

Dick Whittington and the Sixty-Four Holer

Good evening, Lord Mayor (etc) Ladies and Gentlemen. My name is Carolyn Roberts and I am an environmental consultant, Professor Emerita of Environment at Gresham College here in the City, and Walbrook Warden of the Worshipful Company of Water Conservators, a title that is not without relevance to my talk today as we will hear shortly. I am not a historian, but a specialist in human impact on the natural environment, and specifically the water environment. I do dabble in a bit of history and some of you may have heard and seen my Gresham College lecture on the Natural Environment of Tudor London: Walking in the Footsteps of Thomas Gresham. However although we are now going to look even further back in time, to the fifteenth century, I am going to address a topic that is as relevant today as it was then.... How do we deal with, or not deal with, our bodily wastes? And I mean in a physical sense, but also administratively.

This is, of course, moving from the sublime to the ridiculous after Professor Barron's erudite lecture. But please permit me a little leeway with lavatorial humour – I might say 'bare with me', but I won't.

Medieval London was a pretty dirty place. In the face of a growing population (notwithstanding the Black Death around 1350, when maybe half the population had died), hundreds of traders and other visitors, traffic and horses, noise, bustle and woodsmoke, and a long history of people and animals relieving themselves almost where they happened to be, Richard Whittington decided to make a contribution to the wellbeing of London's citizens. He agreed to pay for the erection of a substantial privy, often referred to as a 'longhouse'. That must have been quite a relief for the many residents who had no recourse to any systematic form of sanitation

within a reasonable distance, and given the incidence of poor food and the consequent digestive troubles that likely ensued, was certain to have been very much welcomed. Today we would find the alternatives almost unthinkable, but of course modern sensibilities would not have been as easy to accommodate six hundred years ago.

By 1400, London was a city of some 40,000 people, mainly living and working in the Square Mile, more or less the area inside the old Roman wall. That's about 64m² each – a person every eight metres in all directions. Actual living space was much less, if you take out the streets, churches and commercial buildings, and the gardens of which there were quite a few. The population density was actually similar to Tower Hamlets today, but of course without the high rise. And it was damaged or recycled ground that had already been built upon several times before – by the Celts, the Romans and the Anglo-Saxons. London had been repeatedly burned to the ground, usually but not always by accident. The ground would have been full of old foundations - bricks, rotten wood and tree roots, bits of pipe and tiles, and other rubbish including animal bones, shreds of cloth and leather, decaying rushes from the floors of houses, rotting human bodies in churchyards, and holes. Wild ridge-back pigs and kites scavenged around, but not too effectively despite the fact that kites were a protected species because of their cleaning activities. When the King of Bohemia's brother-in-law, Baron Leo von Rozmital visited London in 1465, his secretary Schaschek noted in his diary that he had never seen so many kites as on London Bridge, and noted that it was a capital offence to kill them. Kites are not particular about what they eat.

Onto that mess, wooden or wattle and daub houses, and some of stone, had been built largely without sanitation.

So, what did people do? Well, the better off used a pot or a 'close stool' which was emptied, periodically by one's servant or wife, into a local watercourse or a cess pool, or just out of the window; street

paving was uncommon. There were quite a few of those cess pools, where liquid seeped into the disturbed ground and no doubt imparted a distinctive tang to the local drinking water. That situation persisted as late as 1815, when cesspools finally became illegal. Some houses had cesspools built into their cellars, waterproofed pits that had to be emptied periodically and which, in the event of a structural fault, not uncommon given the disturbed ground under houses, must have given the neighbours a nasty surprise. Some more substantial houses had a 'drop' constructed adjacent to the chimney, and sometimes a pipe, legal or illegal, that took liquids away from the house. There were prosecutions by the City – inappropriate connection was a crime. The Walbrook, and the Fleet or Holebourne River, were already open sewers by then, although the Fleet was actually navigable up to Holborn Bridge. And mosquitoes and malaria were commonplace. Cleaning these makeshift facilities was a dangerous but well-paid job done by individuals for householders, until it was fully commercialised and waste was taken downstream; the King had objected to the state of the river as he passed downstream from Westminster to the Tower so the City took it over.

Poorer sorts just relieved themselves in the street or took themselves to areas of open ground, notably outside Guildhall. Others went to specific places. A school rule of Merchant Taylors' school, established in 1561 in Suffolk Lane, specified that 'unto their urine the scholars shall go to the places appointed them in the lane or street without the court' while 'for other causes, if need be, they shall go to the waterside'. That was more than a century later, but by the fifteenth Century there were a dozen public facilities in different places, usually 'watersides' – including over the Fleet at Ludgate, known because Christ's Hospital took in a child 'born in the jaques' at the Fleet Bridge.

Those public latrines built on watersides were likely to have been what we would recognise today as 'long drops'. They were often rotten, dangerous, unlit, and subject to collapse. There were several instances of privies balanced over streams where boats mooring tied themselves to the piles in the river, and caused upset to the users of the facilities as the tide rushed out and pulled away the structure. No doubt they would have added significantly to the local aromas. People would likely have queued, or perhaps not. Clearly there was a huge unmet need, for example of women. Sanitation was a civic concern, but the required technology was too overwhelming and the City was not really doing its bit.

