

Water supply, sewerage management and street furniture in Finchley

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Introduction

The ancient parish of Finchley stretches from Henlys Corner in the south to Whetstone in the north, and from Dollis Brook in the west to Islington and St Pancras Cemetery in the east. The parish vestry was responsible for local government for most of the nineteenth century, and it was jealous of its powers. In 1836, the Poor Law Commissioners included Finchley in the Barnet union of parishes, and a meeting of Finchley ratepayers condemned its inadequate allocation of poor law guardians as a virtual disenfranchisement in the election of its officers, while several speakers condemned the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act as ‘an atrocious Whig measure’. A Local Board (formally Finchley Local Board and Urban Sanitary Authority) took over in 1878. In 1895 it was replaced by Finchley Urban District Council, which became the Municipal Borough of Finchley in 1933. In 1965 Finchley became part of the London Borough of Barnet.¹

Water has always been supplied to households in Finchley by commercial companies, but sewerage was the responsibility of the public sector until privatisation in 1989.

Water supply

In the middle of the nineteenth century the population of Finchley was rapidly expanding, and the water supply was inadequate and often contaminated, but in 1866 the vestry, always anxious to save money, declared that it was not necessary to do anything about it. However, in the same year the East Barnet Gas and Water Company was established by Act of Parliament. The *Barnet Press* for 11 September 1869 reported that the company was about to lay water mains in Whetstone, and landlords were urged to have their properties connected on the ground that the resulting reduction in fevers would result in a more regular payment of rents. By another Act of Parliament in 1872 the company became part of the Barnet District Gas and Water Company. Over the next thirty years, there were many complaints about the service, such as one in 1881 that the water ‘was insufficient in quantity and too hard for domestic use’. Supply was inadequate to meet the rapid expansion of the population. Another problem was that the extraction of water north of Barnet lowered the water table so much that local wells dried up, and at one stage the company had to buy water from the New River Company. In 1880, Henry ‘Inky’ Stephens (of Stephens’ Ink Company) installed his own water tower, which still survives, to supply his home, Avenue House in East End Road. Some houses were still being supplied by wells contaminated with sewage in the 1880s. In 1901 the district council complained that the water rate was too high, and the company justified it by saying that expensive deep boring had been necessary.²

The company changed its name to Barnet District Water Company in 1950 following the nationalisation of the gas industry. In 1960 it became part of the Lee Valley Water Company, and this in turn became part of Three Valleys Water plc in 1994. This company and its predecessors had been owned by the French multinational company Veolia since 1987, and it changed its name to Veolia Water Central Limited in 2009. Veolia sold the company in 2012, and it changed its name to Affinity Water Limited, which as of 2021 is owned by a consortium including the German Allianz Group.³

Sewerage

Sewerage in Finchley was a major problem in the mid-nineteenth century, and in 1867 complaints to the Home Secretary led to an enquiry. The inspector warned that Finchley was in poor sanitary condition, with polluted streams and pools, and many houses were being built without sewers. A cholera outbreak led to the



Figure 1. Workmen laying a sewer pipe at an unknown location in Finchley in the late nineteenth century.
Courtesy of Barnet Local Studies

construction of sewers and tanks, but these were full within a year. The Public Health Act 1872 established sanitary authorities, and in 1874 several alternative sewerage schemes for the whole of Finchley Parish were submitted in a report to the Rural Sanitary Authority of Barnet Union, but the Finchley Vestry rejected all of them on the ground that there were conflicting scientific opinions on the best method of disposing of sewage, and it was best to see the results of experiments in other areas before proceeding. In 1879 the Medical Officer of Health of the newly appointed Local Board reported that little had changed since 1867. There were sewage farms in Strawberry Vale and Summers Lane, but it is uncertain what area they covered (Figure 1).⁴

