

RIVERS UNDER LONDON

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London's Lost Rivers: The Hackney Brook and other North West Passages.

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Iain Sinclair takes a look at the rivers of London which have either faded out of the minds of Londoners or else disappeared completely. He considers what relationship these 'lost' rivers have with the idea of 'northness' within London and beyond.

The **Fleet RIVER** was legendarily filthy. Redesigned as a Venetian-style canal by Christopher Wren after the Fire of London, it was quickly overtaken by grim reality. Jonathan Swift, in 1710, wrote about the Fleet filled with "the sweepings from butchers' stalls, dung, guts and blood." A few years later Alexander Pope described how "Fleet-ditch with disemboгуing streams / Rolls the large tribute of dead dogs to the Thames." It is no surprise then that the lower Fleet was culverted in huge storm sewer tunnels where it has remained ever since. Yet before the river became more trouble than it was worth, it was a crucial route in as well as out. Everything from Welsh cheese to coals from Newcastle arrived at the Fleet wharves, and even the stones for Old St. Paul's Cathedral were unloaded here.

The rivers may be hidden but they are far from gone. It is very hard to stop a river from flowing, so they have merely been diverted into the sewer system, often as part of Joseph Bazalgette's monumental tunneling programme during the 1860s and 1870s. They can still be seen if you know where to look, flowing through culverts and under gratings. Sometimes they are hidden in plain sight. The Hampstead and Highgate Ponds are former reservoirs created by damming two streams that form the Fleet. Regent's Park Lake was originally fed by the Tyburn, while the Serpentine was landscaped from the Westbourne in 1731 for the benefit of George II's consort, Queen Caroline. Unfortunately the sewage problem eventually rendered both rivers unsuitable for ornamental ponds, and they were diverted away.

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Camden. **The Camden Catacombs**, as they have become known are were once owned by British Railways but have now passed into multiple ownership. Some sections were demolished during the redevelopment of the area while other sections belong to Camden Market who discourage access.



They were built in the 19th Century as stables for horses and pit ponies that were used to shunt railway wagons. The tunnels run under the Euston mainline, under the goods depot at Primrose Hill, beneath Gilbeys Bonded Warehouse on the **Regents Canal** and under Camden Lock Market. Their route can be traced from the distinctive cast-iron grilles set at regular intervals into the road surface; originally the only source of light for the horses below.



The network of tunnels also includes an underground canal basin and this is clearly visible, close to Camden Lock where the towpath is carried across it on a bridge. The tunnels also gave access to the basements of a number of Victorian Warehouses but most of these and sections of the tunnel network were lost during a major redevelopment of the area in the 1980's.



HORSE TUNNEL



THE UNDERGROUND REGENT CANAL BASIN