

A HISTORY OF SEETHING WELLS, SURBITON

...THE NAME, THE PLACE, ITS WATERS, THE FILTER BEDS & CHOLERA...

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INTRODUCTION

This was based on a talk given to the Surbiton & District Historical Society on 1 September 2026. It was the result of ongoing research on written sources, including books, old maps, newspaper reports and Internet material. It incorporated personal recollections accumulated over about sixty years of local residency and recent observation of changing features during walks around the area. Importantly, these included the decline of the area known as *“The Filter Beds”* which to local people had become an unofficial nature reserve. The talk was in two parts and followed a paper, *“Seeking Surbiton’s Seething Wells”* published in 2025, on www.kingstonhistoryresearch.co.uk Information that emerged during a question & answer session at the end of the talk is included. *“Waters”* refers to water from an original spring at Seething Well and water from the River Thames at Seething Wells. Please note that no claim was made that the talk was a complete definitive history of the area. Some references are on the slides and a list can be found at the end.

SEETHING WELLS: THE NAME [OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY]

- MIDDLE ENGLISH, “*SETHEN*”, APPEARANCE OF BOILING WATER
[1150-1500]
- “*SEETHING*”, APPEARANCE OF SPRING WATER FALLING INTO A POOL
[DAVIES, 1625-1693]
- “*WELL*”, OLD TERM FOR A SPRING OF WATER RISING TO THE SURFACE
OF THE EARTH AND FORMING A SMALL POOL OR FLOWING INTO A
STREAM; OR, A PLACE WHERE WATER “*WELLS UP*”
FROM THE EARTH
- “*WELL*”, MODERN USAGE, SHAFT SUNK INTO THE GROUND TO OBTAIN
UNDERGROUND WATER

PART 1. SEETHING WELLS, NAME, PLACE & WATERS

A slide showing the derivation of the name “*Seething Wells*” according to the Oxford English Dictionary. Overall, it appears to be about water and how it could be accessed, e.g., from a spring, a pool, a stream or a well. The definition at the third bullet point seems to be the most appropriate with reference to the Tithe map evidence – see Slide no. 5.

SEETHING WELLS – NAMES FOR THE PLACE

- ***“SEETHING WELL”***, JOHN AUBREY, 1718
- ***“SIDEN WELLS”***, JOHN ROQUE’S MAP OF SURREY, 1787
- ***“SEDEN WELLS”***, KINGSTON LAND TAX RECORDS, 1828
- ***“SOOTHING WELLS”***, WYLD’S RAILWAY GUIDE, 1839
- ***“SEETHING WELLS”***, CENSUS, 1841
- ***“SEETHING WELLS”***, ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS, 1852, BIDEN, 1852, HALL & HALL, 1859...2026

SEETHING WELLS – NAMES FOR THE PLACE

The slide lays out different names for the same place from 1718-2026. The name “Seething Wells” appears to have been established from 1841. “Soothing Wells” will be considered later.



SIDEN WELLS, FROM JOHN ROQUE'S
MAP OF SURREY, 1787



SIDEN MEWS, BRIGHTON ROAD, SURBITON, JULY 2026

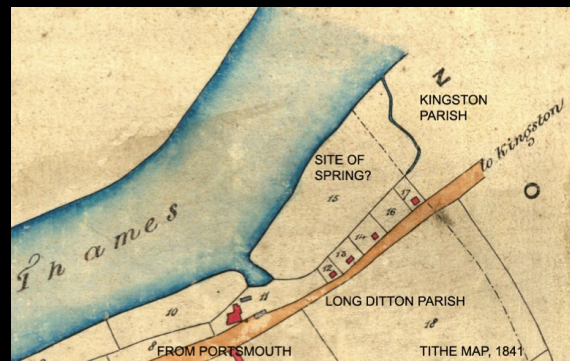
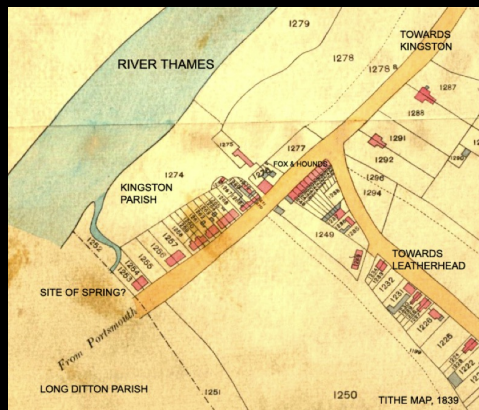
“SIDEN WELLS” BETWEEN “DITTON” & “SURBETON”

SIDEN WELLS

The slide includes an extract from John Roque's Map of Surrey, 1787. Here *“Siden Wells”* appears to be a rural area between *“Ditton”* [Long Ditton] and *“Surbeton”* [Surbiton]. It is assumed that the modern housing development in Brighton Road, Surbiton, is called *“Sidon Mews”* with reference to Roque's Map of 1787.

SEETHING WELLS – THE PLACE, RICHARDSON, 1888

“...1848...Lambeth Water Co...survey...spring in Ditton...with a small stream running down to the river...called The Seething Well...”



ROWLEY W. C. RICHARDSON, 1888, *SURBITON. THIRTY-TWO YEARS OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT*

SEETHING WELLS – THE PLACE

According to Richardson, 1888, the original “*Seething Well*” spring was marked on a plan of the area surveyed by The Lambeth Water Company in 1848. He located the spring at “*Ditton*” [Long Ditton] and from it a small stream ran down to the River Thames. Later, the area became part of the Lambeth Waterworks. Sections of Tithe maps of Long Ditton and Kingston Parishes of around 1840 show the area and the slide gives the reference.

SEETHING WELLS – THE PLACE



25 IN/MILE, OS, 1898

GEORGE WILLIAM AYLIFFE,
1914, *OLD KINGSTON.*
RECOLLECTIONS OF AN
OCTOGENARIAN

"...at the end of the old Fox and Hounds stood a very old ivy-covered well house which contained the original well and spring which became so famous as Seething Wells..."

SEETHING WELLS – THE PLACE

According to George Ayliffe, 1914, the original well and spring which became Seething Wells was at the end of the old Fox & Hounds pub. The slide gives the reference. It has a section of an OS map of 1898 which shows a well on the waterworks reservoir site opposite the junction of Portsmouth Road with Brighton Road. However, it is close to what was *The Globe* pub, while the present *Fox & Hounds*, is at the end of the junction of Westfield Road with Portsmouth Road.* Perhaps Ayliffe's memory had failed him. He was born in 1825, was aged 89 in 1914 and had moved to Surbiton by 1870.* Is he recalling an observation before the waterworks were established, say by 1858, or when they were in use? He does not provide a date for his observation and it should be treated with caution. Rowley Richardson's account is to be preferred.

• Richard Holmes, 2010, *Pubs, Inns & Taverns of Kingston*, Wildhern Press

** David A Kennedy, 2004, *History of Prisons in Kingston upon Thames*.
Part 1, *The Stockhouse and Debtors' Prison*, published privately.

SEETHING WELLS – THE PLACE, AYLIFFE, 1914



JULY, 2026

“...at the end of the old Fox and Hounds stood a very old ivy-covered well house which contained the original well and spring which became so famous as Seething Wells...”

SEETHING WELLS – THE PLACE

However, with reference to the previous slide, it is difficult to dismiss the idea that what appears to be a well head, photographed in July 2026 on the Filter Beds site, is on the site of the structure to which Ayliffe referred. Richard Holmes says that the earliest *Fox & Hounds*, “pre-1828 to post 1840”, was on the other side of the present building at 60 Portsmouth Road [KT6 4HS]. More research is needed to investigate this.

SEETHING WELLS – THE SPRING WATER

- AUBREY, 1718, ...*COLD IN SUMMER & WARM IN WINTER...INHABITANTS WASH THEIR EYES WITH IT AND DRINK OF IT...*
- WYLD'S RAILWAY GUIDE, 1839...*THE MEDICINAL SPRING AT SOOTHING WELLS ...ONE OF THE EARLIEST SPRINGS IN VOGUE OF THE NUMBER IN THE LONDON BASIN...*
- BIDEN, 1852 [RICHARDSON, 1888]...*A SPRING OF WARM WATER ONCE IN GREAT REPUTE...ONCE THOUGHT TO BE AN ALMOST INFALLIBLE IN CERTAIN CASES OF OPHTHALMIA...*
- HALL & HALL, 1859...*HOT SPRING...AN ALMOST INFALLIBLE REMEDY IN CERTAIN CASES OF OPHTHALMIA...*
- WALFORD, 1898...*THE HOT SPRING AT SEETHING WELLS... AN INVALUABLE REMEDY IN CERTAIN CASES OF OPHTHALMIA...HOPED THE DAY WOULD COME WHEN THE WATERS..BE PROVED AS HEALING AS THOSE OF THE MORE DISTANT GERMAN OR BELGIAN SPAS...*
 - AYLIFFE, 1914...*THE ORIGINAL WELL AND SPRING WHICH BECAME SO FAMOUS AS SEETHING WELLS...*
 - BUTTERS, 2013...*A SPA AT SEETHING WELLS...*

SEETHING WELLS – THE SPRING WATER

The references in this slide raise three basic questions:

1. Was the water really cold in the summer and warm in the winter?
2. Was it really an almost infallible remedy in certain cases of opthalmia?
3. Was Seething Wells ever a spa, like the established spas in England, Germany and Belgian?

These questions are addressed in the next slide.

SEETHING WELLS SPRING WATER – QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

- QUESTION 1: WAS IT “HOT” OR “COLD IN SUMMER & WARM IN WINTER” ?
- ANSWER: ON BASIS OF GEOLOGY – NO, MORE LIKELY THAT IT WAS A CONSTANT TEMPERATURE ALL YEAR ROUND.

- QUESTION 2: WAS IT AN INVALUABLE REMEDY FOR CERTAIN CASES OF OPHTHALMIA?
- ANSWER: IF OPHTHALMIA MEANS CONJUNCTIVITIS, YES, BATHING THE EYES IN PURE SPRING WATER COULD BRING RELIEF.

- QUESTION 3: WAS SEETHING WELLS EVER A SPA?
- ANSWER: NO EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT THIS.