Over the next few years, the Thames and Lea Conservancy Boards complained several times about the pollution of streams and watercourses in Finchley, and a number of sewerage schemes were proposed. In 1882 the Local Board recommended a parliamentary Private Bill for the sewerage and improvement of Finchley, but this was rejected by the ratepayers by 880 votes to 383. In an 1890 report, Francis Smythe, who became Surveyor and Inspector of Nuisances to the Board in the late 1880s, condemned the rejection as 'penny wise and pound foolish', as a private Act would have saved great expense in the long run. A sewerage scheme proposed by the then Surveyor, G. W. Brumell, in 1883 encountered so much opposition that it was rejected in favour of his alternative, and in Smythe's view, inferior one. This was approved by the Local Government Board in 1884, together with a £60,000 loan to pay for it. The first contractor appointed went bankrupt, causing delay and extra expense, and work finally commenced on 30 March 1885. The Finchley Local Board had to apply for further loans totalling more than £24,000 to cover additional costs. According to Smythe, these were necessary mainly to cover costs not allowed for in the original estimate, such as easements and compensation to landowners for crossing their land. These expenses were high because most property owners demanded exorbitant sums for access to their land, and it was cheaper to pay up than to dispute them.⁵ Even after its completion there were still many complaints, and sewerage featured in a long running dispute between Frederick Goodyear of North Finchley and Henry Stephens. In 1897 microbiological treatment of sewage was introduced.⁶

Figure 2. Stink pipe manufactured by H. J. Rogers at the corner of Finchley High Road and Christchurch Avenue. *Author*



Finchley Council retained management of sewerage until responsibility was transferred to Middlesex County Council in 1938. Sewerage passed to the Greater London Council when the county council was abolished in 1965. The Water Act of 1973 removed sewerage from local authority control, and the Thames Water Authority took over; it became Thames Water plc on privatisation in 1989.⁷

Stink pipes

Stink pipes, formally called sewer ventilation pipes, were a fascinating feature of nineteenth and early twentieth century sewerage management. They were one of a number of solutions proposed in the middle of the nineteenth century to the problem of the build up of gases in sewers. Vertical hollow columns on pavements were connected to the sewer and conveyed gases up to a safe height. In 1870, the leading sanitary expert William Corfield described the use of stink pipes in Liverpool. He recommended combining them with Archimedean screw pumps to draw the gas up and charcoal filters to clean the gas, but it seems unlikely that these refinements were installed in Finchley. He warned against setting light to the flammable gas, citing a case where it was piped to the furnace of a soap works in Southwark. The gas exploded and destroyed the furnace.⁸ The modern method of getting rid of sewer gases is through pipes which run from toilet waste conduits and up the sides of houses.

Many stink pipes have been removed over the past hundred years, but a considerable number still survive. A few are designated as Grade II Listed Buildings, although none in Finchley. They are maintained by Thames Water, apart from a few small ones in private gardens. The surviving pipes are made of iron and many have peeling paint, but a few look well maintained. Some have lost their top part and a number only survive as stubs, but intact ones continue to serve their original purpose (Figure 2).

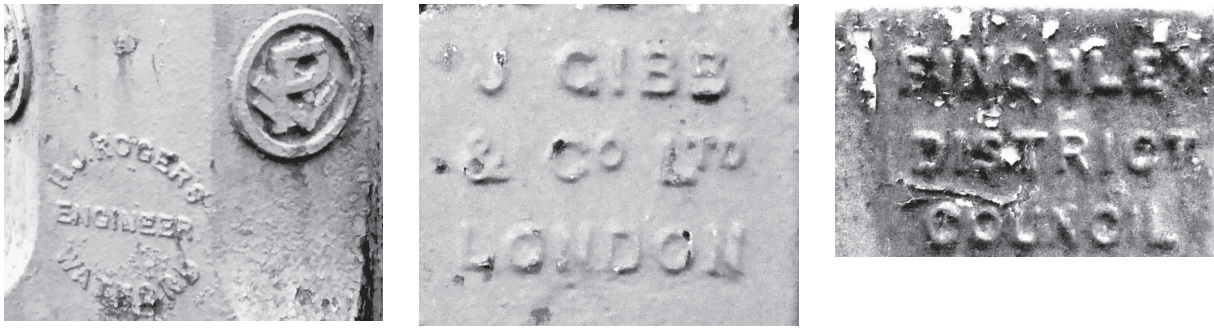


Figure 3. Inscription of H. J. Rogers. *Author*

Figures 4 and 5. Stink pipes of J. Gibb & Co Ltd are usually also inscribed with the name of the council. *Author*

I have surveyed the area of the former Finchley District Council for stink pipes and I believe that I have found almost all of the surviving ones. They date to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and the great majority are inscribed with the name of the manufacturer.

