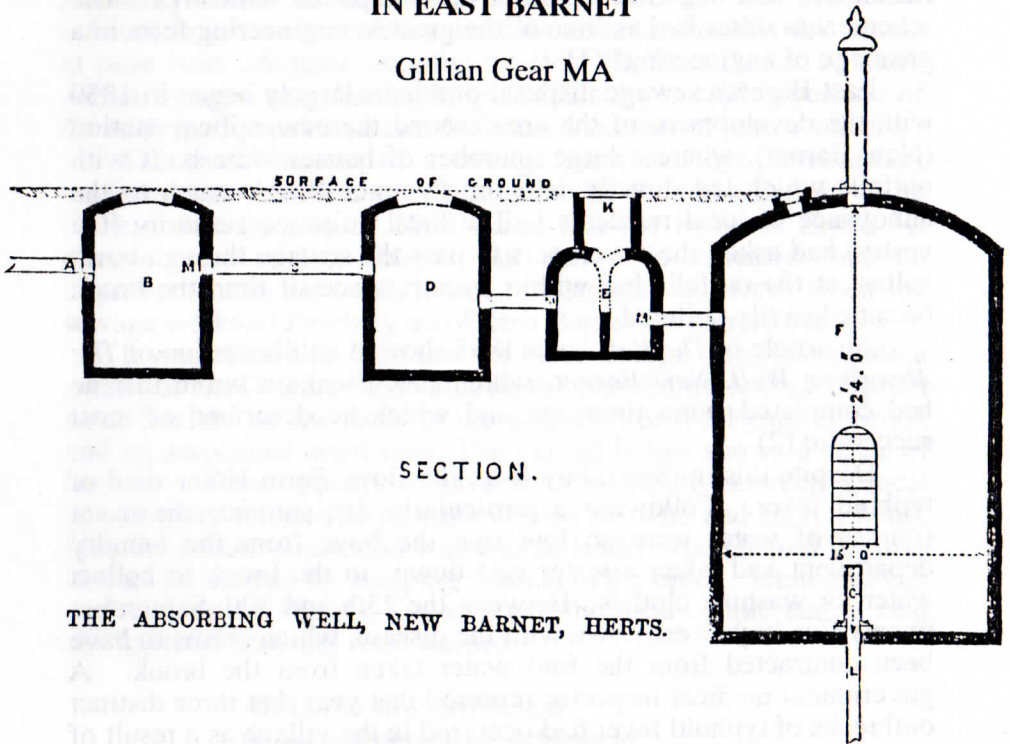


**THE VICTORIANS ANSWER TO "NUISANCE DISPOSAL"
IN EAST BARNET**

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THE ABSORBING WELL, NEW BARNET, HERTS.

The mid-Victorians were faced with a problem largely ignored by their predecessors; that of effective sewage disposal. The earliest drainage systems had made use of natural watercourses and ditches for surface water and cesspools for sewage.

In the countryside there were few difficulties but as cities and towns grew the problems of overcrowding exacerbated the situation.

In cities some measures were taken to dispose of surface water through the use of open brick sewers which connected up with natural watercourses and many of these became mainly enclosed and underground by the beginning of the 19th Century. Until 1815 it had been forbidden to discharge "offensive matter" into them.

The introduction of the WC meant a greatly increased volume of water to dispose of and at the same time the Victorians became aware of the connection between disease and the lack of safe disposal methods.

In London a scheme designed by the engineer Joseph Bazalgette was begun in 1856 but not completed until 1875. The scheme was described as "one of the greatest engineering feats in a great age of engineering".(1)

East Barnet's sewage disposal problems largely began in 1850 with the development of the area around the new railway station (New Barnet), where a large number of houses were built with outfalls which led directly into the Pymmes Brook much to the annoyance of local residents. The local nuisance authority (the vestry) had asked the developers to pass the sewage through burnt ballast at the outfalls but within a short space of time the brook became heavily polluted.