SPRING WATER QUESTIONS

1. Seething Wells was not a thermal region, e.g., Bath in Somerset. More likely the water was at constant temperature all year round, as is the Coombe Conduit spring water.*

2. If “*ophthalmia*” means ordinary conjunctivitis, bathing eyes in pure spring water could bring relief.**

3. There is no evidence that Seething Wells ever was a spa. We are probably dealing with wishful thinking here, especially by Wyld, who wished promote railway travel, and Walford, who possibly wished to encourage health tourism in England.** It is difficult to dismiss the idea that Wyld called the area “*Soothing Wells*” to encourage belief in its water’s medicinal properties.

*A virtual tour of Coombe Conduit, 2020,
www.kingstonhistoryresearch.co.uk

**Seeking Surbiton’s Seething Wells,
www.kingstonhistoryresearch.co.uk

SEETHING WELLS, RIVER WATER, FILTER BEDS & CHOLERA

The Seething Wells Filter Beds is a unique example of early Victorian civil engineering – built in 1852 to provide the city of London with clean drinking water after the 1838 cholera epidemic.

SWAG, 10/8/2026

- **WHAT IS CHOLERA & WHAT CAUSES IT?**
 - **WHERE ARE THE FILTER BEDS?**
 - **HOW DID THE FILTER BEDS WORK?**
- **WHERE WAS THE FILTERED WATER DELIVERED?**

PART 2. THE FILTER BEDS & CHOLERA

The Seething Wells Action Group [SWAG] is concerned about the decline of the Filter Beds and loss of local history and nature reserve features. Their online statement of 10 August 2026 raises some questions which are addressed in the next slides.

WHAT IS CHOLERA?

GENERAL BOARD OF HEALTH, 1850

- *features were of shrunken appearance, the skin felt cold and there was a marked reduction or total suppression of urinary output*
- *victim had collapsed, with an extremely weak or undetectable pulse*
- *characteristic rice-water faecal evacuations*



WHAT IS CHOLERA [1850]?

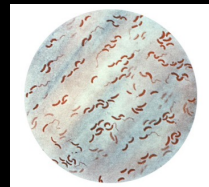
In 1850, the General Board of Health of the Royal College of Physicians published a report on the cholera epidemics of 1848 & 1849. The report was an analysis of information provided by local medical officers and reflected the prevailing “*miasma*” and “*germ*” theories of the time. These reduced to the cause of cholera being either the inhalation of a foul smell emanating from decaying organic matter or the ingestion of an unknown harmful substance from food or water. The report provided a definition of a case of cholera which represented the state of medical knowledge at the time.

WHAT IS CHOLERA?

- *Acute intestinal infection caused by drinking water contaminated with the bacterium ***Vibrio cholerae***.*
- *Infectious dose is high, i.e., $10^6 - 10^{11}$ bacteria.*
- *Symptoms 12 hours to five days after infection.*
- *The typical diarrhoea, described as “rice water”, can lead to life-threatening dehydration.*
- *Most infected people do not develop symptoms, but possibly they can spread the bacteria through their faeces for up to ten days.*



WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION, ETC., 2026



WHAT IS CHOLERA [2026]?

Recent medical knowledge about the cause of cholera is reflected in this slide. It was based on information from the WHO and other leading authorities. Cholera is caused by a bacterium, *Vibrio cholerae*, of which very large numbers have to be ingested from contaminated water, or sometimes food, to produce the classic life-threatening symptoms, exactly as described in 1850. However, not all infected people develop the symptoms but they can to spread the harmful bacteria though their excrement.

CHOLERA EPIDEMICS IN BRITAIN

- **1832, ORIGINATED IN BENGAL, INDIA, ABOUT 14,000 CASES IN ENGLAND & WALES, WITH ABOUT 7,000 DEATHS**
- **1849, ORIGINATED IN BALTIC SEA AREA, VIA INDIA, ABOUT 53,000 CASES IN ENGLAND & WALES**
Kingston, Ewell & Richmond, Surrey, Summer, 1849
- **1854 & 1866, ORIGINATED IN BALTIC SEA AREA, FAR LESS CASES IN ENGLAND & WALES THAN IN PREVIOUS EPIDEMICS**

CHOLERA EPIDEMICS IN BRITAIN

The slide outlines cholera epidemics in Britain from 1832-1866. It is generally accepted that cholera originated in India and spread from there. In the 19th century it was known as “*Asiatic cholera*”. There were cases in Kingston, Ewell & Richmond in the summer of 1849.

Pool of London, Thomas Luny, 1801-1810



SHIPS IN THE POOL OF LONDON, 1801-1810

HOW DID ASIATIC CHOLERA GET TO LONDON?

It seems likely that cholera came from excrement from ships in the Pool of London or from the excrement of infected people arriving in London. The slide, a painting by Thomas Luny, shows ships clustered in the tidal Pool of London in 1801-1810. The water could have been contaminated by waste tipped over the sides of ships and the movement of the tides could help to spread harmful material.

DEATH OF REV. JAMES DOYLE, KINGSTON UPON THAMES, 1855 FEAR OF ASIATIC CHOLERA FROM THE CRIMEA

On Sunday evening last, considerable excitement was caused by the sudden death of the Rev. James Doyle, chaplain of the Roman Catholic chapel, Kingston-upon-Thames. The deceased gentleman has recently returned from the Crimea to recruit his health, and up to last Sunday evening was getting on extremely well. He preached in the morning, and interested his hearers with the vivid picture he drew of the trials the poor soldier had to endure in the Crimea—of the many trials he had undergone, and concluded by thanking God for sparing him to his congregation. About eight o'clock, he complained of pains in his chest and stomach. Medical assistance was sent for, but before Dr. Coleman and Dr. Mitchell arrived, the deceased gentleman was no more. The Rev. James Doyle was much beloved by all the soldiers in the camp for his amiable and kind disposition. The deceased gentleman died of Asiatic cholera.



MORNING ADVERTISER, 31 JULY 1855

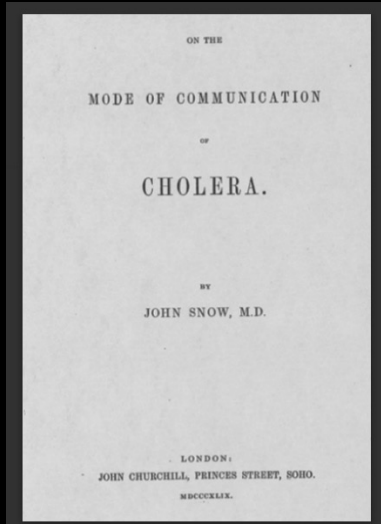
"THE DECEASED GENTLEMAN DIED OF ASIATIC CHOLERA"

SURREY COMET, 4 AUGUST 1855

*"HE HAD NO SYMPTOM APPROACHING IN THE SLIGHTEST DEGREE
TO THAT FATAL DISEASE"*

FEAR OF ASIATIC CHOLERA FROM THE CRIMEA

The Rev. James Doyle, Priest of St Raphael's Chapel, in 1855, died of a heart attack, according to his death certificate, after returning from service as a Chaplain in the Crimean War. A national newspaper reported that he had died of "*Asiatic Cholera*". However, the local newspaper, reported that "*he had no symptom approaching to the slightest degree to that fatal disease*". Probably, this was on the advice of the two doctors who had attended poor Father Doyle and who were keen to assure local residents that he had not died of the dreaded disease, which some thought was transmitted directly from person to person.



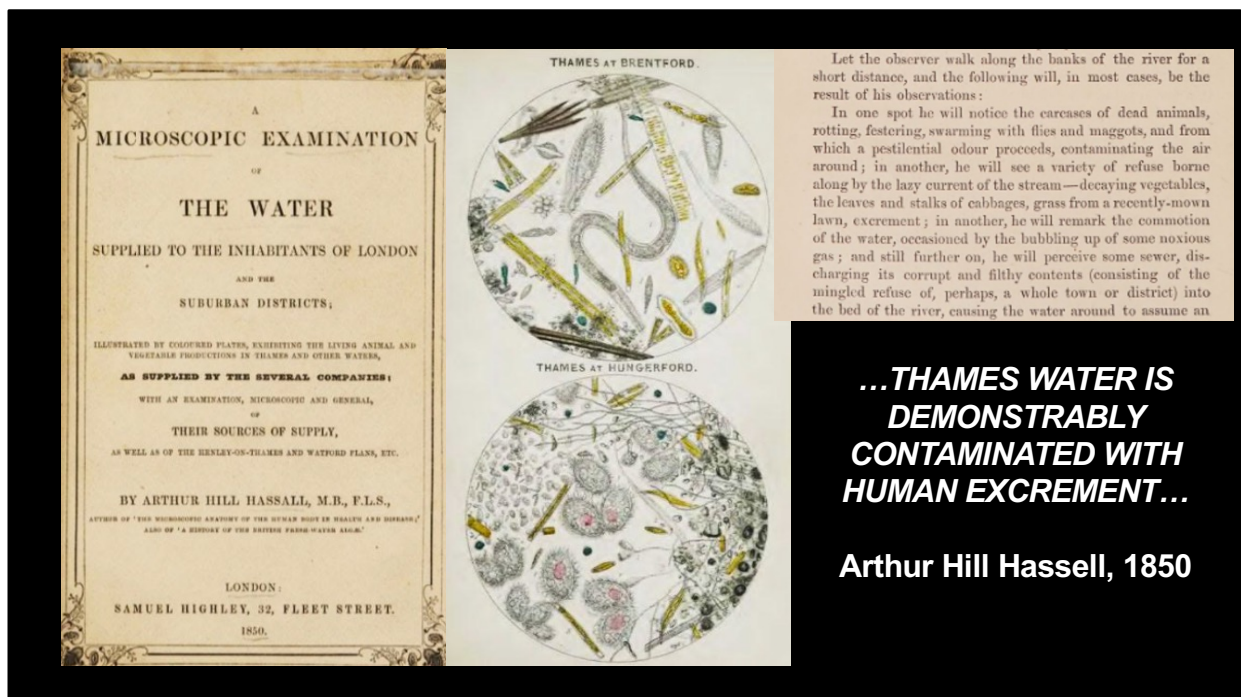
DR SNOW'S CONCLUSIONS, IN 1849:

- ***CHOLERA IS CAUSED BY A TOXIN FROM A MICROBE IN SEWAGE-CONTAMINATED DRINKING WATER.***
- ***THE SANITARY MEASURE MOST REQUIRED IN THE METROPOLIS IS A SUPPLY OF WATER FROM THE SOUTH AND EAST DISTRICTS OF IT FROM SOME SOURCE QUITE REMOVED FROM THE SEWERS"***
- ***DO NOT DRINK UNTREATED WATER THAT MAY BE CONTAMINATED WITH SEWAGE.***

THE CAUSE OF CHOLERA IN LONDON, 1849

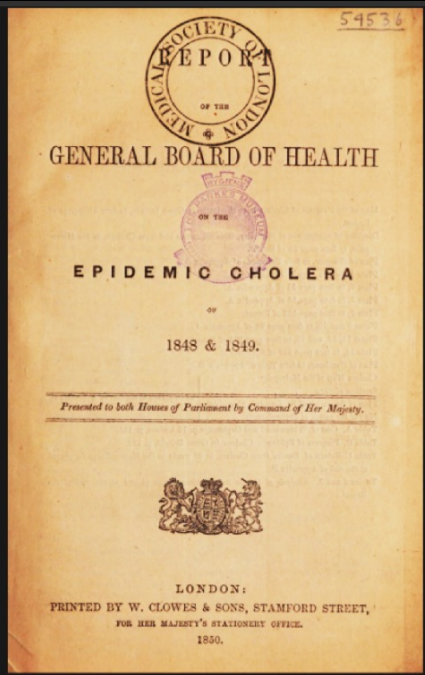
In 1849, Dr John Snow published his research findings on the mode of transmission of cholera. In essence, he concluded.

- **It was caused by a toxin from a microbe in sewage-contaminated drinking water,**
- **The London drinking water supply should be drawn from sources far removed from rivers where sewers discharged,**
- **Do not drink untreated water that may be contaminated with sewage.**



MICROSCOPICAL EXAMINATION OF THAMES WATER, 1850

Dr Arthur Hill Hassell published his research findings in 1850. He discovered many types of “*Infusoria*” [protozoa, plankton, etc., as depicted in the slide], in samples of water taken from the tidal reaches of the Thames at Hungerford and Brentford. Moreover, as a consequence of observations during his walks along the tidal river that it was “*contaminated with human excrement*” and other filth.



The image shows the front cover of a historical report. At the top, there is a circular seal with the text 'MEDICAL SOCIETY OF LONDON' and 'REPORT'. Below this, the title 'GENERAL BOARD OF HEALTH' is printed. In the center, there is a small crest with the text 'ON THE' above it and 'EPIDEMIC CHOLERA' below it. The years '1848 & 1849.' are printed below the title. At the bottom, there is a royal coat of arms and the text 'LONDON: PRINTED BY W. CLOWES & SONS, STAMFORD STREET, FOR HER MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE. 1850.'

**UNWHOLESOME WATER.
METROPOLITAN EXPERIENCE.**

SILKMILL ROW, HACKNEY

**...4 CESSPOOLS SUNK 1-12 YARDS FROM A WELL...
2-3 WEEKS LATER, THE WATER BECAME TAINTED
AND OFFENSIVE...LIKE A THIN SOUP WITH FECULANT
MATTER...**

WATERLOO ROAD, LAMBETH

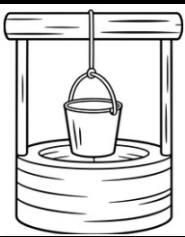
**...MORTALITY FROM CHOLERA WAS EXCESSIVE, THE
WATER SUPPLIED BY THE LAMBETH WATER WORKS
IS STATED TO BE "MUDDY, HAVING A FOETID SMELL
AND REPLETE WITH INSECTS"...**

**[CAUSE OF CHOLERA - MIASMA THEORY
VS. GERM THEORY]**

UNWHOLESOME LONDON DRINKING WATER, 1850

The Board of Health report gave examples of “unwholesome water” in London.

- In Hackney, four cesspools were sunk close to a well. Later the water became *“tainted and offensive...like a thin soup with feculent matter...”*
- Water supplied by the Lambeth Water Works, which then drew it from the tidal Thames was stated to be, *“muddy,, foul-smelling and replete with insects”*.

- **FAECES + DRINKING WATER = DISEASE.**
- **TURBID, FOUL-SMELLING WATER = FAECAL CONTAMINATION, UNSAFE TO DRINK**
- **CLEAR WATER WITH NO SMELL = SAFE TO DRINK**

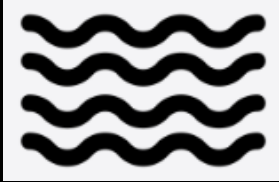
CRAPPER SPECIALITIES
Founded 1867

PEDESTAL WASH-DOWN CLOSET Improved Marlboro  Base Lead trap included White or heavy W.C. Basin ornamentation 24/5 34/5 42/5 60x5	VALVE CLOSET Basin and stop tap in one piece  Base Basin and stop tap in one piece Ventilating air off overflow trap China dish with flushing rim Copper air regulator 24/5 34/5 42/5 60x5 47x5 4/9
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WATER WASTE PREVENTER
Cast-iron Syphon Waste Preventer
Transfer into Valve. Silencing Air Tubes 2 gals
Brass Chain and China pull

3 gillon 4/9 12/6

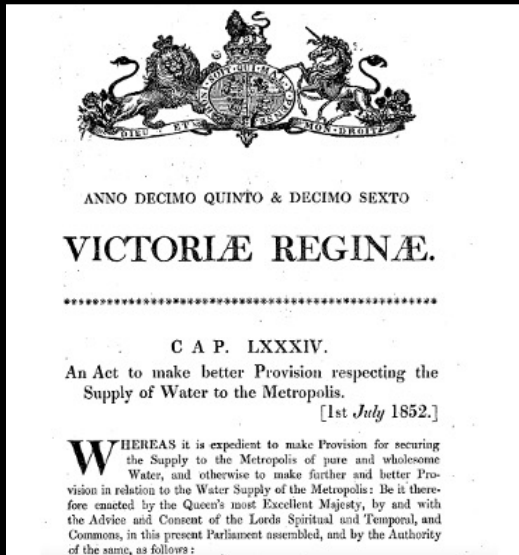
50, 52, & 54, MARLBOROUGH ROAD, CHELSEA
LONDON, S.W.

MID-19TH CENTURY BELIEFS ABOUT SAFE WATER

While the exact cause of cholera was yet to be discovered, beliefs about safe water can be summarized as follows.

- Drinking water contaminated with sewage led to disease.
 - Turbid, foul-smelling water was indicative of sewage contamination.
 - Clear water with no smell was safe to drink.
 - Water from the polluted tidal Thames was unsafe to drink.
-
- Independently of these beliefs, the increasing use of the water closet connected to sewers that discharged into drinking water supplies increased the risk of disease.



PURE & WHOLESOME WATER FOR THE METROPOLIS, 1852

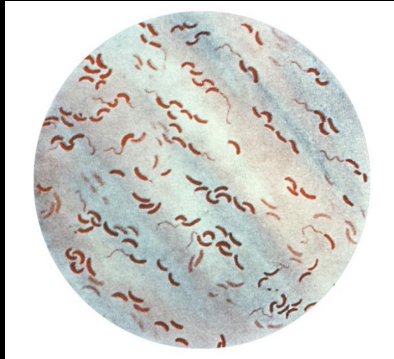
- FROM 31 AUGUST 1855, UNLAWFUL FOR ANY COMPANY SUPPLYING WATER FOR DOMESTIC USE TO TAKE WATER FROM THE TIDAL RIVER THAMES OR TRIBUTARIES BELOW TEDDINGTON LOCK. CHELSEA WATER WORKS EXEMPTED.
- RESERVOIRS WITHIN SPECIFIED DISTANCE TO BE COVERED.
- FROM 31 DECEMBER 1855, AQUADUCTS TO BE COVERED UNLESS WATER FILTERED THEREAFTER.
- FROM 31 DECEMBER 1855, ALL WATER SUPPLIED FOR DOMESTIC USE TO BE FILTERED.

LEGISLATION FOR PURE & WHOLESOME WATER FOR LONDON, 1 JULY 1852

The slide shows the essential requirements of the Metropolitan Water Act of 1852. By 31 December 1855:

- Drinking water must only be taken from the non-tidal Thames and it must be filtered thereafter.
- Reservoirs must be covered to prevent contamination.
- Aqueducts must be covered to prevent contamination.

The Act exempted the Chelsea Waterworks from drawing water from the tidal Thames because already it was being filtered as it was known that it was polluted.



**VIBRIO CHOLERAЕ, DISCOVERED BY
MICROSCOPY, DR FILLIPO PACINI,
ITALY, 1854
WENT LARGELY UN-NOTICED**



**VIBRIO CHOLERAЕ, GROWN IN
PURE CULTURE BY DR ROBERT
KOCH, GERMANY, 1884,
RECEIVED WORLDWIDE NOTICE**

DISCOVERY OF THE CAUSE OF CHOLERA

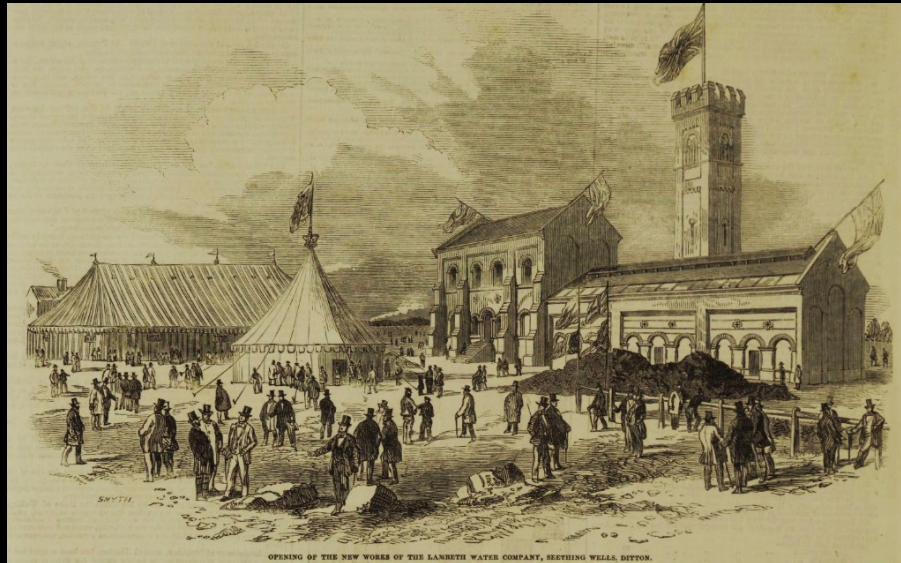
The bacterium later called *Vibrio cholerae* was first discovered by microscopy Dr Fillipo Pacini, an Italian physician. He found it in the rice water excrement of clinically-established cases of cholera. He published his findings in a little-read Italian medical journal and largely they went un-noticed.

