gang could be seen as standing on their own.

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30 McDonald.  
31 Ibid.
There is another instance of male gang leader Billy Kimber, of the Brummagem, who closely associated with the group from south London many thought that is where he resided. Kimber became well known as he was young and had the muscle and brains to control the men in surrounding territories or to make life uncomfortable for other gangs running the racecourse circuit. The Brummagem’ leader came from a family that had money, but in his youth Kimber still ran with the group known as the “Peaky Blinders.” The difference for the Forty Elephants and Kimber, is that most of the women associated with the Forty Elephants came from a lower class family that did not earn a lot of money searching for a better life. Kimber, on the other hand, had been turned on to crime at a young age after he was convicted of assault at eighteen and met his lieutenant, George Brummy Sage. Ultimately that is where and who it is credited to for giving Kimber the idea of his sprawling racetrack extortion. The operation took on a life of its own much like the women who were shoplifting for the Forty Elephants. Men from the Brummagem gang would travel the rails to various race tracks to extort money from the other racketeers. Once the alliance came with the McDonald brothers out of a common enemy with the Sabinis gang that controlled some of the more profitable racecourses. Again, another difference being the alliance made between the two groups was different in nature, as many women in the Forty Elephants gang had family member associated with them. Whereas the Brummagem gang and the Elephant and Castle gang were aligned based upon a common enemy.

Getting into more about how the men and women of these gangs interacted differently with society it is easy to see that there was no competition between the two sexes, as they both had their own agendas. As to why they chose similar but different avenues of crime speaks to the

33 McDonald, *Gangs of London*
34 AETN UK.
social contracts each party subscribed to. Women’s roles were in the home and inferior to men’s roles. However, they were vital to the clothing industry as women were often the ones to make the cloth for the factories. On the other hand, women were used as nannies or housekeepers for families in the upper classes, again serving as a vital piece of British society. The class system was something that was stringent, and although the illusion of social mobility was present, there was a strong likelihood that was never going to happen. Working as housekeepers and nannies allowed for the lower classes to have better jobs and eventually helped develop the middle class because these workers would often make more or have better working conditions than the women in factories. Britain in the early twentieth century had a culture that had the ability to change and with the introduction of new ideas from all over the world, it was possible to see this phenomenon.

Wanting to keep up an appearance that women and their families were further ahead of their means than what it appeared is not a new concept in the twentieth century. Even in nineteenth-century Europe the middle-class families who hosted dinner parties would keep up the appearance by taking on the work themselves. Taking on the work of a servant was considered a social blunder, but women whose husbands could not afford to employ the number of service people would create handwritten dinner invitations, pretend they did not know what their maid served them at the table amongst other behaviors. Women were indeed an integral part of British business society as though the women are where credibility would be established, and they brought about a certain civility that was not often awarded to men.35 Even though this was happening in the mid-nineteenth century the ideology was cemented in this time that many women in the workforce should be inferior to the men. The middle-class were the ones to lead

35 Purvis.
the way, but as the cartoon from "Keeping Up Appearances" notes that eventually the ideas get passed along from one class to another. In the lower class, it did not matter if one was a man or woman, everyone was just trying to survive and make a living together. These ideas then turned into the lower working class emulating the behaviors of the middle class, such as kids standing at the dinner table, buying houses that had parlors amongst other behaviors.\textsuperscript{36} The other changing standard was the cleanliness. With the introduction of hot water into homes, and new technology like vacuums allowed women to keep their houses nice looking. There was a lift of the marriage bar that forced women to leave certain jobs after they were married due to the increase in talks about women’s rights. This allowed for less job availability for the young and up and coming women, especially in the lower classes. There were some notable changes in women moving into the twentieth century, but the old ideologies were still present.

There was some social mobility afforded to women, but in the early half of the twentieth-century, it is more about women testing their limits and trying to get out of the shadow of men. Looking at the British economy at the time, as the pre-war Edwardian economy was strong due to the high levels of production coming from Britain, and more jobs were available. People were able to afford more luxuries no matter which class they came from due to the increase in economy.\textsuperscript{37} There are statistics that was Britain itself was manufacturing seventy-five percent of all finished products in the world.\textsuperscript{38} Then after World War I the British economy took a hit because the wartime production went down, and many factories were destroyed, and lives lost. With the economic change came a shift in social thinking as well. It is also a shift that is noted

\begin{footnotes}
\item[36] Ibid.
\item[38] Ralph Menning, "Nineteenth-Century Europe," Lecture, Kent State University at Stark, North Canton, OH, Spring 2018
\end{footnotes}
because many historians when periodization the nineteenth century consider until after World War I, 1918 part of the nineteenth century because of how the ideas changed post-war.

The original analysis of women in organized crime puts women behind the men operating at the time. Women who committed crimes were never really looked at in their own right and only seen as working for the various bosses rather than standing on their own and partaking in their own organized crime. Most historians working on projects in this area would put women somewhere on the spectrum from kleptomaniacs to mad murderesses. They lived in the shadow of the crime boss men as molls, and prostitutes and often were given the diagnosis of mental issues due to stress. Meaning the women in the Forty Elephants, despite all the social change occurring, were still looked down upon in society. More than their male counterparts in the gangs around London because they were not playing a small background role.