Along comes Dick Whittington, a Gloucestershire boy, and a London man. Relatively well-off, a man of influence whose money came from wheeling and dealing in fabric and other things including moneylending. You might think of him as the Del Boy (Only Fools and Horses) of his time, keeping his money in liquid form, rather than property. It must have been quite a shock to move from rural Gloucestershire to crowded and insanitary London and in later life he was clearly interested in water and the environment. Not only did he bequeath money for public water fountains in St Giles Courtyard and north of the Church of St Botolph, and some almshouses, but some public facilities were established prior to his death in 1423. He previously campaigned against illegal fishing in the Thames, and the alleged sharp practices of beersellers, both common concerns for environmentalists today in my experience. He supervised the rebuilding of part of Westminster Abbey as well. So unlike Del Boy, he must have been seen as a safe pair of hands.

Whittington decided to build a public longhouse in St Martin Vintry, to be one of his legacies. What we know about it comes mainly from documents that date to about 150 years after its foundation.

Whittington's longhouse, his 'Privie Guift' appears to have been a long narrow structure, situated on an inlet of the Thames where the

tide would wash away the waste twice a day, at least in theory. Tides then were not as high as today, as London Bridge slowed the flows. The various Quays on the North bank of the Thames had been pushed out into the river by some 90 metres between 1050 and 1300, so the structure was on reclaimed land, probably pretty marshy with an irregular embankment along the margin on the river. Looking closely at the likely location near Bell Wharf Lane, I think it was probably in and around the mouth of the Walbrook (and its tributary the Lang Bourne), which were already effectively open sewers because of all the wastes thrown into their upper courses. There is a sketch map of the location, shown in a post-Great Fire drawing by John Oliver probably dated 1667 or 8 attached to the 1671 Letters Patent to the City, but that was 150 years later. 15th Century maps of London are difficult to find, and the closest known one, Matthew Paris', dated 1390, shows next to nothing of the City's buildings other than St Paul's, Lambeth Palace, the city gates and London Bridge. The Agas Map of 1561 or thereabouts, is many years later, and again gives only a general indication of the setting prior to the Great Fire of 1666 but does show the crowded lanes. The Google Earth image in the handout shows the best estimate of where it was, close to what is now the Little Ship Club, and next door to Dowgate Dock, formerly a wharf where timber was imported and now the point where some of London's landfill is put onto barges for taking downstream. This is also where the Walbrook River oozed its filthy way into the Thames, the ground probably in reality a quagmire. It almost certainly would have served to reduce the unpleasantness of local people relieving themselves on Whittington's doorstep, of course.

We have almost no other descriptions of this facility, which was rebuilt on a much smaller scale a century later, but we do understand that it was long and narrow - a '64 holer' or actually probably closer to being a '128 holer', as Dick Whittington was

evidently a believer in gender equality, and women had their own facilities, probably with a separate entrance. This would have been the largest public convenience of its time, and possibly ever in the UK. Some people may imagine that the facility had some sort of cubicles, but this is almost impossible since looking at the dimensions, each 'hole' had only about 60 cm of width space. So, this would likely have been a communal experience. Many of you may be imagining it to be like the Roman facilities, with a horizontal plank or stone shelf, with a row of holes. However, there are other possibilities, such as is illustrated in the 1559 painting by Pieter Breughel the Elder; its title is 'Netherlandish Proverbs', and the extract shows the proverb 'they *** through the same hole'. It's on your handout. It probably was not an unmitigated pleasure to use the Longhouse. You may note the eagerly waiting fish in the river below. Whatever its configuration, the longhouse was probably not a place to hang around for a conversation.

We do nevertheless believe, by virtue of a legal case in 1690, that the Longhouse was intended to be lit at night, and that Whittington money was left to cover the expense of that. This would have made it less dangerous, potential collapse of its wooden piers notwithstanding. Perhaps inevitably, the City became lazy about paying for this lighting after a while. And the Longhouse had, unusually, five or six almshouses above it – hence it was a two storey structure. Later on, the sensibilities of the authorities seem to have kicked in and they decided that having almshouses above it, might not be the best option. One wonders if these almshouses were ever popular residences?

The seventeenth century legal case was occasioned because a pair of dyers, the Peck brothers, had effectively locked the doors to the Longhouse and built around it, preventing tidal access for some form of cleansing, hence causing annoyance to the locals, as well as reducing their opportunities for a modicum of privacy. Evidently they

prayed for some relief from the situation. The Court of Aldermen was sent to investigate (they were evidently not themselves users of the Longhouse) and also found that the stink of the Longhouse was not able to be dispersed because it was no longer properly open to the air. George Peck was required to make good the problems, but disputes about the required investment to avoid nuisance evidently continued with the City and with the Ward, for centuries.

There were also several more complete rebuildings, albeit at a smaller scale and style, but the site continued as a public convenience, probably until the early 20th century. That is a very, very long legacy of the farsightedness of Richard Whittington.