Dr Robert Koch, a famous German bacteriologist, isolated *Vibrio cholerae* in pure culture from clinical samples and because he published, in 1884, his findings in well-read German medical journal he is generally credited with the discovery.



MAP OF THE SEETHING WELLS AREA, JULY 2026

The slide shows the area of interest along the Portsmouth Road, from its junction with Cleaveland Road, Surbiton, KT6 4AJ and the end of Thames Marina, Thames Ditton, KT7 0AX. Part of the area lies in Long Ditton.

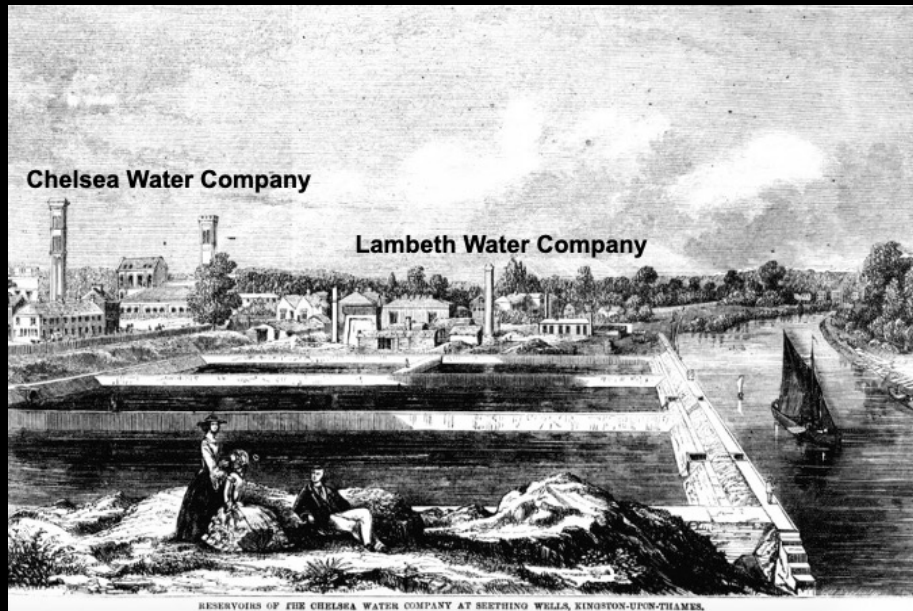


OPENING OF LAMBETH WATERWORKS, SEETHING WELLS, DITTON,
FROM ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS, 3 APRIL 1852

OPENING OF THE LAMBETH WATERWORKS, 1852

The slide shows the grand opening, in 1852, of the Lambeth Waterworks at “*Seething Wells, Ditton*”. This was shortly before the Metropolitan Water Act was passed.

Note the piles of coal which were essential to feed boilers for the steam-driven pumps needed to distribute filtered water to consumers. Later a Coal House was erected at another part of the site and there were tunnels that led to the riverside where coal was delivered by barge. It was unloaded by a hydraulic crane and transported to the Coal House by trucks which ran down by an inclined railway and were coupled by an endless wire rope passing over large pulleys. As the loaded trucks descended, they hauled up empty trucks. A similar arrangement was in place at the Chelsea waterworks.



SEETHING WELLS WATERWORKS SOME BASIC INFORMATION *

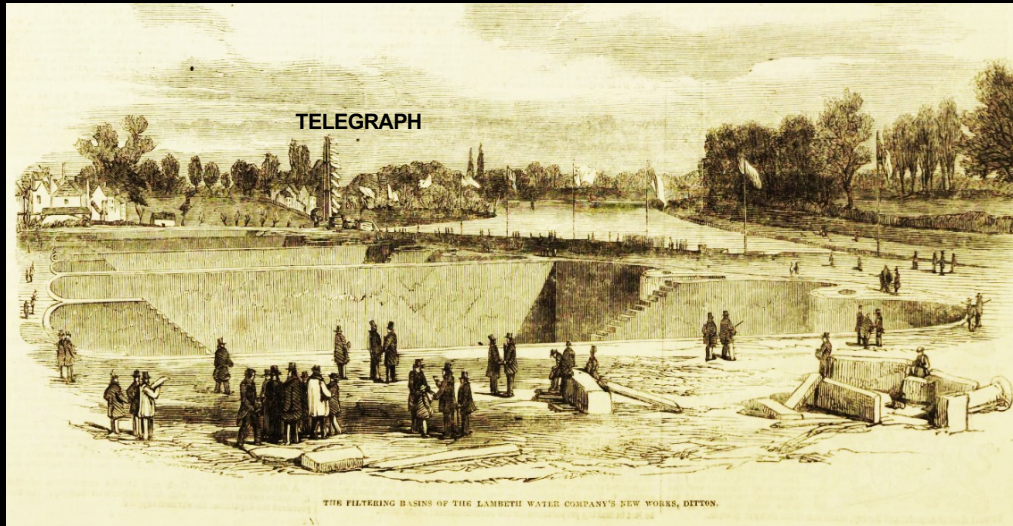
LAMBETH WATER COMPANY

The original cost, cited in 1852, was £150,000 [about £12 million in 2017]. The length of supply pipework was about 300 miles. In August, 1866, average daily water supply was 9.9 million gallons delivered to 36,347 houses, with an annual income to the company of £68,248 [about £6 million in 2017].

CHELSEA WATER COMPANY

The original cost, cited in 1858, was £470,000 [about £28 million in 2017]. The length of supply pipework was about 270 miles. An average daily water supply, in 1866, was 8.7 million gallons delivered to 24,463 houses, with an annual income to the company of £64,302 [about £4 million in 2017].

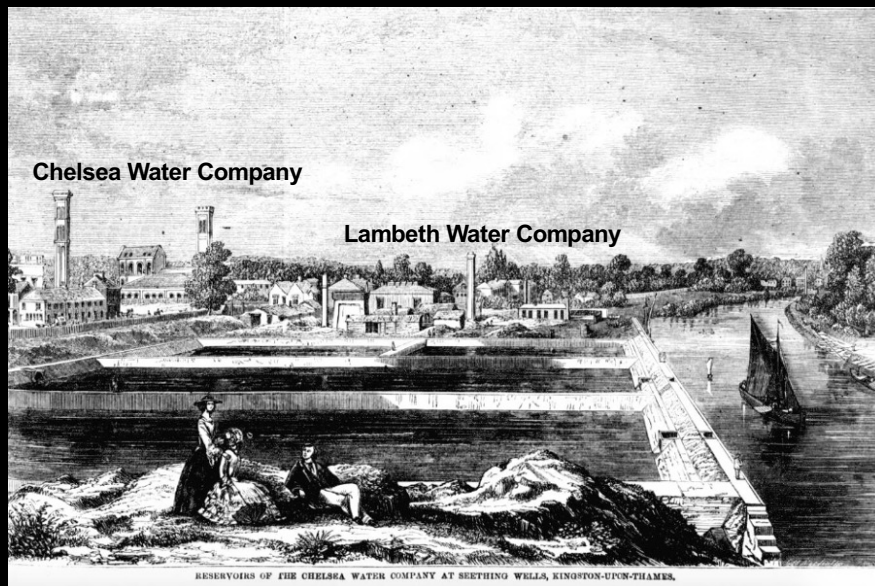
* Colborn & Maw, 1867; Illustrated London News, 3 April 1852; Illustrated Times, 8 May 1858; National Archives Currency Converter.



FILTERING BASINS AT DITTON, FROM THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS, 3 APRIL 1852

FILTERING BASINS OF THE LAMBETH WATERWORKS, 1852

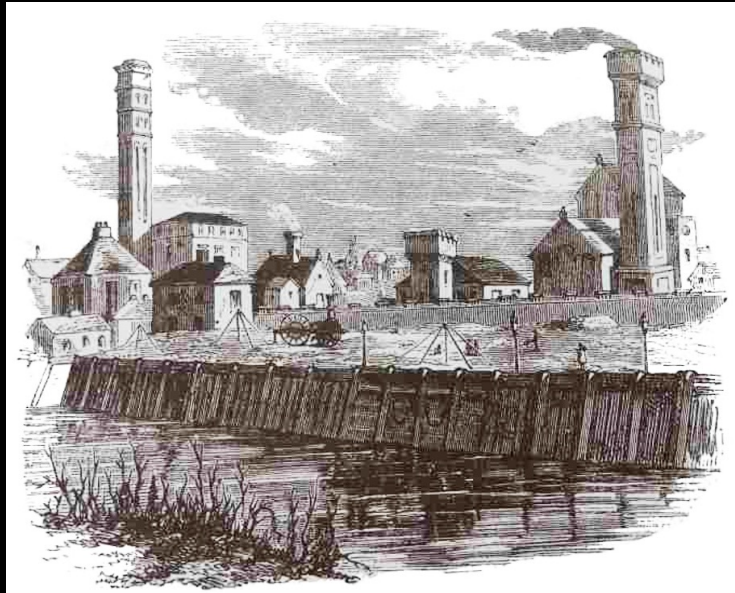
The slide shows the grand opening, in 1852, of the filtering basins [filter beds] of the Lambeth Waterworks at Ditton. The telegraph, mentioned in Wyld's Railway Guide, 1839, is identified. The telegraph was part of a system for sending Admiralty messages between London and Portsmouth.



RESERVOIRS OF THE CHELSEA WATER WORKS, SEETHING WELLS, KINGSTON UPON THAMES,
FROM THE ILLUSTRATED TIMES, 8 MAY 1858

RESERVOIRS OF THE CHELSEA WATER WORKS, 1858

The slide shows the newly-completed reservoirs of the Chelsea Waterworks. In the foreground, some well-dressed people are relaxing on piles of earth which suggests that the construction had just been finished when the engraving was made. Further along the riverside, buildings of the Lambeth Waterworks are identified. Across the Portsmouth Road, buildings of the Chelsea Waterworks are identified.