Applying these social changes to the underground criminal world the then notable shift lies with Alice Diamond. Females had been in the crime world long before Diamond was on the scene. As a thief, Diamond was the one that brought about a new, more systematic mode of thieving and a moral code for these women. First examining the background of the author, Brian McDonald’s uncle was once an item with Alice Diamond. Then on top of that Ada Johnson, one of Alice’s closest friends, was formerly a McDonald. Although Brian McDonald is upfront with this information there still could be some biased in the way he wrote about Diamond in his books. However, when compared to Shirley Pitt’s story, the eventual new queen, she also interacted with Diamond and her perception seems to be similar to Brian McDonald’s. From a young age, Pitt's herself interacted with Diamond, it was clear that Alice was the leader of the Forty Elephants, and no doubt ruthless as any man when it came to her holdings or her people.

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39 McDonald, *Alice Diamond.*
40 Gamman.
The way that the Forty Elephants operated was a process of delegation, an assembly line if you will. McDonald himself pulled a quote out of a police report when one of the cell leaders Gertrud Skelly was pulled in. The report read as…

“She is a member of a gang of clever and expert shoplifters who systematically visit large shops and stores in London and the Provinces. Establishments are entered mostly at meal times. Articles that are easily accessible are refused and other asked for, which necessitate the assistant going to another room or to the window display. During the absence of the assistant, various articles are taken and handed to confederates, or by the Confederates themselves, who immediately leave the shop. They meet at a local tea shop or public house, where goods are done up into parcels for a return to London.”

This report indicates what Brian McDonald has in the back of Alice Diamond and the Forty Elephants: Britain’s First Female Crime Syndicate. There is a team of women that go into stores that are not necessarily all working together at all times, they all have the same techniques that were more than likely passed down from Alice. Gertrud Skelly was a minor leader in the Forty Elephants as there are some smaller rings within the group. This allowed for the group to be more mobile and less noticeable.

The other good description of how the group operated came from Pitt’s. Early on in Shirley Pitt's life, she served as one of the “confederates” that would take the items after they were lifted. The system described above was one that was tried and true. Often there were stories of women of the Forties that would be apprehended by the police after they came out of the stores, only for the police to find nothing on the women even after they searched them. Their techniques included using young girls to pass items, or cases off to or develop clothing that would allow them to conceal the items in plain sight.

One of the cleverer techniques used typically at jewelry counters was perfected after the quality of chewing gum in the United States improved. A skillful British shoplifter, Annie

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41 McDonald, Alice Diamond.
Gleeson, brought this new method to the streets of London. How the method would work was like the classic grab and handoff method, but the handoff did not take place between two people coming into contact with one another directly. What the first person would do was the typical excitedly look through the jewelry, quickly asking to see one thing after another but instead of pocketing the targeted item it would be stuck underneath the counter with chewing gum. After that, a second woman would come in and run her fingers along the bottom of the counter to locate the target jewel and make off with the item. This new gum-method introduced in the early 1910’s allowed for higher priced jewels to be lifted with a smaller risk to the woman initially asking to see the jewels. The initial woman would be suspected of taking the jewels, but when she would be searched nothing would be on her, minimizing the risk. The systematic work seen is almost like an assembly at the factory where everyone has their own role to play, and as long as everything goes smoothly everyone makes a profit. However, there is a level of trust that also goes into systems like the one utilized by the Forty Elephant women. It was this kind of ingenuity that allowed for women to continually go into shops and take things right under the noses of others because there was nothing a shopkeeper could do if the item was not found on the person who looked at it last. If women were apprehended there were a few ways they could get out of having charges pressed against them. The typical way of getting out of any charges though was the method of slipping goods to ‘confederates,’ and trying their best to obscure where the stolen objects had been spirited off to.

Due to the nature of the crime, the women were committing secrecy and trust were two key factors in being a part of the group because one informant could bring down any number of women at once. As a result, the Forties were ruthless when it came to dealing with those who

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McDonald, *Alice Diamond.*
would get in their way or members themselves who did not do as the leader.\textsuperscript{43} The women who were daring enough to take the title of “Queen” had to be ruthless because there was a varied level of benefits and dangers to go along with the title.

"Rewards for the Queen were a larger share of the spoils, a respectful acceptance of her leadership, and obedience, certainly novices who held her in awe, what today would be regarded as celebrity status. One significant problem with this was recognition by not only her peers but also her adversaries, particularly the police who seemed to enjoy announcing to a court that the accused was known as Queen of the Forty Thieves or such. ... though many aspired to a criminal crown, only a handful succeeded. Mary Carr and Alice Diamond were unique in having long careers in female criminal enterprise.\textsuperscript{44}

There was a certain allure that came along with being part of the underground criminal world. Shoplifting was exciting but the considerable risks these women took were not something that those who were uncommitted to the cause could take on. By researching British society and other organized crime from the early twentieth-century the Forty Elephants can find their official place in society and in the organized crime world.

