

The Stinkpipes of South Newnham



History: The Great Stink of 1858, when it reached the olfactory lobes of the Members of Parliament sitting in the House of Common, precipitated the decision that something must be done about London's miasma. It was thus that the leading Victorian engineer Joseph Bazalgette was brought in to build a proper sewerage system to contain and take the waste away from London. Sir Goldworthy Gurney for his part devised a series of stinkpipes to follow the route of the main sewers. They had to be *typically: 6 inch /150 mm diameter; 20-25 feet / 6-8 metres tall*¹, tall enough for the wind to disperse stray-gases above and away from the noses of the Victorians. As one website author describes it, "the gases they [the stink pipes] ventilate is a delightful cocktail that includes methane, hydrogen sulphide and ammonia – all flammable, all smelly".²

Recently in London, when it transpired that neither Lambeth Council nor Thames Water knew the whereabouts of the 158 stinkpipes in their area, Clapham Historical Society decided in 2006 to help the 'hard-pressed' authorities by running a light-hearted Easter Hunt of 'Spot the Stench Pipe'. It would appear that by default stench or stink pipes are still in operation, but often not well maintained or even neglected.

Cambridge has its stinkpipes, too, and these remarkable relics of that era of innovative engineering and evolving hygiene standards are still operational. Maintained by Anglian Water, who make sure from time to time no birds have built their nest in the crown, the stinkpipes continue to fulfil their function of venting the sewers of Cambridge.³ Anglian Water, too, are rather 'hard-pressed' when it comes to frequency of maintaining the paintwork of all their Victorian legacy!

South Newnham sports at least four cast iron stinkpipes which, though rather rusty now, were probably in pale green. They share the same style crown and three have fluted bases. One would suppose they were put in as part of the same installation project.

¹ Greenwich Industrial History Society

² 'Do you know what a stinkpipe is?' By Laurie Winkless in Londonist

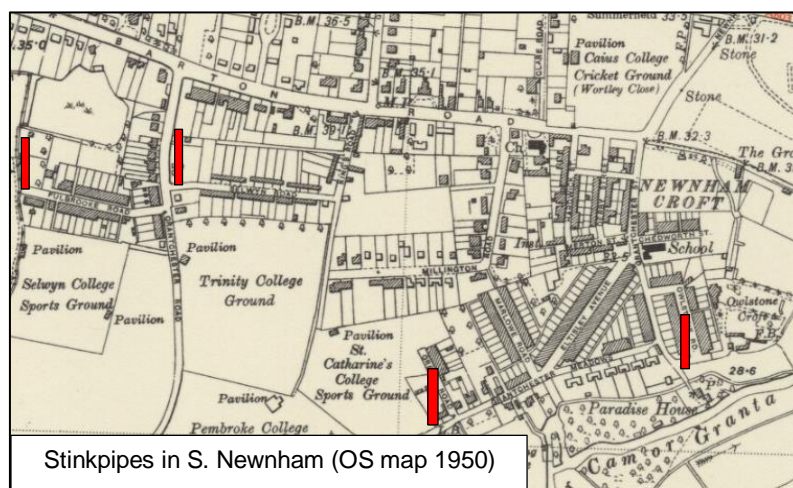
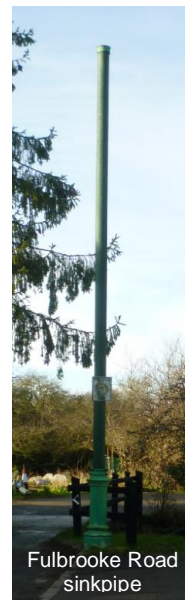
³ Information supplied by Anglian Water

1. One is located on the left corner of the drive leading to one of the oldest houses in Newnham, Paradise House. This site is one of the last remaining picturesque corners of the Croft and marks where Gravel Pit Lane passed, as Grantchester Street was originally called.
2. A second is situated where the last house of Cambridge stands before the beginning of the Grantchester Meadows walk. It is just within the perimeter of 117 Grantchester Meadows which is in the ownership of St Catharine's College. This pipe is not in such good repair, having lost parts of its crown. As far as can be seen behind the ivy masking it, it seems to be of the same kind as the others.
3. A third is near in Selwyn Road, near the junction with Grantchester Road. This is not wrapped in vegetation and can therefore be surveyed in its full length. It seems identical with the one near Paradise House and bears the embossed name of the firm who made it: 'Ham Baker & Co United Engineers, Westminster'.
4. A fourth stands at the westernmost end of Fulbrooke Road.



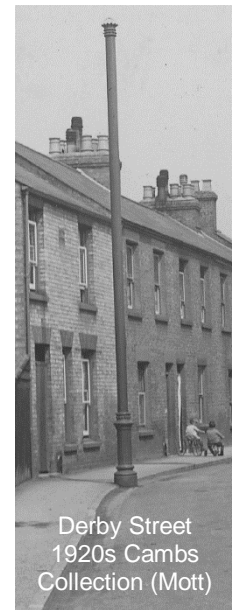
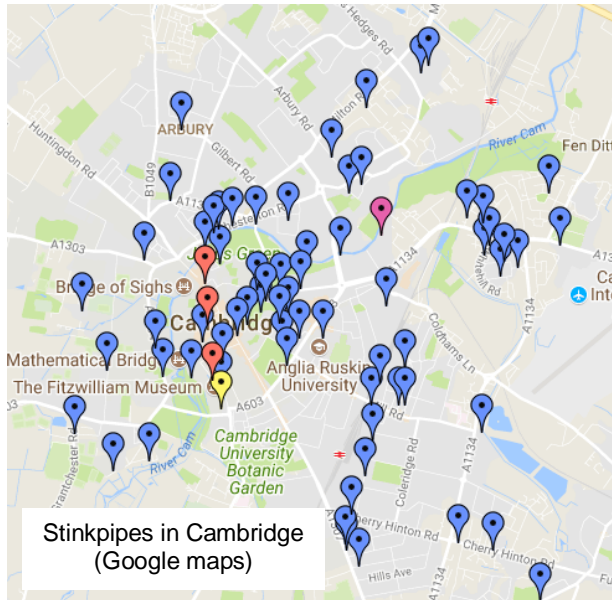
Archaeological and Industrial Significance:

Unlike our present age in which 'design' all too often means functionality at the expense appearance, Victorian design meant engineering prowess allied with aesthetic concern, something we observe in the careful mouldings and fluted bases. The pipes were often painted grey or pale green, sometimes black. We learn important lessons from this: stinkpipes were built to last on the one hand and on the other to grace the streetscape. Besides these considerations, the effluent pipes of this period also connect us with the history of technology, an enduring technology some of which has not yet found a replacement.



Conclusion: The stinkpipes of Newnham should be considered heritage assets and as such care should be taken to maintain them in good condition. The choices are three: to refurbish them - which in two cases would mean losing the romantic ivy which clings to them, to leave them as they are, or to engage in judicious conservation which preserves some of nature's invasion; certainly we should resist any attempts to remove them. Let us rejoice that they are still functional. Those that are fully exposed should surely be repainted, probably in pale green which would have been the colour of choice and blends well with the street scene.

Note: Other stinkpipes appear in old photos: A photograph of Derby Street taken in the 1920s⁴ has a stink pipe clearly visible at the point where Lambert the Builder's fencing ends and the terrace starts. The fencing is still there, but the pipe is not. Today there is an ugly modern zinc lamp-post instead near where it used to stand.



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On behalf of South Newnham Neighbourhood Forum,
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(photos by T. Elliott except where indicated)

⁴ Cambridgeshire Collection (Cambridge City Library)