An article in *The Builder* in 1865 showed an illustration of *The Absorbing Well, New Barnet*, which Jno. Blenkarn wrote that he had completed some time ago and which he described as most successful.(2)

Despite this in 1868 a boy from the Boys' Farm Home died of typhoid fever. Following a particularly dry summer the usual sources of water were so low that the boys from the laundry department had taken a water cart down to the brook to collect water for washing clothes. Between the 25th and 30th September twenty five boys went down with the disease, which seems to have been contracted from the foul water taken from the brook. A government medical inspector reported that year that three distinct outbreaks of typhoid fever had occurred in the village as a result of the foul state of the Pymmes Brook.

To conform with the Sanitary Acts of 1866 the East Barnet vestry had appointed a sewage committee to look into the question of obtaining an effective system. The committee had ten members and included the rector, the Rev. C.E. Hadow, the overseer Mr. H. Balfour, the church warden Mr. C. Baxton, a local builder Mr. Samuel Walton and and a farmer Mr. W. Hodson. Over the next few years there seems to have been much discussion but little action.

In 1867 Mr. J.W. Bazalgette carried out a survey for the draining of sewage of towns and villages in the Lee Valley and the East Barnet sewerage authority paid £26.5.11d. towards its cost. However it proved impossible to get all the local authorities

concerned to agree to work together.

In February 1869 a government inquiry was held at the Alexandra Hotel in New Barnet and the inspector reported:-

The village of East Barnet still retains its original rural character but round the Barnet station of the Great Northern Railway a suburban town is rapidly springing up The area of East Barnet is about 1,700 acres, its population which was 850 in 1861 is now estimated at 3,000 and new houses are being built at the rate of 100 per annum. Considerable attention has been paid to the construction of main sewers by the various ground landlords but none whatever to the sewage outfalls all these being carried into Pymmes Brook which happens to run through the parish most conveniently for that purpose.

The Pymmes Brook receives some of its contents from a portion of Chipping Barnet Parish but the greatest amount from the district around the new station. Then it flows through the old village where it receives sewage and thence through open land belonging to handsome residential mansions and grounds til it reaches the parish of Edmonton where it falls into the river Lea.3)

He suggested that an interception sewer be laid from Chipping Barnet to the west and to Edmonton to the east which would keep the sewage out of the brook and carry it on for irrigation treatment in Edmonton. This needed the co-operation of four districts, which did not materialise.

In November 1869 the vestry gave notice of itsr intention to compulsorily purchase about 50 acres of land which formed part of the Great Northern Cemetery, 18 acres belonging to the executors of the late H.L. Long, Esq and 20 acres belonging to the executors of the late William John Thomson, Esq. which adjoined the cemetery on the other side of the brook. It also gave notice of their intention to compulsorily purchase 40 acres of land in the parish of Monken Hadley knowns as Folly Farm. The land was to be used for building sewers, drains and "other necessary and incidental works and conveniences".(4)

An outcry erupted from local residents, mainly led by Mr. Hodson, who were alarmed at the cost. A placard was put up in the village suggesting the committee were going to spend £30,000 and that the rates would be seven or eight shillings in the pound but this was denied. A public meeting was held at the Warwick

public house, chaired by Mr. Hodson, when he spoke of the illegality of the Sanitary Committee and it was resolved to try to dissolve that committee. A vote was taken at a meeting on the 18th December when the rector Mr. Hadow was in the chair and whilst 80 people voted to dissolve the committee, 138 voted against the motion.

On 3rd July 1869 the parish had been served with a notice to stop the discharge of "offensive matter" into the Pymmes Brook within thirteen calendar months so it was becoming increasingly urgent that some action be taken. In October the committee advertised for a sanitary inspector at a salary of £30 per annum and in February 1870 one was appointed and was ready to receive complaints about faulty drainage. After even more discussion on the merits of different systems it was decided to adopt the irrigation system and two sewers were to be laid on different levels running down roads whenever possible.

