The Great Stink

By Johanna Lemon

In the summer of 1858, the city of London came to a standstill. Government could barely function; people resisted the urge to leave their homes, but demanded action from the government. What had brought London to its knees was the overwhelming stench that radiated from the surface of the River Thames.

For centuries, England’s most famous river played the role of dumping ground for all of London’s various wastes—human, animal, and industrial. As the population of London grew from a tiny Roman fort into a large, metropolitan city, the amount of waste it produced expanded exponentially. By the 1600’s, many people began to recognise that the pollution of the city’s most vital water source was becoming a problem. Yet with no comprehensive idea on how to fix the issue, no action was taken and the people of London continued to use the Thames as both a water source and a rubbish bin. By the arrival of the 19th century, the problem had been left to stew for too long. Enough waste and pollution had accumulated in the Thames to make it the most contaminated and unhygienic river in the world.

Though the situation with the Thames was noticeable before the onset of England’s Industrial Age, it was the summer of 1858 that finally brought it to the attention of lawmakers. That particular summer, all of London was feeling the affects of an oppressive heat wave and as a result, all the sewage in the Thames began to ferment in the scorching sun—centuries of waste was literally cooking in the monstrous heat. The result was a smell as offensive and disgusting as can ever be imagined. It spawned accounts such as the following: there were “stories flying of men struck down with the stench, and of all kinds of fatal diseases, up-springing on the river’s banks.”

Luckily enough for the denizens of London, even the elite were not exempt from such an odious odour:

‘The intense heat had driven our legislators from those portions of their buildings which overlook the river. A few members, indeed, bent upon investigating the matter to its very depth, ventured into the library, but they were instantaneously driven to retreat, each man with a handkerchief to his nose.’

Members of Parliament tried at first to stay the course and continue their sessions without agreeing to any drastic plans of reform. They knew that any action taken in regards to ridding the stench would involve an arduous overhauling of the entire infrastructure of the Thames. Many lawmakers were hesitant to make such a commitment and tried instead to relieve their own battered senses.

Their first attempt to quench the stench involved dousing the curtains of Parliament in a mixture of chloride and lime. When that didn’t work, they even considered removing the entire government from the Westminster area—despite the newly constructed building they had only recently acquired. That idea was quickly dropped and soon, days had passed without the formation of a solid resolution. Eventually, the stench simply began to overpower the staunch sensibilities of many of the Members, some who could even be ‘seen fleeing from the Chamber, handkerchief to nose, complaining loudly about the “Stygian Pool” that the Thames had become.’
One of the most vocal and well-known supporters of Thames reform was an English chemist and physicist named Michael Faraday. He staunchly supported a complete reformation of the toxic river, so much so that after a boat ride along its surface, he composed and sent a letter to the editor of The Times newspaper. The letter, entitled ‘Observations on the Filth of the Thames,’ would soon become the public’s rallying point for an overall restoration of the Thames. Faraday wrote a blunt dissection of the situation regarding the polluted river. He described how he had tossed pieces of paper into the water which had almost immediately disappeared proving that ‘the whole of the river was an opaque pale brown fluid’ and that the river was nothing more than ‘a real sewer.’ Faraday also made it very clear when he cautioned that ‘if we neglect this subject, we cannot expect to do so with impunity; nor ought we to be surprised if, ere many years are over, a hot season give us sad proof of the folly of our carelessness.’

Thankfully, through a combination of pubic pressure and abject nasal suffering, Parliament finally chose to act instead of leaving the issue for another “hot season.” They also began to realize that simply relocating the seat of government would not do anything to alleviate the suffering of the people who could not move away from the toxic Thames.

Within a record of eighteen days, a bill was created, passed, and signed into law that would refurbish the entirety of the River Thames. Indeed, many found the situation ironic, as this passage illustrates:

‘In 1855 the condition of the Thames appalled the eminent scientist but three yeas later, in 1858, the hottest summer on record reduced it to a state in which it offended a more influential body: the politicians whose recently rebuilt hoses of Parliament stood upon its banks. This proximity to the source of the stench concentrated their attention on its causes in a way that many years of argument and campaigning had failed to do and prompted them to authorise actions which they had previously shunned.’

Disregarding the motives behind the renovation, London’s most important river was finally getting the care it so rightfully deserved. The reformation of the Thames included not only the implementation of a sewage system—to be designed by the English civil engineer Sir Joseph Bazalgette—but also a construction of embankments along its sides. With these reforms, the Great Stink slowly began to dissipate and Londoners could breathe proper sighs of relief—not only for the clear air, but also for the other benefits that accompanied the integration of change. Not only did the Thames gradually evolve into one of the cleanest rivers in the world but the implementation of a functioning sewage system also aided in the elimination of several waterborne illnesses that had plagued London for centuries.

So while the Great Stink might have been deplorable and hideously offensive to everyone’s delicate senses it nonetheless helped to push forward a reform that had been waiting to be realized for centuries.