

Riverside: The Sewage Pumping Station at Cambridge Museum of Technology

As the population of Cambridge surged with businesses and housing, plus the University growing, there was a problem with sewage and smells in the River Cam. Not only did this cause discomfort to breathing and health problems, it also spread diseases, such as typhoid and cholera. The terrible stench and state of the river was noticed alike by poor and rich, worker and monarch. On a visit to Cambridge in 1843, Queen Victoria asked, "What are those pieces of paper floating in the river?" Rather than saying they were book and newspaper pages used as toilet paper, the tactful answer was, "Those Ma'am are notices for the students to say that bathing is forbidden!". Eglantyne Jebb was an economist and important campaigner for improved living conditions. She wrote an important policy report advocating proper piping from toilets to sewage pipes, and a sewage treatment facility, to prevent ground water contamination and promote clean water. By the end of the Victorian era, the River Cam was finally cleaned when the pumping station was built on Riverside in 1894 through which the sewage from the city was pumped out to the village of Milton, powered by steam pressure. It was closed down in 1968, but you can see the site today with the huge chimney. The Curator and volunteers maintain the steam engines, which are now on display as part of the Cambridge Museum of Technology.

