

London's lost rivers



By Bethan Cann

We all know London is renowned for its history, from the monarchy to rampaging serial killers, but after recently looking for different activities to do in the city, I learnt one

of the most interesting hidden histories are the lost rivers.

Beneath London's bustling streets, there are at least 12 rivers that have been lost over time, a network that's been forgotten despite people walking above them every minute of every day. The rivers are mostly tributaries of the Thames, and as London became industrialised and urbanised in the 17th to 19th centuries, they became polluted so had to be covered over.

The rivers are still much more than just small streams, even if we can no longer see them. In their prime they were lifelines for the city, providing fresh water and channels for trade. Each river has its own story, some dating back to the beginning of London's civilisation.

The river Walbrook was a foundation for early settlement in Roman Londinium. Archaeologists have discovered religious temples and artifacts along the banks of where it ran. As well as being at the heart of Roman Londinium, the river was a marker of faith, commerce and community. Some historians believe the Walbrook shaped the geography of London today, determining how roads, bridges and neighbourhoods developed.

Other rivers don't have such serene ideologies behind them. The Tyburn you may have heard of, due to giving its name to the infamous Tyburn Gallows, which was once the site of public executions. Similarly, the Effra which ran through Brixton into the Thames at Vauxhall is notable in Victorian legend, suggesting that when it would overflow, coffins would float down it creating tales of ghostly horror.

If you have a keen eye, you can notice where a hidden river lays beneath by looking at street names. A perfect example of this is the river Fleet, which of course is now an iconic landmark for the British printing and newspaper industry, Fleet Street.

One of the main reasons many of these rivers were covered was driven by the recurring cholera outbreaks in the 19th century, allowing the infection to travel at speed. Engineer Sir Joseph Bazalgette, founded a new sewage system for the capital that incorporated many of the rivers into underground channels, protecting the Thames from contamination.

In certain parts of London, you can hear the rivers below, twisting their way through their underground network, and there are even tours you can take to embark on London's waterway past.

The rivers serve as a great reminder that London wasn't always made of skyscrapers and concrete, but it was first shaped by nature. They will always remain part of the city and influence London's legacy, whether we can see them or not.