



Keeping Clean

The Ancient Romans and Ancient Greeks loved to bathe. They didn't understand the science behind it, but they knew that keeping their bodies clean was an important part of staying healthy. From the time the Saxons invaded Britain to the end of the 1700s, Britons had a troubling relationship with staying clean. For hundreds of years, it was believed that clean and open pores in the skin allowed illnesses to enter the body, and so people tried to keep their skin as dirty as possible to keep it out. Towards the end of the 18th century, people began to suspect that the pores might actually be best left open and that cleaning once in a while might be a good thing. One scientist even covered a horse in tar and demonstrated how it died because it couldn't breathe through its skin anymore. In fact, it died because it overheated, but it certainly had an impact on people.

However, even into the 19th century, people were unwilling to get too clean. Karl Marx was a German philosopher who headed off to university in the 1830s. When he left home, his mother gave him instructions to have "a weekly scrub with sponge and soap". An English doctor produced a book in 1861 called *Baths and How to Take Them* because people were so unsure how to clean themselves properly.

Even when people realised that keeping their bodies clean might help them to live a little bit longer, their houses didn't always match. Especially in the poorer areas of the big cities, families often shared houses with others and lived in the waste that each made. At the time when Charles Dickens was writing *Oliver Twist*, people were cramming into small houses in numbers not seen before or since. Because there were no working sewers, all of the human filth, food waste and dead animals were left in the house. In one report, an inspector visited a house and found the cellar was filled with human waste to a depth of three feet! The back garden was flooded with sewage so deep that the people had stacked bricks as stepping stones. Neither of these things was unusual or shocking to the inspector, it appears.

Streets were very rarely cleaned - one street in Leeds was surveyed in the 1830s and hadn't been cleaned for 15 years. Even where waste was removed, it often made life even more dangerous. For thousands of years, the Thames in London acted as a dumping ground. Human waste, rotten meat, dead animals, waste from factories and everything else that people threw away, ended up in the water. Huge animal markets



meant that thousands of tonnes of dung were dumped each year. Most people hoped that the tide would wash the waste away, but it never did. What made it worse was that most of the streets and villages of London took their drinking water from the river. This meant that cholera epidemics spread quickly and violently when they popped up. The water became so full of poisonous gas, that miners digging under the river once sparked an enormous ball of fire, just from the gasses in the water.

When London embraced the flushing toilet in the 1850s, the problem grew even worse as even more waste was flushed into the river. People often moaned that the foul smells would waft back up and out of the toilet and cause their house to smell. It wasn't until Joseph Bazalgette built London's sewers in the 1860s that London's waste was finally taken away from the city centre. Londoners finally had something resembling a clean living environment.

SUMMARY FOCUS

1. What was the main difference between the Ancient Roman's attitude to bathing and the Saxon's approach?
2. How did a scientist try to prove that pores were important?
3. Why is the quote from Karl Marx's mother a clue as to how people viewed washing?
4. Why were poor people more likely to be unclean?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

R

How long had it been since the street in Leeds had been cleaned?

V

Which word in the text tells you that Londoners were eager to use flushing toilets?

V

Find and copy a word that means close to "looks like".

R

When were the sewers of London built?

I

What fact about London meant that cholera spread quickly?

Answers:

1. The Romans knew keeping clean was important, from the Saxons onwards, people didn't try to keep so clean.
2. He covered a horse with tar. This was supposed to block the pores to prove that the horse would suffocate.
3. She said to wash once a week, which isn't very often compared to now.
4. They lived in cramped houses with more people and the waste was left uncleaned.
5. He designed and built the sewers to take the waste away from the city centre, giving them a cleaner place to live.

R: 15 years

V: Embraced

V: Resembling

R: The 1860s

I: The drinking water was taken from the Thames, which was heavily polluted.