LAMBETH & CHELSEA WATER WORKS, FROM HALL & HALL, 1859, *THE BOOK OF THE THAMES*

THE SEETHING WELLS WATERWORKS, 1859

The slide is taken from an engraving in *The Book The Thames* by Mr & Mrs Hall. The book was published in 1859 and probably the engraving was made slightly earlier. It shows buildings of the Lambeth and Chelsea Waterworks which appear to be in use, judging by the smoke coming from a chimney. Construction work appears to be underway by the riverside.



THE SEETHING WELLS WATERWORKS, 1871

The slide shows a section of an OS map of 1871. Buildings of the Lambeth & Chelsea Waterworks are identified. What appear to be the filtering basins of the Lambeth Waterworks are identified as “*Reservoirs*”. Next to them is the inlet which was marked on the Long Ditton Tithe Map of 1840 with an area of undeveloped marshy ground nearby. Opposite Westfield Lodge “*Reservoirs*” of the Chelsea Waterworks are identified. The Kingston & Long Ditton boundary lies between the Engine House and Coal House on the Lambeth site.

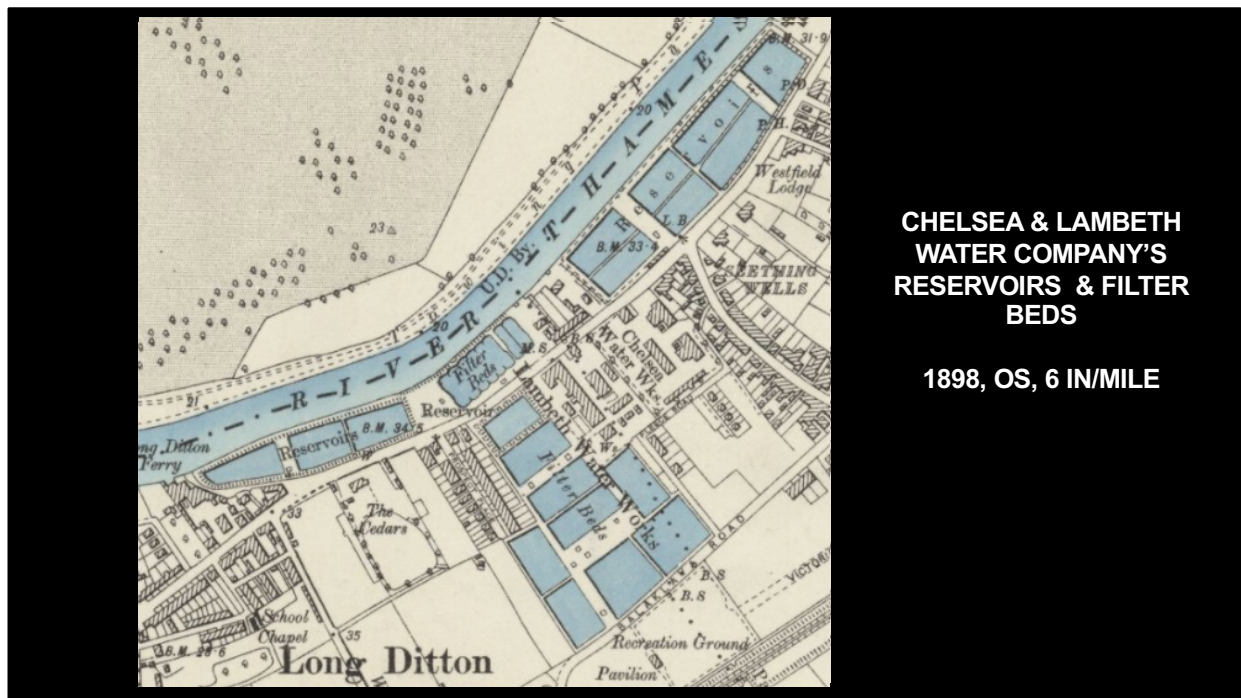
In 1871, The Lambeth Waterworks would have been drawing Thames water directly into the filtering basins. Then, the Chelsea Waterworks would have been drawing water into the reservoirs before it was taken into filter beds, which are not clearly marked on the map.



**1873, INTAKES MOVED UPSTREAM FROM SEETHING WELLS TO MOLESEY
& RESERVOIRS INSTALLED**

THE RESERVOIRS AT WEST MOLESEY, 1873

By 1873, the intakes of the Lambeth & Chelsea Waterworks had been moved upstream to West Molesey and reservoirs had been installed there. Water from these reservoirs was pumped to Seething Wells for filtration and later distribution. The reason for the change will be explained later.



THE SEETHING WELLS WATERWORKS, 1898

The slide shows a section of an OS map of 1898. Reservoirs and filter beds are marked along the riverside. Filter beds of the Lambeth and Chelsea Waterworks are also marked.



**QUEEN'S PROMENADE, SURBITON, WITH WATERWORKS IN BACKGROUND, 1890-1910
FROM PHOTOGRAPH HELD AT KINGSTON HISTORY CENTRE**

THE SEETHING WELLS WATERWORKS, 1890-1910

The slide is a computer-enhanced image taken from a photograph in the collection of the Kingston History Centre.* It is a view of Queen's Promenade, Surbiton, showing buildings of the waterworks in the upper middle ground. The location pin marks smoke from a chimney. This reminds us that we are looking at an industrial site that possibly operated 24 hours a day, all year round, and its constant smoke would have contributed to the local air pollution.

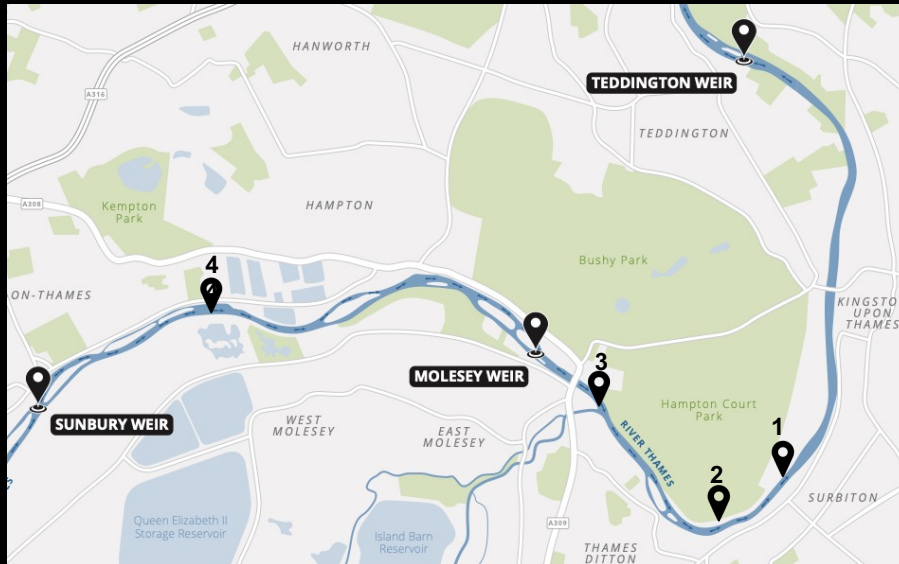
*** I am most grateful to staff who provided a good photocopy of the original photograph.**



**NEED FOR FILTRATION,
RIVER THAMES IN FLOOD,
THAMES DITTON**

WHY FILTER THE SEETHING WELLS RIVER WATER?

A previous slide proposed that in the mid-19th century drinking turbid water was considered to be a factor in disease-causation. Originally, Seething Wells river water was seen generally to be cleaner and purer than downstream tidal water. However, when the main river flooded after heavy rainfall the water became turbid and contained floating weeds, etc. This problem was made worse because the intakes were downstream from the mouths of the River Mole and The Rythe stream both of which flooded more frequently after rain. Filtration was needed to address this problem rather than in the certain knowledge that filtration removed harmful microbes. However, the problem of the Mole and The Rythe got worse, with more of a challenge to the filter beds. Accordingly, a decision was taken to move the intakes upstream to West Molesey. The next slides continue this theme.

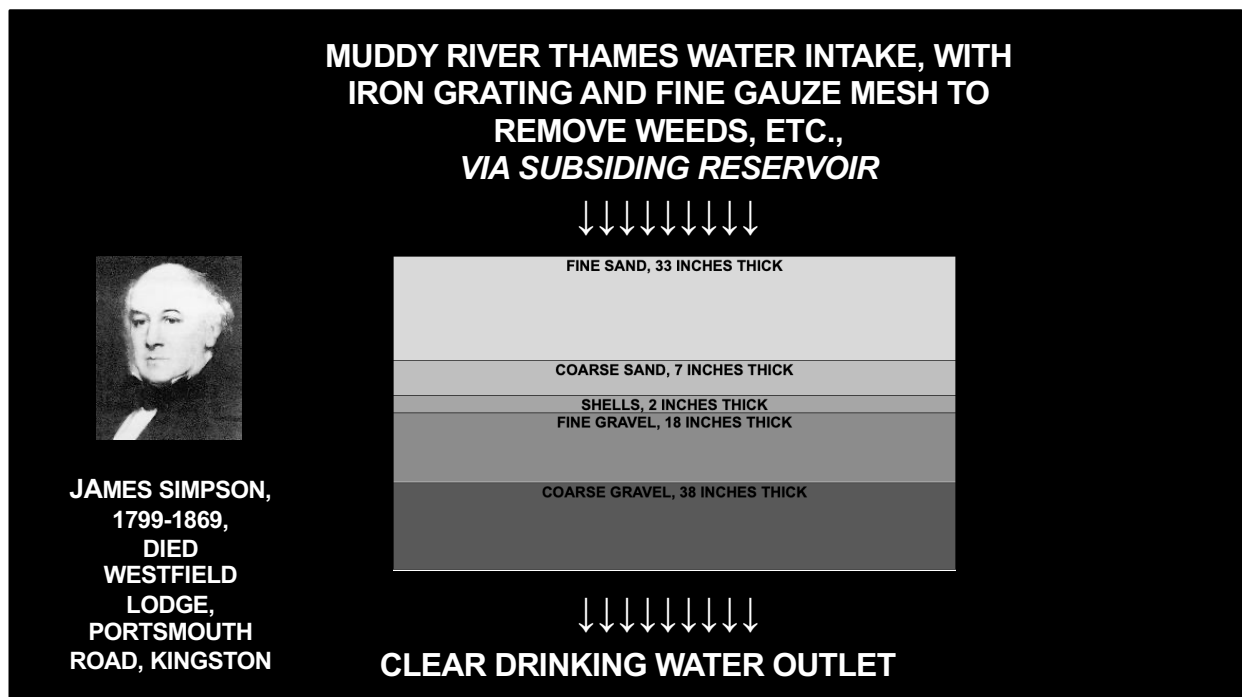


1. INTAKE, TO FILTER BEDS, SURBITON, 1852 & 1858
2. THE RYTTE, SOMETIMES MUDDY
3. RIVER MOLE, SOMETIMES MUDDY
4. INTAKE TO FILTER BEDS, WEST MOLESEY, 1873 & 1875, LESS MUDDY

