

## Crossness – A Sewage Saga

A talk to the Eltham Society by John Ridley  
Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> November 2004

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London's sewage was the topic for John Ridley's talk and he started with a potted history of the capital's "poo".

The Romans had introduced toilets to England, but, when they left, it was 1,200 years before the next toilet was seen. London became increasingly awash with effluent for centuries and various Acts of Parliament had little effect. When the first WC was designed in 1590 only two were built, one being for Elizabeth I. As late as 1660 Samuel Pepys recorded in his diary *in going to the cellar I did put my foot in a great heap of turds, which did trouble me.*

Cesspits were used and frequently seeped or overflowed but there was also a tradition of emptying toilet waste out of an upper window with a cry of "Gardez l'Eau", from which the word "loo" may be derived.

From 1848 a Commissioner of Sewers was responsible for ensuring that all street sewers were effective but the continuous flow of such filth into the Thames, the source of London's water supply, led to outbreaks of cholera. Three million pounds, a vast sum then, was allocated by Disraeli and as a result London's saviour, Joseph Bazalgette, in 1859 created a vast new sewerage system that is still in operation today.

Sewage had to be discharged at low tide therefore Crossness Pumping Station was built to retain it for release at the right time – 480 tons of effluvia per minute. The resultant magnificent building and beam engines were "a triumph of Victorian innovation, a masterpiece of engineer, and a cathedral of ironwork" and London owes a great debt to Bazalgette's genius.



**Crossness Pumping Station designed by Joseph Bazalgette.**

Eventually modern hygienic techniques led to the closure of the Crossness station, the last run being in 1953. The buildings and engines became badly run down until in 1958 Cross Engines Trust was formed. Restoration work still continues but in 2003 Prince Charles visited the site when restoration of the beam engine 'Prince Consort' was completed, part of a magical transformation.