

## LIFE IN THE SEWERS

Source: "The Living Age, " Vol. 5, Issue 48, April 12, 1845



[Related sketch entitled "Sewer Scavenger": Growing cities (in the early 1800's) had many rubbish collectors, who sifted through garbage for things to sell and "recycle." Some worked in the sewers, like this London scavenger. Sewer scavengers occasionally found valuable items, but their occupation was unhealthy and extremely dangerous. (Source: Museum of London)]

### **The following is the article as published on April 12, 1845:**

"Few who walk along the streets of London, and see mile on mile of carriage-way and foot-pavement stretching out before them, and branching off on every side, reflect upon the vast and wonderful schemes of sewerage that extends underneath. From the remotest district of London to the river, small sewers flow into larger ones; and these again, after a long course and many windings, in the Thames. Were a map executed of these subterranean currents, so intricate, yet so regular, like the large veins and arteries of the body, it would convey a grander idea of the civilization of the capital than even the magnificent streets, filled with the productions of the world, that extend above ground. Formed of substantial brick-work, well arched and secure, they represent a sunken capital which has been variously estimated at the enormous sum of from one million and a half to two millions sterling. It is an interesting sight when any one of the main sewers is under repair in a principal thoroughfare, to see how deep the excavation is,

and how many lines of gas and fresh water pipes have to be traversed before the strong current of foul water, running in its capacious brick channel, is reached by the workmen. Several of these main sewers were open streams, meandering through the fields, before London became so gigantic as it is now; and among the number may be cited the Fleet, running from beyond Islington, through Bagnigge Wells, Clerkenwell, Fieldham, Holborn, and Farrington street, into the Thames, once capable, it appears, of bearing merchant vessels as far as Holborn; the Wallbrook running from Moorfields past the Mansion-House, and by the church of St. Stephen, Walbrook, and by Dowgate, into the Thanes; and the Lang of Long Bourne, which still gives name to one of the wards of London.

Any one who has walked over Blackfriars or Waterloo Bridge when the tide is down, may have observed men and boys, and occasionally women, waling upon the shores of the river, knee deep in the slime, with baskets upon their backs, or slung over their arms, picking up pieces of wood that have been left behind by the tide, or bits of coal that have fallen from the numerous coal barges that come up laden from the pool, where the collier vessels are moored, to discharge their cargoes at the wharfs further to the west. These "mud-larks," as they are sometimes called, bear generally a bad character, being accused of not contenting themselves with the prizes they find on the shore, but of robbing the coal barges or other vessels, on board of which they can creep at nightfall without detection. However this may be, their functions do not end with the shore, but in the sewer. With torch in hand, to preserve them from the attacks of numerous large and ferocious rats, they wade, sometimes almost up to the middle, through the stream of foul water, in search of stray articles that may have been thrown down the sinks of houses, or dropped through the loop holes in the streets. They will at times travel for two or three miles in this way - by light of their torches, aided occasionally by a gleam of sunshine from the grating by the wayside - far under the busy thoroughfares of Cornhill, Cheapside, the Strand, and Holborn, very seldom able to walk upright in the confined and dangerous vault, and often obliged to crawl on all fours like the rats, which are their greatest enemies. The articles they mostly find are potatoes and turnips, or bones, washed down the sinks by careless scullery-maids;

pence and half-pence, and silver coins; occasionally a silver spoon or fork, the loss of which may have caused considerable distress and ill-will in some house above; and not unfrequently more valuable articles, which thieves, for fear of detection, have thrown down when they have been hard pressed by the officers of justice. It might be thought that a life amid the vilest filth, and amid so much danger and unpleasantness of every kind, would allure but few; but the hopes of the great prizes sometimes discovered in this miserable way deprives it of its terrors, and all the principal sewers that branch into the Thames have their regular frequenters. Were it not that the tide gives them too little time for that purpose, they would extend their researches to the extremities of London; but tow or three miles inland is the utmost bound of their peregrinations. Those who value their lives will not be tempted to extend their researches further, lest they should be drowned by the rising waters of the river.

About two years ago, these and some other particulars of their mode of life were first elicited in consequence of the following circumstance; - An old man who had long pursued this calling was suddenly missed. Every search was made for him by the few to whom he was known; and his wife and family, not without many fears that he had lost his way in the sewers, or had been surprised by the tide, and drowned in his efforts to escape, mad anxious inquiries at every police office in London; but without receiving any tidings of his fate. Months elapsed, and his name was passing from the remembrance of all but those who had lost their husband and father by his disappearance, when a young man, passing with his torch up the Fleet, at nearly a mile distant from the place where it discharges itself into the Thames, was startled at seeing the figure of a man amid the darkness sitting at the junction of a smaller sewer with the main current of the Fleet. He shouted, but received no answer, and heard nothing but the rolling of the black and fetid water, and the splash or squeak of the numerous rats which he had alarmed. Advancing nearer, he held the light to the face of the silent figure, and beheld the ghastly countenance of a skeleton. He was not a man of strong mind, and losing his self-possession in his horror, he stumbled against it and fell. His light was extinguished. His situation was now sufficiently awful; but the added horror of the total darkness recalled his startled faculties instead of scattering them entirely. He

knew his way by the number of iron grating at intervals above, and groped along cautiously, shouting as loudly as he could, to keep up his own courage, and to startle the rats from his path, lest he should tread upon one which would turn upon him and fasten on his flesh. Grating after grating was thus passed, and he heard the carriages rattling above whenever he came near, and at times the conversation of people. Once he stopped under a grating, by the side of which an old woman sat her applestall, and overheard her discourse with her customers, and was tempted to give the alarm, that he might be drawn up. This, however, would have been a work of time, and he therefore decided to go on. He proceeded accordingly, and arrived at the Thames without accident, and immediately informed his companions of the discovery he had made. It was surmised at once that the skeleton was that of the man who had been so long missing. Information was given to the police, and a constable was despatched to see the issue. He would not, however, venture up the sewer, but remained by the river side to await the return of the three "mud-larks" who went up with torches and basket to bring out the remains of the dead man. They found, on reaching the spot, that the discoverer, in his fright, by falling against the skeleton, had overturned it from its sitting position. A skull, a mass of bones, with a few buttons, and a portion of his shoes, alone remained - his flesh and his attire having been devoured piecemeal by the rats. The remains were collected and brought out without accident. A coroner's inquest was held on the following day, and the identity was established by the buttons, the only means by which it could be proved. Of course it could never be known to a certainty how the life of this unfortunate being had been lost; but the general supposition was, either that he had been suffocated by foul air, or that he had been seized with a fit of apoplexy in that darksome sewer. The simple verdict, "found dead," was returned by the jury.

Such is the romance of common things; and such is one of the many marvels that lie around us and beneath us, observable only by those who are disposed to study the manners, the habits, and the struggles of the poor."