Henry John Rogers supplied most stink pipes in Finchley until his death in 1910. In the 1911 Ordnance Survey maps for mid and north Finchley, all his pipes are in roads which are shown on the maps, whereas most pipes made by other manufacturers are in roads which are not shown.⁹ Rogers was born at Watford in 1846. He trained as an engineer in Crewe at the London and North Western Railway and then worked in the South African mining industry. In 1885, after his return to England, he became a member of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers. In the same year he bought an engineering works in Watford which specialised in paper making, and he later took out several patents for improvements in the straining of paper pulp. His work was diverse, including carrying out major electrical machinery contracts, and shortly before he died he built a gas compression plant (Figure 3).¹⁰

The second most common stink pipes are inscribed 'J. Gibb & Co Ltd, London'. Gibb's stink pipes are usually inscribed with the name of the council and the company also made pipes for Friern Barnet Urban District Council. They must have been manufactured after November 1904, when James Gibb & Co Limited was incorporated (Figures 4 and 5).

Two other manufacturers used the same design as Rogers. Gibb's stink pipes are almost identical, apart from having no logo and using an angular style of zigzag decoration, whereas the Rogers pipes have a logo (pictured above) and the zigzags are shallower. The one stink pipe I have found inscribed 'B. C. Badham and Co, Holborn, London',¹¹ is identical to the Rogers ones apart from the company name. Stink pipes made by other manufacturers have a simpler design, perhaps suggesting that they were made later.

Two stink pipes may have been for sewers running along the Great Northern Railway, now the Northern Line. One, which is made by Rogers, is on the road bridge over the railway on Nether Street near The Grove. The other, which is on the footpath under the line between Trinity Road and Manor Park Road, is the pipe made by B. C. Badham & Co.

The sewerage scheme of the late 1880s included ventilating shafts (stink pipes), and a list of excess expenses includes £109 6s for one in Whetstone. Smythe commented in his 1890 report: 'The erection of ventilating shafts though a matter of time will eventually prove a boon to the District'.¹² Installation probably ceased around the time of the First World War as all the surviving stink pipes were made by businesses which started trading before 1910.

Stink pipes in Finchley District (Figure 6)

Inscribed 'H. J. Rogers, Engineer, Watford' (Figure 3)

- Church Path, near Woodside Park Road
- Durham Road near Leicester Road
- East End Road near Stanley Road
- Elmfield Road
- Fairlawn Avenue
- Corner of Finchley High Road and Christchurch Avenue (Figure 2)
- Corner of Finchley High Road and Hertford Road
- Finchley High Road near Oak Lane
- Corner of Friern Park and Grove Road
- Hall Street
- Hendon Avenue near Hendon Lane
- Corner of Hendon Lane and Crooked Usage
- Corner of Hendon Lane and Cyprus Road
- Holden Road near Guildown Avenue
- Lansdowne Road (1)
- Lansdowne Road (2)
- Lichfield Grove
- Lincoln Road
- Long Lane near Cromwell Road
- Long Lane near Font Hills
- Long Lane near St Paul's Way
- Nether Street near The Grove
- Regents Park Road near North Crescent
- Squires Lane near Queens Avenue
- Torrington Park near Friary Road
- Corner of Woodhouse Road and Penstanton Avenue
- Woodside Grange Road near Grangeway

Inscribed 'B. C. Badham & Co, Holborn, London'

- Footpath under the Northern Line between Trinity Road and Manor Park Road

Inscribed 'J. Gibb & Co Ltd, London' and 'Finchley District Council' (Figures 4 and 5)