NEED FOR FILTRATION OF THAMES WATER

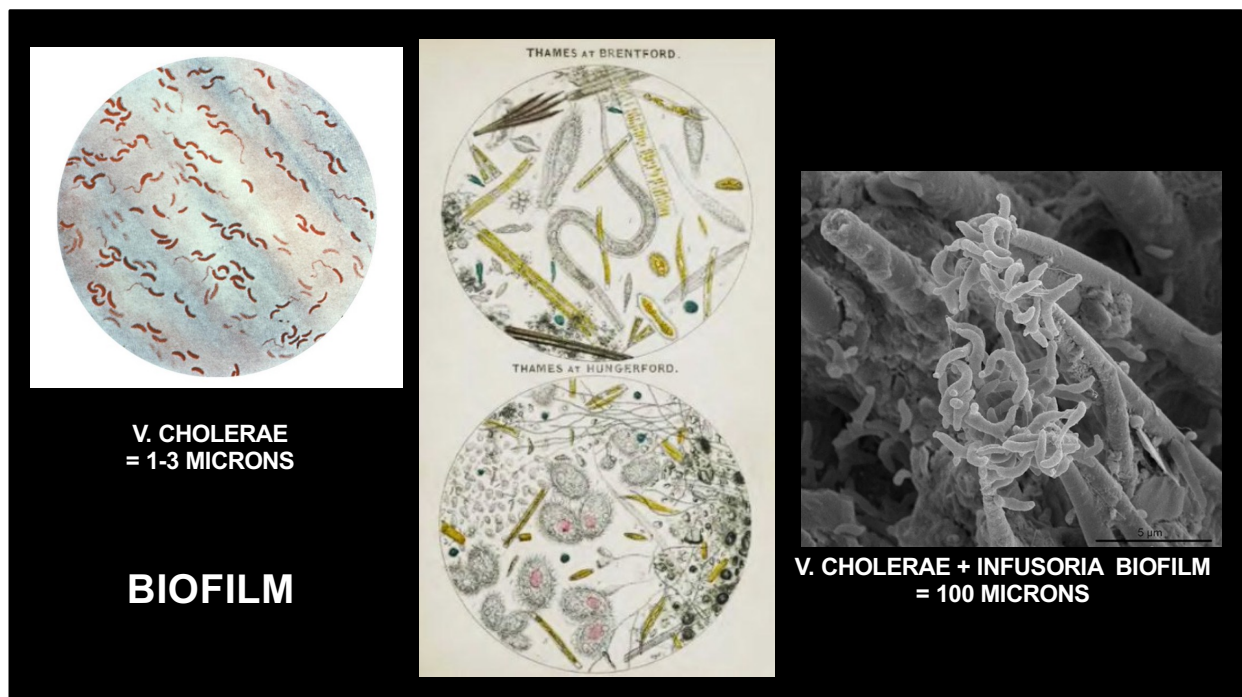
WHY FILTER THE SEETHING WELLS RIVER WATER?

This slide is a plan of the River Thames from the start of the tidal reach at Teddington Weir to Sunbury Weir. It shows the location of the original intakes at Seething Wells, the mouths of the Rytte and Mole and the intake upstream at West Molesey.



HOW THE FILTER BEDS WORKED

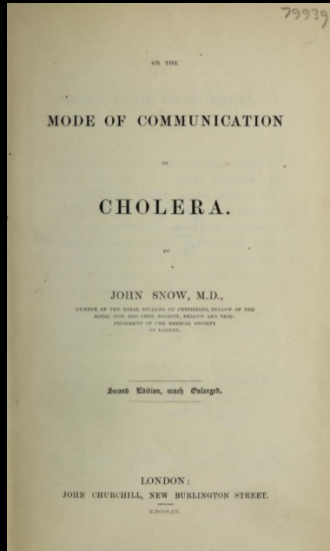
This slide is a diagram of the filter beds at Seething Wells. They were developed by James Simpson, the Engineer of both the Lambeth and Chelsea Waterworks. He lived at Westfield Lodge during his tenure and died there. Essentially, potentially muddy water was taken through a coarse filter to remove weeds, etc. Then it passed through a layer of fine sand and increasingly larger particles before emerging as a clear effluent fit for eventual distribution to consumers. The fine sand layer had to be cleaned regularly to prevent it from clogging up.



DID THE FILTER BEDS ACTUALLY REMOVE MICROBES?

Would the filter beds actually have removed the harmful microbe, *Vibrio cholerae*, if it had been in the Seething Wells water? The microbe is a very small particle, roughly 1-3 microns in length, it is invisible to the naked eye. A micron is equivalent to one thousandth of a millimeter in length. Possibly, such a small particle could have slipped through Simpson's fine sand filter. However, modern research indicates that *Vibrio cholerae* attaches itself to the sort of organisms that Hill-Hassell found in Thames water, and called "*Infusoria*", to yield a much larger particle that could be trapped by a simple filter system. Such composite particles are known today as "*Biofilm*".*

* Jennifer Teschler, et al, 2015



DR SNOW'S CONCLUSIONS IN 1855:

- THE CHOLERA OUTBREAK IN BROAD STREET, LONDON, WAS CAUSED BY DRINKING WATER PUMPED FROM A CESSPOOL-CONTAMINATED WELL.
- PEOPLE WHO DRANK THAMES WATER DRAWN FROM THE SEETHING WELLS, NON-TIDAL REACH, SUFFERED FAR LESS CHOLERA THAN THOSE WHO DRANK THAMES WATER DRAWN FROM THE TIDAL REACH AT CHELSEA.

DID THE FILTER BEDS PREVENT CHOLERA?

In 1855, Dr John Snow published the second edition of his book *“On The Mode of Communication of Cholera”*. He concluded that the infamous Broad Street outbreak was caused by drinking water pumped from a well that was contaminated by effluent from a nearby cesspool. This earned him the recognition as a father of epidemiology. A second conclusion was that people who drank the filtered water from the Lambeth Waterworks at Seething Wells suffered far less cholera than those who drank water then drawn from the tidal Thames by the Chelsea Water Company. In 1859, John Simon reported the incidence of cholera in a population that drank clean water from Seething Wells with one that drank water supplied by the Southwark & Vauxhall Water Company. He described this water as *“perhaps the filthiest stuff ever drank by a civilized community”*. He found that the population drinking dirty water had suffered three and a half times more cholera than those who drank clean water. So, the Filter Beds appeared to be working well in the control of cholera.

LAMBETH WATER WORKS, SEETHING WELLS	
Filtered Water, Nominal Sea Level	Filtered Water, Nominal Sea Level
↓	↓
Pumped 10½ miles to covered reservoir at Brixton, 118 ft. above Nominal Sea Level	Pumped 2 miles to covered reservoir on Coombe Hill, 95 ft. above Nominal Sea Level
↓	↓
Pumped & gravity supply for domestic use in Brixton, Dulwich, Beckenham, Penge, Balham, Streatham, Tooting, Selhurst, etc.	Gravity supply for domestic use in Kingston upon Thames neighbourhood

FROM COLBURN & MAW, 1867, THE WATER WORKS OF LONDON

DISTRIBUTION OF WATER FROM LAMBETH WATERWORKS

The slide shows the distribution of filtered water, as it was in about 1867, from the Lambeth Waterworks at Seething Wells. Essentially, water was pumped to a covered reservoir at Brixton and from there it was pumped or flowed by gravity to domestic consumers in Brixton, etc. In a separate supply network, water was pumped to a covered reservoir on Coombe Hill and by gravity it flowed to domestic consumers in the Kingston upon Thames area.

CHELSEA WATER WORKS, SEETHING WELLS		
Filtered Water	Nominal Sea Level	Unfiltered Water
↓		↓
Pumped 6½ miles to covered reservoir on Putney Heath	200 ft. above Nominal Sea Level	Pumped 6½ miles to uncovered reservoir on Putney Heath
↓		↓
Gravity, aqueduct over Thames at Putney	Nominal sea level	Gravity, aqueduct over Thames at Putney
↓		↓
Gravity supply for domestic use in Westminster, Pimlico, Belgravia, Chelsea, Fulham, etc.	Nominal sea level	Gravity supply to Serpentine in Hyde Park & other non-domestic use

FROM COLBURN & MAW, 1867, THE WATERWORKS OF LONDON

DISTRIBUTION OF WATER FROM CHELSEA WATERWORKS

The slide shows the distribution of filtered and unfiltered water, as it was in about 1867, from the Chelsea Waterworks at Seething Wells. Filtered water was pumped to a covered reservoir on Putney Heath and from there it flowed by gravity to domestic consumers in Westminster, etc.

Unfiltered water was pumped to an uncovered reservoir on Putney Heath and from there it flowed by gravity to the Serpentine lake in Hyde Park and for other non-domestic usage, such as dust suppression in streets. In both cases, the water was taken over the Thames at Putney by separate aqueducts.



METROPOLITAN WATER BOARD AT SEETHING WELLS, 1949

Around 1902, the assets of the Lambeth and Chelsea Water Company's, along with those of other companies supplying water to London, were taken over by the newly-established Metropolitan Water Board [MWB]. The slide is an part of an OS map of 1949 that shows the many filter beds of the MWB at Seething Wells and its reservoirs opposite the junction of Brighton Road and Portsmouth Road.

