

Monster fatberg goes on display at London Museum

adapted from an article by Jason Daley

- 1 You might be forgiven for thinking that the Beast of London's Whitechapel district is a nickname for Jack the Ripper, but in fact it is the name of a much more recent villain. In September 2017, sewer workers in London discovered the Beast in the Whitechapel sewer, an enormous fatberg made of oil and grease poured down London drains mixed with flushed wet wipes, diapers and condoms that failed to disintegrate. Though it was cleaned out by sewer workers, a bit of the Beast still remains, and now the lipid-curious can take a look at this bit of the fatberg at the Museum of London.



- 2 So why would a museum put a rancid piece of grease and diapers on display? According to the museum, its collection already includes exhibits on London's Victorian-era sewer system, which in the 19th century helped the city fight water-borne diseases and problems with open sewage. At the time it was a huge innovation, but now, that system is struggling to keep up with modern plumbing and modern sewage. In recent decades, the amount of oil and grease dumped into the sewer has multiplied, and residents have not gotten the message that wet wipes, diapers and other things do not belong in the toilet. All that has led to a plague of fatbergs in the last decade. "Here at the museum we are all about reflecting the real lived experience of Londoners and it is part of our season exploring the highs and lows of London city life," explains Vyki Sparkes, the curator of social and working history. "I don't think you can get much lower than a fatberg."
- 3 16; the Whitechapel behemoth — which was akin to concrete — was cut to pieces using high-powered hoses, though those eventually failed to do the trick and shovels and saws were required. Workers then lifted chunks out through manholes. That means not many large pieces were recovered or saved.
- 4 To preserve their piece of the berg, the museum chose to dry it. That reduced the overwhelming smell, but Sharon Robinson-Calver, who led the conservation team, says there are still drain-fly larvae in the fat, which still occasionally mature and fly out. "They seem quite happy," she says. "They've got a good food source. They pop out and fly around from time to

time, which will be fascinating for visitors. It is part of the mystery of the fatberg, it's the gift that keeps on giving."

- 5 Andy Holbrook, of the museum's conservation department, says the sewer sample will remain on display for six months. Since conserving sewage is a pretty new museum science, he says he is unsure how long the chunk will last after that. "I think we will wait and see. It might explode. It might turn into a hundred million flies. We don't know. I don't think we are completely committed to keeping it."
- 6 20, there is hope for the fatberg. Keeping fats in cold, oxygen-less environments has preserved them for centuries, as in the case of Irish bog butter. Divers have also recovered 340-year-old cheese from a shipwreck in Sweden.
- 7 In the meantime, Becky Trotman at Thames Water, a utility company responsible for water supply and waste water treatment, hopes that the display will raise public consciousness about the sewer system and how it shouldn't be treated, well, like a sewer. "This display is a vivid reminder to us all that out of sight is not gone forever," she says. "So please help keep London and all the sewers flowing — don't feed the fatberg."

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