- Friern Watch Avenue near Finchley High Road
- Hervey Close
- Holmwood Gardens
- Manor View near Rosemary Avenue

Some stink pipes in other Districts¹⁷

Friern Barnet Urban District. Inscribed 'J. Gibb & Co Ltd, London' and 'Friern Barnet Urban District Council'

- Ashurst Road
- Bramber Road
- Chandos Avenue
- Friern Park (no council inscription)
- Horsham Avenue

Barnet Urban District

- Cherry Hill, no inscription
- County Gate, no inscription
- By Dollis Brook north of Horseshoe Lane, no inscription
- Dale Close, inscribed 'A C Woodrow & Co, London'
- Fairfield Way, no inscription
- Quinta Drive, no inscription
- Raydean Road, inscribed 'JNS'
- Shelford Road, inscribed 'Broad & Co Ltd, London'

- Penstanton Avenue, behind fence but has Gibb style decoration
- Ridgeview Road near Woodside Lane (no council inscription)
- Windermere Avenue near East End Road

Inscribed 'Wm E Farrer Ltd, Birmingham' (William E Farrer Ltd incorporated 1909¹³)

- Nether Street near Birkbeck Street
- Nether Street near Coleridge Road

Ham Baker & Co Limited (incorporated 1901¹⁴)

- Long Lane near Dukes Avenue, inscribed 'Ham Baker'
- Westbury Grove, inscribed 'Ham Baker & Co Limited, Engineers, Westminster' (Figure 7)

Inscribed 'Broad & Co Ltd, No. 1, London' (incorporated 1896¹⁵)

- Chalgrove Gardens

Inscribed 'Adams Hydraulics Ltd, York' (incorporated 1903¹⁶)

- Gordon Road near Elm Park Road

No inscription

- Lovers Walk west of the railway line, has the Rogers decoration
- Lovers Walk west of Ballards Lane, has the Rogers decoration
- The Ridgeway near St Paul's Way
- The Ridgeway near Willow Way
- St Paul's Way
- Wentworth Avenue
- Woodhouse Road near School Way

Illegible inscription

- Briarfield Avenue
- Courthouse Gardens

Hendon Urban District

- Brookfield Avenue/Wise Lane, no inscription
- Corner of Finchley Road and Helenslea Avenue, no inscription
- Finchley Road near Hayes Crescent, inscribed 'Ham Baker & Co Limited, Engineers, Westminster'
- Finchley Road near Helenslea Avenue, inscribed 'Ham Baker & Co Limited, Engineers, Westminster'
- Fryent Grove, no inscription
- Winnington Road by Hampstead Golf Club, no inscription

East Barnet Urban District

- Shaftesbury Avenue, inscribed 'Adams Hydraulics Ltd, York'



Figure 6. Map of Finchley District, showing the boundary (thick dashed line) and location of stink pipes (black circles). *Background map based on data from openstreetmap.org. © OpenStreetMap contributors*

Street ironware

Henry Rogers supplied storm drains and manhole covers in Victoria Park, which opened in 1902. There are also a few of his storm drains, manhole covers and fire hydrants in Finchley streets. James Gibb was the main early supplier of storm drains. Most are inscribed J. Gibb and Co Ltd, but ones with 'James Gibb & Co' are also common, and these must date to between the mid-1880s and Gibb's incorporation in 1904.¹⁸ He also supplied a few fire hydrants and manhole covers on pavements, but like the stink pipes they are all inscribed with the name of the limited company, dating them to after 1904. The only Gibb manhole covers I have seen

Figure 7. Stink pipe in Westbury Grove
manufactured by Ham Baker. *Author*



in a road are in a quiet cul de sac, perhaps because those in busier roads could not stand up to a century of traffic. Gibb's name is found on street ironwork outside Finchley, and a storm drain he made for Southgate Local Board is dated 1893.¹⁹

Some circular manhole covers in Finchley were made by A. C. Woodrow & Co. of 34 High Holborn. Most are inscribed FUDC for 'Finchley Urban District Council'; a few have 'Borough of Finchley', so must date to after 1933, when Finchley became a municipal borough. These manhole covers are either inscribed 'SEWERAGE' or 'SURFACE WATER'.²⁰ Alexander Charles Woodrow was born in 1894 and his business is first recorded in 1923.²¹ The most common manhole covers, which are triangular with rounded corners, are inscribed 'Broad & Co. Ltd' and 'Borough of Finchley'. There are also storm drains manufactured by Woodrow and Broad.

