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The Most Disgusting Jobs in Victorian London

Henry Mayhew

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Victorian London was a dirty place. The city faced the problem of how to deal with a huge amount of human waste and horse dung, as well as other waste such as animal bones and millions of oyster shells (oysters were a cheap food at the time). A lot of waste was disposed of outside the sewerage system, for example flowing into cesspools, or being discharged directly into streets and open watercourses. Rats, bugs and other pests abounded.

However, labour was cheap and plentiful, and large numbers of people were employed in filthy jobs, ranging from cesspool emptying to sewer flushing, and from rat-catching to bug destroying.

In addition, some Victorian Londoners tried to make money by combing through waste and refuse. Sewer-hunters waded through the sewers, scouring and sieving the sewer's contents for valuable items such as jewellery; bone-grubbers searched street and house bins looking for anything from their next meal to small items which could be sold; and mud-larks tried to make a subsistence living by sifting through the noxious mud and soil in London's river banks.

The Most Disgusting Jobs in Victorian London is a record of the lives of these people.

The Most Disgusting Jobs in Victorian London is drawn from the work of Henry Mayhew, the pioneering Victorian journalist. Mayhew wrote about the lives of ordinary Londoners, focusing on street life and the poor, and gathered his journalism together under the title London Labour and the London Poor. The Most Disgusting Jobs in Victorian London contains edited versions of Mayhew's writing.

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