

The Great Stink of London, 1858

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In the mid-19th century, Britain was gripped by the fear of cholera, a highly infectious and deadly disease. When cholera struck Hamburg in Germany, the British government grew alarmed that this latest outbreak might spread to Britain. They decided to create a special committee to deal with the expected epidemic.

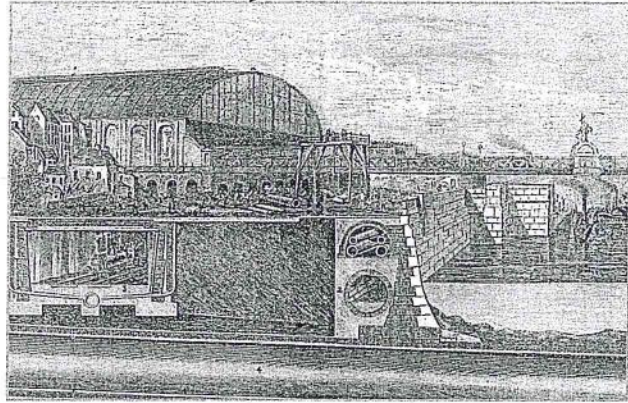
However, the epidemic never happened because of the work of one man: Sir Joseph Bazalgette.



At that time, London's sewage flowed straight into the River Thames. From here it leaked into adjacent springs, wells and other sources of drinking water. This was the root cause of cholera, a waterborne disease. Contemporary accounts describe London being crowded with men, women and children struggling to survive in terrible conditions. In 1849, one journalist reported that the air had 'the smell of a graveyard, and a feeling of nausea comes over anyone unaccustomed to it.' About the Thames, he wrote, 'heavy bubbles now and then rise up in the water, which is covered with a scum like an encrusted cobweb. In it float large masses of noxious, tangled weed and against the posts of the bridges are swollen carcasses of dead animals.'

In the summer of 1858, the stench from the Thames was so bad that Members of Parliament fled from the rooms overlooking the river. The Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, rushed from the debating chamber, handkerchief to nose. The press called the crisis The Great Stink. Disraeli introduced to Parliament a Bill that gave Bazalgette the authority to construct the sewers which he had designed; it was rushed through within sixteen days and Bazalgette began work immediately.

By 1874 Bazalgette had completed his ingenious scheme. He designed a grand system of drains and sewers to carry foul water to new pumping stations and holding tanks, and new embankments to make the river cleaner. In all, he built



1,182 miles of sewers, four pumping stations and two major water treatment works which are still operating to this day.

Bazalgette did much else besides. He designed and created many famous London streets and several magnificent bridges across the River Thames, including Tower Bridge, a present day London landmark. In fact, Bazalgette created more of London than anyone else before or since. But his greatest claim to fame is the system of sewers, which banished cholera forever and which still serve the capital city to this day.