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Notes and references

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- 2 *Victoria History*, p. 79; G. P. R. Lawrence, *Village into Borough*, 2nd ed., Finchley Public Libraries Committee, 1964, pp. 21-23*; *Hansard*, local and personal acts, HC Deb 10 August 1866 vol. 184 c2166*; Barnet District Gas and Water Act 1872*; Stephens House and Gardens, The Water System*
- 3 *Victoria History*, p. 79; Affinity Water, *Our history**; Companies House
- 4 *Victoria History*, pp. 78-80; *Village into Borough*, pp. 21-22; *The Sanitary Record*, 3 January 1879, p. 16*; 'History of Finchley Sewerage Schemes' by Francis Smythe, Finchley Local Board Surveyor, report for the chairman and members of the Investigation Committee, 6 August 1890, pp. 1-2, 5, 9, ACC23520/2/1800, Barnet Council Local Studies and Archives
- 5 'History of Finchley Sewerage Schemes', pp. 1-21; *The Sanitary Record*, 15 December 1884, p. 268*
- 6 *Victoria History*, pp. 78-80
- 7 *Victoria History*, p. 78-79; *The Surveyor and Municipal and County Engineer*, volume 88, 5 October 1957, p. 1037, describing the Middlesex County Council (Sewerage) Act 1938; Greater London Council, London Metropolitan Archives*; Thames Water plc – Company Profile, Information, Business Description, History, Background Information*
- 8 W. H. Corfield, *A Digest of Facts Relating to the Treatment and Utilization of Sewage*, Macmillan, 2nd ed., 1871, pp. 154-58
- 9 Mid Finchley 1911 and North Finchley 1911, Old Ordnance Survey Maps, The Godfrey Edition
- 10 Henry John Rogers, *Grace's Guide to British Industrial History**
- 11 B. C. Badham & Co also supplied a few storm drains and metal plates set in kerbs in Finchley. Benjamin C. Badham wrote a letter to *The Engineer* on 'Steam on tramways' in 1877 (16 March 1877, p. 185) and his business is recorded in 1890 (*The Builder*, 15 March 1890, p. 200).
- 12 'History of Finchley Sewerage Schemes', pp. 12, 19, 28
- 13 Companies House. See also William Edward Farrer, *Grace's Guide**
- 14 Companies House. See also Ham, Baker and Co, *Grace's Guide**
- 15 Broad and Co was established 1882, incorporated in 1896 and was taken over by Travis Perkins in 1975. See Broad & Co, *Grace's Guide** and Travis Perkins, *Grace's Guide**
- 16 Companies House. See also Adams-Hydraulics, *Grace's Guide**
- 17 Photographs of stink pipes in Barnet are at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Sewer_ventilation_pipes_in_the_London_Borough_of_Barnet
- 18 Companies House; James Gibb & Co, *Grace's Guide**. James Gibb and Co started trading in 1876 and the business incorporated as James Gibb and Co Limited on 30 November 1904, company number 82716. James Gibb died in 1930. The company ceased trading in 1984 and was dissolved on 18 April 1988.
- 19 A storm drain in Brownlow Road, London N11, is inscribed 'James Gibb & Co', 'Southgate Local Board' and '1893'.
- 20 Most manhole covers inscribed 'FUDC' and 'SEWERAGE' or 'SURFACE WATER' have no manufacturer's name, but they are of a similar design as the Woodrow ones and probably also made by them.
- 21 Alexander Charles Woodrow, *Grace's Guide** and A. C. Woodrow and Co, *Grace's Guide**

* source accessed online