In 1974, the MWB became part of the Thames Water Authority [TWA]. In 1987, TWA was privatized as Thames Water.



**METROPOLITAN WATER BOARD'S
FILTER BEDS & SETTLING BASIN**

1968, OS, 6 IN/MILE

METROPOLITAN WATER BOARD AT SEETHING WELLS, 1968

The slide is part of an OS map that shows the Seething Wells Waterworks in 1968. Disused filter beds are marked by City Wharf, “settling basins” replace the filter beds of the 1949 map and what in the 1949 map are marked as “reservoirs” are marked as “filter beds”.



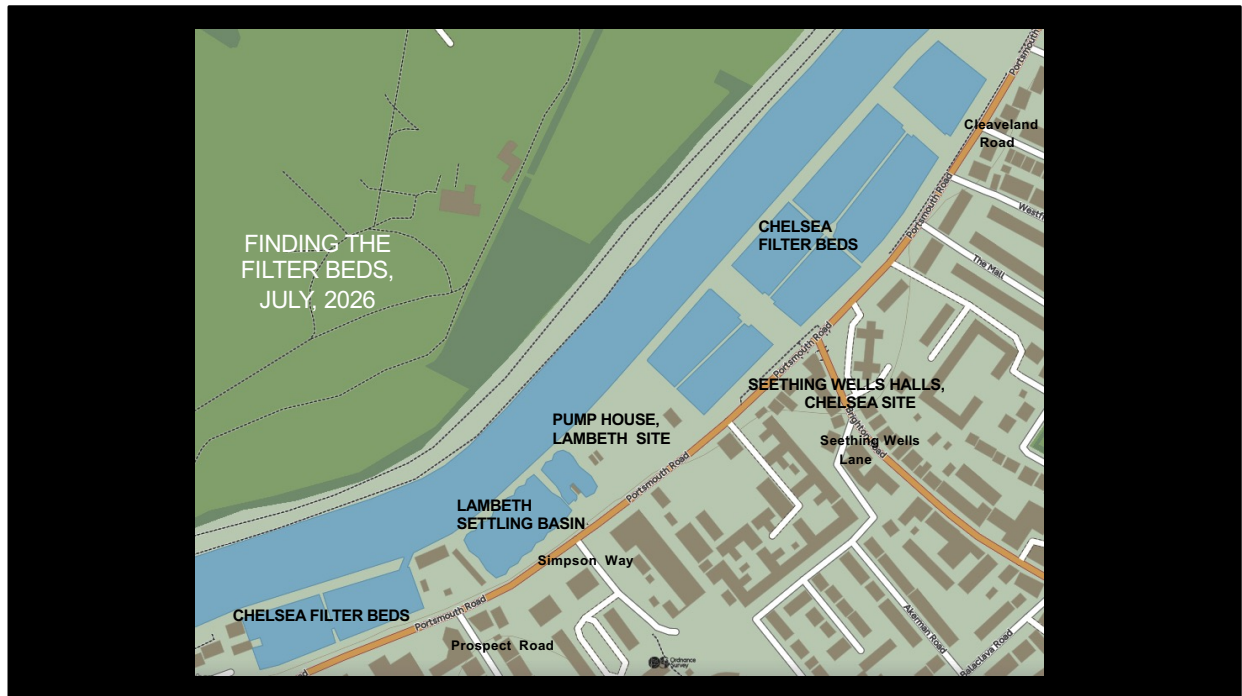
**CHELSEA WATER WORKS MARKER,
BEAUFORT ROAD, KINGSTON,
20 JULY 2026**



**METROPOLITAN WATER
BOARD STOPCOCK
ACCESS COVER,
PORTSMOUTH ROAD,
LONG DITTON,
25 JULY 2026**

EVIDENCE OF OLD WATER SUPPLIERS, 2026

During recent local walks, an old Chelsea Waterworks marker was seen in Beaufort Road, Kingston, and an old Metropolitan Water Board stopcock access cover was seen in Portsmouth Road, Long Ditton.



FINDING THE FILTER BEDS, 2026

The slide, for orienteering purposes, is a part of a modern map that identifies the old Chelsea Filter Beds [now Thames Ditton Marina], the old Lambeth settling basins, the old Lambeth waterworks site, with the existing Pump House, and the old Chelsea filter beds.



THAMES DITTON
MARINA
CONSTRUCTION,
1957

CREATION OF THAMES DITTON MARINA, 1957

There is evidence that the old Chelsea Waterworks filter beds along the riverside at Thames Ditton were unused before the start of WW2.* And, this could be an indicator of the beginning of the end for the Seething Wells waterworks. In 1957, the Marina site would have been owned by the MWB. By 1987 MWB had been incorporated into Thames Water which remains the owner of the adjacent old Lambeth Settling Basins, and more about this site will be said later. Construction of the Marina began in early 1957 and it was in use by the end of 1957.* The photograph indicates that most of the buildings of the old Lambeth Waterworks on the riverside had disappeared by 1957.

* *The Sphere*, 22 June & 5 October 1957.



SEETHING WELLS HALLS OF RESIDENCE

There is evidence that by 1996 Kingston University had taken on the existing Chelsea and Lambeth Waterworks buildings along the Portsmouth Road for future use as halls of residence for students. Around this date, adjacent old Waterworks buildings probably had been taken over for use by the Nuffield Health company.



ST JAMES' PARK, BALACLAVA ROAD, LONG DITTON, ESHER MAIL & NEWS, 14 OCTOBER 1998

ST JAMES' PARK, LONG DITTON

By 1998, old filter beds in the Balaclava Road area of Long Ditton and the old filter beds of Windmill Road, Thames Ditton were being developed for residential use.



PUMP HOUSE, LAMBETH WATERWORKS SITE, PORTSMOUTH ROAD, JULY 2026

SITE OF OLD LAMBETH WATERWORKS BUILDINGS

The slide, a photograph taken in July 2026, shows the Listed Pump House on the site of the old Lambeth Waterworks buildings. Note the graffiti on the building and pile of rubbish. The old Seething Wells spring probably would have been in this area.



LAMBETH SETTLING BASIN, THAMES WATER, JULY 2026

LAMBETH SETTLING BASINS

The slide is a photograph taken in July 2026, of one of the Lambeth Settling Basins owned by Thames Water. It is understood that currently, when needed, water is drawn from the nearby Thames and is pumped directly to the Knight & Bessborough Reservoirs at West Molesey. The presence of duck weed on the surface could show that the enclosed water was static.



LAMBETH SETTLING BASIN, THAMES WATER, JULY 2026

LAMBETH SETTLING BASINS

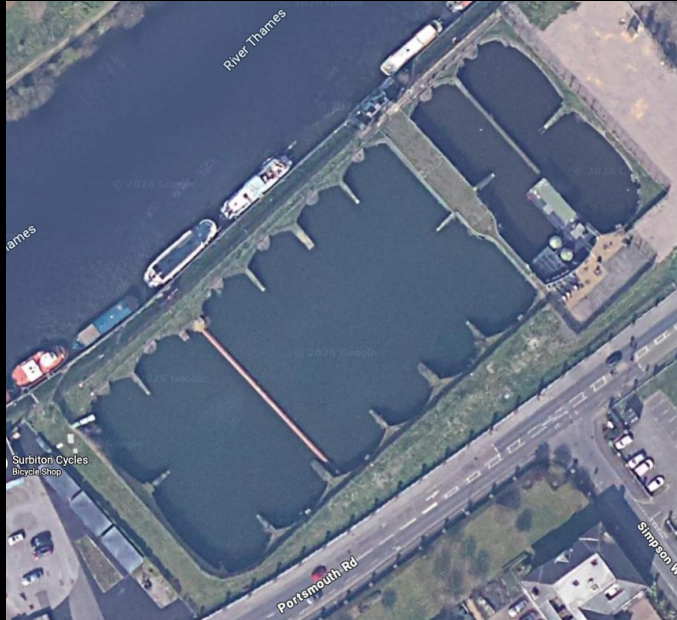
The slide, another photograph taken in July 2026, in the foreground shows water, grass, flowers and foliage attached to the fence. No duck weed can be seen and this might show that the water was not static.



LAMBETH SETTLING BASIN, THAMES WATER, JULY 2026

LAMBETH SETTLING BASINS

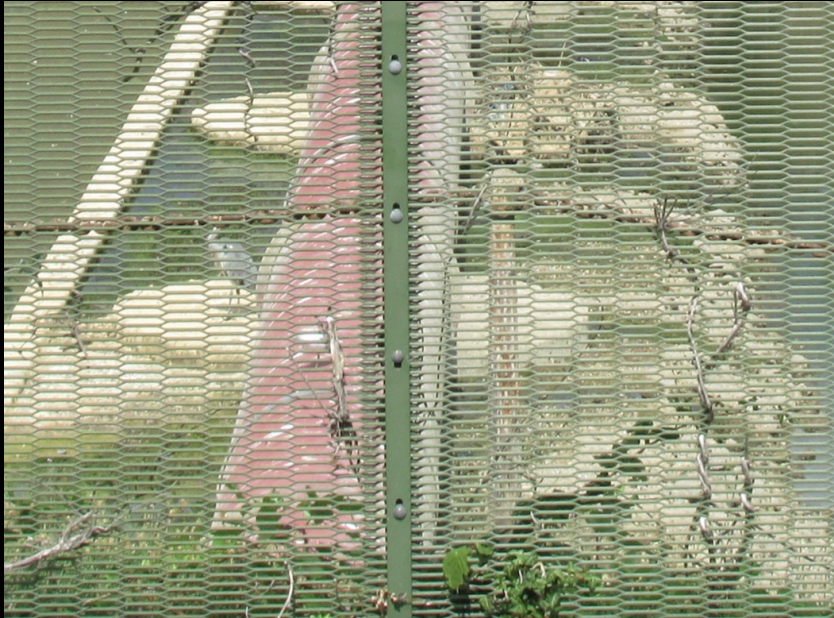
The slide, another photograph taken in July 2026 shows that the basic shape of the Settling Basins [aka Filter Beds] had not changed since the opening in 1852. The *“tide marks”* that can be seen are the reduction of water level in a long hot summer.



