Unit focus: Industrial Revolution
Text focus: Information Text (1020L)

STAGE 6

The Great Stink

The year was 1858 and London was baking. An unusually hot summer had dried out much of the River Thames. Unfortunately, this happened at the same time as the ageing sewers were still pumping all of the city's waste into the river. Only now it wasn't flowing fast enough to take it away. The tremendous amounts of effluent discharged from the factories that had sprouted up during the Industrial Revolution only made the problem worse.

Back then, people thought that diseases were caused by miasma - a type of bad air. As the sewage and factory waste began to heat up and rot, it started to smell. Even then, people didn't realise that it was the cause of diseases in the city. There were three outbreaks of cholera (an often fatal illness caused by bacteria in the water) before people started to realise that the waste in the Thames may be to blame. The hot summer and stagnant river had made it a perfect home for the bacteria.

It wasn't until the smell grew so bad that the Houses of Parliament curtains had to be coated in lime to mask the odour and people refused to leave their homes, that plans were made to solve the problem. In fact, the issue had been around for a long time.

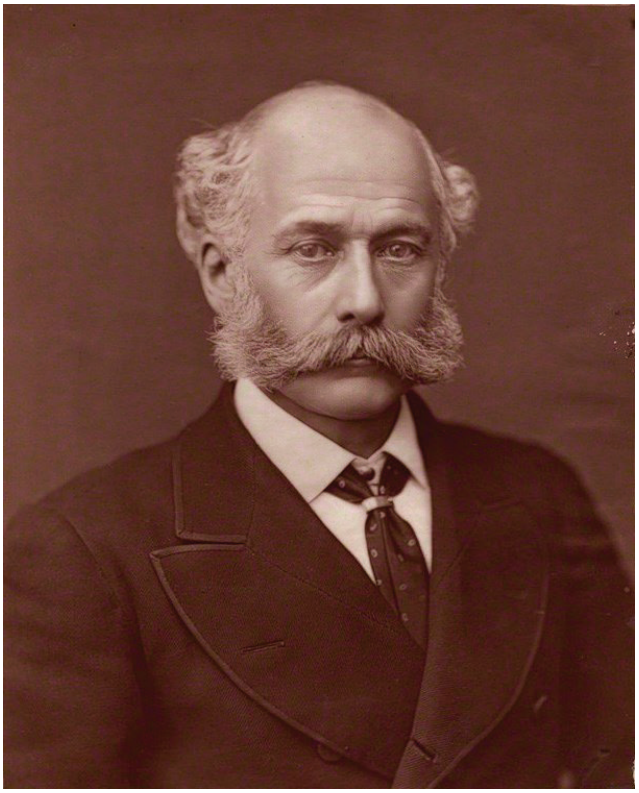
London had been using the Thames as a dumping ground as well as its main source of water for hundreds of years. As far back as the 1600s, people realised that this was a bad idea, but they had no idea what to do about it. Instead, they just carried on as they always had. The Great Stink finally gave them the impetus they needed to take action.

One of the first ideas was simply to move the Houses of Parliament so that the government didn't have to put up with the stench. Obviously, other members of the public were less keen on this solution.

It took a civil engineer named Joseph Bazalgette (his surname is pronounced Bazel-jet) to come up with a solution that worked. Up until then, all of the waste was dumped onto the shores of the river. It relied on the tides to wash it away. Part of his plan was to create new embankments where the sewers could dump the waste into the deeper parts of the river.

As well as this, Bazalgette designed an entirely new sewer system. This included pumping stations to lift waste from lower areas into the main system. He also arranged areas to dump the waste that were beyond the limits of the main city's water sources. Perhaps even more impressive was the fact that he understood how much London was still set to grow, and he designed a system that could handle that much waste.

In fact, Bazalgette's sewers were so well designed that they still handle most of London's sewage today. Cholera outbreaks stopped in the city of London, and he is thought to have saved more lives than any other Victorian official.



Joseph Bazalgette

INFERENCE FOCUS

1. Why were members of the public less keen on simply moving the houses of parliament?
2. Why did factories make the problem worse?
3. Why was cholera made worse by the situation?
4. Why was dumping waste onto the shores of the river a bad idea in the summer of 1858?
5. Why was it impressive that Bazalgette made the sewers so big?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

R	In which year was the Great Stink?
V	Find a word that means waste was pumped out of factories.
S	Why was the Thames a source of disease?
R	What did they try to coat the curtains in parliament with?
V	Find a word that has a definition closest to "the energy to do something".

Answers:

1. It wouldn't solve the problem for them
2. They released a lot of waste into the river as well
3. The stagnant water and hot weather made it spread quicker
4. The hot weather meant the river was lower so the waste wasn't washed away
5. He predicted that London would grow and his system still works today

R: 1858

V: Discharged

S: It was used as a dumping ground as well as a water source

R: Lime

V: Impetus