This did not please some of the residents and led mainly by Mr. Hodson a campaign to stop the proposals continued. At a vestry meeting on 30 September 1870 a motion was passed asking the overseers to stop the sanitary committee spending parish money. On the 6th October the sanitary committee met to discuss the non-payment of their account to the overseers for the committee's expenses and they put the matter in the hands of their solicitor Mr. Parker. The matter went to the Barnet Magistrates Court where it was ruled that the account had to be paid.

A government loan for £16,497 was agreed in March 1871, repayable in 30 years and at last the East Barnet sewage farm could go ahead.

A farm bailiff was appointed in the autumn of 1872 at a weekly wage of £1.5.0d. He was to keep accounts, a labour book and report book. During the previous five weeks two men had been employed in planting 20,000 cabbages, cutting down the hedge on the south of the land and clearing and keeping clear the watercourses.

Plans were submitted in January 1873 to the committee by the engineers, Lawson and Masergh. A critic of the scheme was a Mr. Metcalfe who ran a hydropathic establishment in New Barnet, which gave hot and cold water treatments. He commented on the two sewers that had already been laid that these were to work on the principle of gravitation which he thought would fail for sewage. This proved to be the case for in February 1873 the sewer was blocked.

In June 1873 four new members joined the sanitary committee and included Mr. Hodson and Mr. Metcalfe as well as a Mr. Hopkins and a Mr. Pratt. Mr. Hodson immediately put in a claim for damage to his crops for £10 which was allowed.

The Barnet Board of Guardians took over responsibility for sanitary arrangements for a short time until 1874 when the East Barnet Rural Sanitary Authority was formed. The Board of Guardians appointed a parochial committee of nine local residents.

The Local Board report book showed that in 1877 a cottage was built for the farm bailiff at a cost of £496, followed in 1878 by two cottages for farm workers. Three or four men seem to have been employed at this time as well as a boy. A team of horses worked on the farm and the horse driver received 15/- a week. The horse-keeper received £1.1.0d. in 1888. Two watermen looked after the sewage and when they had to clean out the drains and sewers they were allowed an extra 6d. a day.(5)

Tenders were invited on 3 July 1877 for carriers on the farm and for straightening the brook. This latter alteration caused problems on several occasions as in 1879 and 1881 when a land slip occurred and the banks of the brook had to be strengthened. Mr. Denton's tender for straightening the brook and Mr. J. McKenzies' for the carriers were accepted. The farm had a gravel pit and the gravel was used by the Boards on local roads. In 1883 it was used to build a granary on the farm. Crops from the farm were sold at Barnet Market and included oats, tares and cabbages.

In 1882 when there were problems of flooding the sewers were described as follows:-

The sewage of New Barnet is collected by stoneware drain pipes varying from 9 to 18 inches in diameter and conveyed by gravitation into the main or high level sewer at a point in Crescent Road. The high level sewer is egg-shaped in form 2'6" internal dimensions and is built of half brick in cement. Total length of 1 mile 7 furlongs 50 yards and has a fall or gradient of only 1 in 1760...

(East Barnet) The sewage is conducted by an 18" stoneware pipe (low level sewer) to the farm a length of 1 mile 2 furlongs and 20 yards with a fall of 1 in 1760. It takes a course southward from Cat Bridge nearly parallel to but at a lower level than the high level sewer with which it has no connection.(6)

There continued to be difficulties with the sewer in Crescent Road when after anything more than a light shower meant the sewer surcharged bringing up sewage. This rose above the ventilating grates in Crescent Road between St. Wilfrid's Road and Brookhill Road and flowed into the roadway. A connection was made between the two sewers near the Cat Inn in June 1885 to alleviate this problem.

In 1901 contact beds were added and in 1910 these were converted into six percolating filters. Two filters were built in 1912 and a further one added in 1929 and yet another in 1930. A pumping station with two reciprocating pumps driven by gas engines to pump the sewage from the waterfall area, was erected on the site in 1906, and controlled by electrically driven pumps, for the sewage from the Everleigh estate, in 1934.