**AERIAL VIEW OF OLD
LAMBETH
WATERWORKS
SETTLING BASIN,
AUGUST 2026**

LAMBETH SETTLING BASINS

The slide, an aerial view downloaded in August 2026, supports the view that the basic shape of the Lambeth Settling Basins has not changed since their opening in 1852.



HERON AT LAMBETH SETTLING BASIN, THAMES WATER, JULY 2026

LAMBETH SETTLING BASINS

The slide, a photograph taken at about mid-day the same time as the others, in July 2026, shows a heron fishing near a large pipe. Therefore fish or other food of herons, frogs perhaps, live in the water so as to make it worthwhile for a heron to be there. The droppings on the top of the large pipe suggest that the site is frequently visited by birds. Overall, this small series of photographs shows that the Lambeth Settling Basins site is effectively a nature reserve.

WATERWORKS IN THE SEETHING WELLS AREA – KEY POINTS

1858, INTAKES FROM THAMES AT SURBITON & DITTON & FILTRATION. 1875, INTAKES MOVED TO WEST MOLESEY, WITH FILTRATION AT SURBITON & DITTON

1902, ASSETS TRANSFERRED TO MWB, INDUSTRIAL SITES CONTINUE

1957, DITTON FILTER BEDS CONVERTED TO THAMES DITTON MARINA

BY 1966, DISUSED SURBITON FILTER BEDS WERE UNOFFICIAL NATURE RESERVE

1974, MWB ASSETS TRANSFERRED TO TWA, WHICH, BY 1989, HAD BECOME THAMES WATER

1987-1988, WORK AT “SECONDARY FILTER BEDS” AT SURBITON CONTINUES

1992, SITES DECOMMISSIONED, SOME ASSETS SOLD

1998, THAMES WATER & ST JAMES’ HOMES BUILD RESIDENTIAL ESTATE AT DITTON

BY 1999, REFUSAL OF PLANNING PERMISSION FOR DEVELOPMENTS AT SEETHING WELLS FILTER BEDS

2005, SEETHING WELLS FILTER BEDS NOW METROPOLITAN OPEN LAND, CONTINUES AS NATURE RESERVE

2018, SITE DRAINED, VEGETATION REMOVED

2026, SEETHING WELLS FILTER BEDS NO LONGER A NATURE RESERVE WETLAND SITE

WATERWORKS AT SEETHING WELLS- KEY POINTS

This slide attempts to identify the key points in a history of the Seething Wells Filter Beds. First they were an industrial site, designed to deliver safe drinking water to the Metropolis. Then, activity on the constituent sites declined as different owners concentrated on other water supply systems. Unused sites were leased or sold for other purposes where planning permission was obtained. The construction of Thames Marina, in 1957, was the first evidence of this. Eventually, failed attempts to get planning permission for housing and other developments at led to the Seething Wells Filter Beds being declared, in 2005, as *Metropolitan Open Land*. By 1966, in my recollection, the Seething Wells Filter Beds had become an unofficial nature reserve and continued as such until 2018 when they were drained, with vegetation removed. Sadly, in the summer of 2026, the site is an arid desert.



SUMMER, 2018

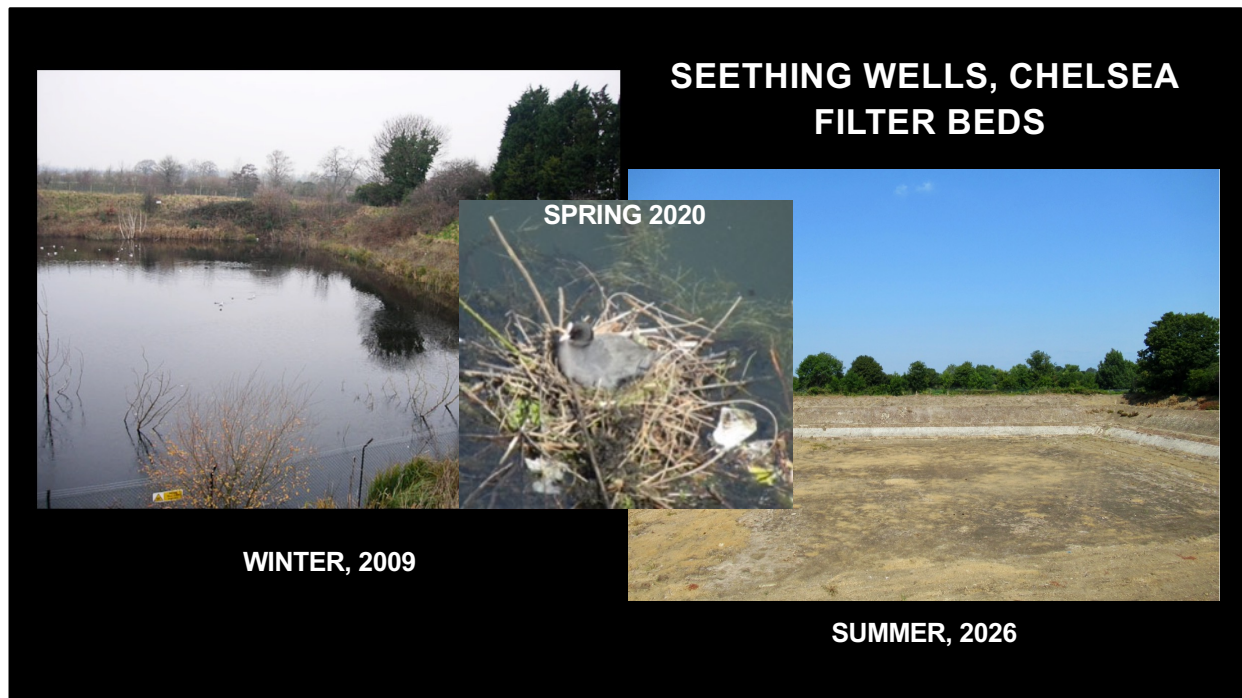


SUMMER, 2026

SEETHING WELLS FILTER BEDS - LOSS OF AN UNOFFICIAL NATURE RESERVE

LOSS OF AN UNOFFICIAL NATURE RESERVE

Despite the determined efforts of local groups to reverse the decline, the Seething Wells Filter Beds have been lost as a nature reserve. The slide shows how they were in the summer of 2018 and how they were in the summer of 2026. The change is dramatic and distressing.



LOSS OF AN UNOFFICIAL NATURE RESERVE

The slide has images of the same part of the Seething Wells Filter Beds in the winter of 2009, the spring of 2020 and the summer of 2026.

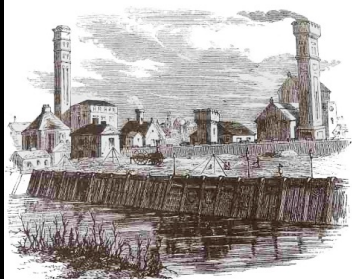


CHELSEA FILTER
BEDS,
JULY 2026

NO WATER TO BE
SEEN!!!

LOSS OF AN UNOFFICIAL NATURE RESERVE

The slide is a photograph of the Seething Wells Filter Beds taken in July 2026. It is ironical that while the notice declares *“Danger, Deep Water”*, no water can be seen at all!!!



**1859, SEETHING WELLS,
LAMBETH & CHELSEA
WATERWORKS,
INDUSTRIAL SITES**



**2009, CHELSEA FILTER BEDS,
WETLAND SITE**



**2026, CHELSEA FILTER
BEDS, ARID DESERT,
WHAT NEXT?**

SUMMARY

- **The Seething Wells Filter Beds were part of vast, industrial-scale water supply system to deliver over the years an astronomical quantity of clean drinking water to the Metropolis. Vast quantities of coal were consumed and the smoke contributed to air pollution in the area.**
- **When Seething Wells Filter Beds were no longer required, they fell into disuse, nature took over, and the site became an unofficial wetland nature reserve.**
- **The present owners have converted the site into an arid desert. Yet, because it is legally Metropolitan Open Land, it cannot be built on.**
- **What will happen next?**

MORE INFORMATION

www.kingstonhistoryresearch.co.uk

- *SEEKING SURBITON'S SEETHING WELLS, 2025*
- SOME ONLINE REFERENCES ARE GIVEN BELOW & OTHERS ARE ON THE NEXT SLIDE

ONLINE REFERENCES, 1 [5 SEPTEMBER 2026]

Seething Wells Action Group [SWAG]

<https://seethingwellsactiongroup.org>

<https://seethingwellsactiongroup.org/useful-information/>

Kingston History Research

www.kingstonhistoryresearch.co.uk

National Library of Scotland, old maps

<https://maps.nls.uk/os/>

National Newspaper Archive

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.com/home>

World Health Organisation and other official information on cholera

<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/cholera>

<https://journals.asm.org/doi/10.1128/microbiolspec.poh-0012-2015>

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7150208/>

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/laboratory-biosafety-biosecurity/pathogen-safety-data-sheets-risk-assessment/vibrio-cholerae.html>

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24191858/>

https://epi-snow.ph.ucla.edu/Stream5_additionalitems_g.html

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22475662/>

MORE ONLINE REFERENCES

SEE BELOW

ONLINE REFERENCES, 2 [5 SEPTEMBER 2026]

John Snow, 1849, On the mode of communication of cholera, 1st Edition, London, John Churchill.

Report of the General Board of Health, 1850, on the epidemic cholera of 1848 & 1849, London, HMSO.

Arthur Hill Hassell, 1850, A microscopic examination of the water supplied to the inhabitants of London and the suburban districts, London, Samuel Highley.

John Snow, 1855, On the mode of communication of cholera, 2nd Edition, London, John Churchill.

John Simon, 1856, Report on the last two cholera epidemics of London, General Board of Health.

Mr & Mrs S. C. Hall, 1859, The book of the Thames, London, Arthur Hall, Virtue & Co.

Z. Colburn & W. H. Maw, 1867, The waterworks of London, London, E. & F. N. Spon.

Rowley W. C. Richardson, 1888, Surbiton. Thirty-two years of local self-government, Surbiton, Bull & Son.

Asa Briggs, 1961, Cholera in the nineteenth century, Past & Present, 19[1], pp. 76-96.

Jennifer K. Teschler, et al, 2015, Living in the matrix: assembly and control of *Vibrio cholerae* biofilms, Nat. Rev. Microbiol., 13[5], 255-268.