The trust though was on a strict code of ethics and there was often cross over between the male gangs and the women of the Forty Elephants because often the women were family to the males. For example, Marie (Britten) Jackson attacked cell leader Bertha Tappenden. The attack was the result of Tappenden was throwing out a slew of insults directed toward Jackson. Bill Britten punched Tappenden after Jackson’s initial attack. Bill Britten’s punch led to a fight with Alice Diamond’s brother Tommy. After that night there was a falling out between the members of the Elephant and Castle gang and the women in the Forty Elephants.\textsuperscript{45} The instance shows that even though the fight was actually just between the two women, family members got involved and the men took over the situation at the end. Like the male gangs though, there was little

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\item\textsuperscript{44} McDonald, \textit{Alice Diamond}.
\item\textsuperscript{45} McDonald, \textit{Gangs of London}.
\end{itemize}
infighting because of the level of trust needed to operate these crime rings. That did not stop fallings out such as these, but often that just meant the losing party was no longer in the group, and if they did speak they were already defeated once. Meaning it was in the ousted members favor to keep quiet about group activates.

Another difference between men and women and these types of bar fights is that the women of the Forties were more known to become intoxicated and attack the betrayer at their residence or they would plan the attack in advance. The women seemed to have more of justification behind their attacks whereas the men tended to just have a hatred for one group or a race and that was enough to justify an attack. All the attacks from a bystander perspective seem to be senseless, but to these underworld members, the justification was that in keeping up their ability to incite fear and keep their power on the streets.

Although acts of violence and fighting was seen within the Forty Elephants Alice Diamond, had her limits to the types of accepted behavior of group members. Mainly her limits sprang out of necessity, evidenced in the case of Alice’s own friend. Maggie ‘Baby Face’ Hughes, one of Alice’s oldest confidant’s, became too much of an alcoholic she was deemed a liability for the crime circle. By 1939 Hughes’ alcoholism had shown how ugly it could become as she stabbed Mrs. Lou Williams in the face with a piece of broken glass. The act by itself was not what had Diamond concerned, but that the judge would not even allow Hughes to apply for bail and the pattern of behavior was becoming more regular. Hughes was even known to have put her husband in the hospital during a fight, that ended up with Mr. Hughes obtaining a razor cut to the face. Diamond could not have someone that unpredictable on her team, because the

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46 Ibid.
47 McDonald, Alice Diamond
48 Ibid.
operation she was running was one of precision and great timing. Any small variable could get everyone one caught and put in jail, and it was not like they had not been caught before, but the police were getting wise to the women’s techniques. Diamond’s allegiance was still to her friend, but the other women of the group had to come first. Alice needed to be the one to make the difficult choices in order to maintain group stability, that way the Forty Elephants could continue their enterprise.

Like many things just as Mary Carr was unseated by Alice Diamond, there was another woman to come in a pick up the mantle of Queen of the Forty Elephants. Shirley Pitts became the eventual successor of the other and lead the existing system into another era of shoplifting and lives of excess while Diamond grew old. Pitts was able to take what she had learned from an early age onward to improve upon and develop the skills even more. As to the where the Forties are all at now, there is no real telling because although the books from Brian McDonald and Lorraine Gamman contain many eyewitness accounts and family tales they did not disclose their sources to protect the identities. What seems to have happened is technology improved making it difficult for the old forms of shoplifting to work anymore. That is not to say shoplifting is not a common crime anymore, but the notoriety is not seen in the same way, and as far as it is known shoplifters are no longer as brazen about their elicit actives.

British Society was a leader in the world in culture and industry, two things they were able to capitalize on rather quickly. An entire culture shift occurred as technology improved and more women were required to come into the workforce, causing a shift in the expectations between classes as various wardrobing and other goods to become available to the lower classes due to a decrease in cost. Strict social lines began to blur as it came to men and women, and the

49 Gamman.
lines between the classes leaving the door open for new norms to develop and materialize. In the criminal underworld, there was also shift as Mary Carr paved the way for women to find their way in the field of organized crime. Once Alice Diamond came along then she took what her predecessor had done and expanded on the workings of the group to create a notorious bunch of women. The associations with the Elephant and Castle men and their ability to take advantage of the legal system allowed them to live lives of extravagance, obtain levels of fame, and gain that excitement of living outside the realm of the socially accepted world. All in all, women in organized crime are a different category of their own based on how society views them, and their ability to exist in the world and enterprise on already existing, sometimes corrupt, systems. Based on their own merit the women of the Forty Elephants although semi-dependent on their male counterparts for protection, was able to hang with the best of the male gangs in London because as it came down to it the other male gangs would protect each other, in a way the men had accepted the Forties as an equal in their world. Due to this Alice Diamond and all the other Forty Elephants deserve to look at in the world of crime on their own merit.
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