There were three accidents reported in the records, which reflect the changing attitudes towards employees. The first accident was in September 1885 when Alfred Brown of Southgate fell nine feet onto his head whilst working on the new works and sprained his neck. He was paid half wages until the next meeting.

A second accident occurred in June 1883 when George Seaton was helping another man with drawing Number 1 Upper Settling Tank and fell in. When he was got out he was found to be dead. The farm manager reported that he, of course, had no idea that the man was subject to fits and that it was as a result of a fit that he had fallen and drowned. His body was taken to the Cat Inn where the coroner held an inquest the following day and recorded the death as accidental. The farm manager reported that the fellow had left his family in difficult circumstances and suggested that the widow be given one week's pay.

However in 1918 when a farm worker cut his face with an axe while cutting willows at the farm he was paid three weeks pay in full while off sick and his doctors bill was also paid.

During its 66 years of existence the sewage farm seems to have run successfully agriculturally. A wide range of crops was produced and horses were used right up to the 1930s. The crops were auctioned locally but did not seem to bring in sufficient profit to make the farm self-financing as had been hoped in the early stages. The estimated cost for the six months from 5th October 1906 was just over £400 whilst the estimated income was a little over £258.

In the 1930s almost the whole of the open land of East Barnet was developed for housing and this put an intolerable strain on the sewerage system built to cope with a population of under 4,000.

The local council installed a completely modernised system of sewage disposal and the sewage farm as such ceased to exist by 1938. The new aeration system cost £62,000 and once again there was local criticism regarding the amount of money spent.

The amount of land bought by the East Barnet Sanitary Authority seems to have been 51 acres and not the 110 acres referred to in the compulsory purchase order and whilst this seems to have been adequate initially, by 1904 the East Barnet Sanitary Authority were complaining of their difficulty in coping because of the increased population and the limited amount of land available.

The establishment of a sewage farm had not immediately eradicated the problem of pollution of the Pymmes Brook. The Government Enquiry of 1886 stated that the Pymmes Brook "is always more or less foul ... but that it is expected that an improvement in the condition of this stream will occur when the sewage works of Finchley and Friern Barnet are carried out".(7)

It was about this time that the Rev. George Bamfield wrote a parody of The Defeat of Hiawatha for the New Barnet Mutual Improvement Society on the topic of the pollution of the Pymmes Brook and an associated court case. The extract below shows a sense of humour. There appears to have been a dispute between a local householder referred to as Tale-er-oke-so who had built a house near the brook. Hiawatha was a local leader who cleared the area around the houses by dumping rubbish in the brook. Hiawatha was defeated by the Bigwig Kewsees and the local people had to bear the financial loss and were warned:-

*Hiawatha saw defilement
Gross pollution and defilement
Heaped together round their wigwams
Multiplying and increasing
Year by year still growing stronger
Bones of Bison - skins of rabbit
Tails of herrings - Oka-hah-wis
Slops of kettles from the wigwams
Filth unspeakable and deadly
Nurse of illness and of fever
Heap'd like hills about the village
And he cried "I'll clear this horror
Cleanse the earth of this pollution
Empty all in Pymsey-ho-ho
All the heap within the Brooklet.*

*Dreadful is a smoky wigwam
Terrible a Scolding Squaw
But far worse than smoke or scolder
Is it, if you go to law
You may stand the charge of soldiers
Sweeping on in serried band;
But the charges of the Lawyers
Oh! my children! Who shall stand!(8)*

Footnotes:-

- (1) L.C.C Centenary of London's Drainage (London) 1955 p.7
- (2) See front cover
- (3) PRO MH 13/216
- (4) Ibid.
- (5) E.B.V.L.B. Report Book 19.6.1877 & 12.2.1878
- (6) Ibid. 29.9.1882
- (7) 1886 Select Cttee on Rivers Pollution (River Lea) 795-809
- (8) Records of the New Barnet Literary & Debating Society

This bulletin is based on a Thesis presented for the University of London Diploma in Local History in 1982 and available at the Barnet Museum.