

Dirty and Dangerous: Nasty Jobs from the Past

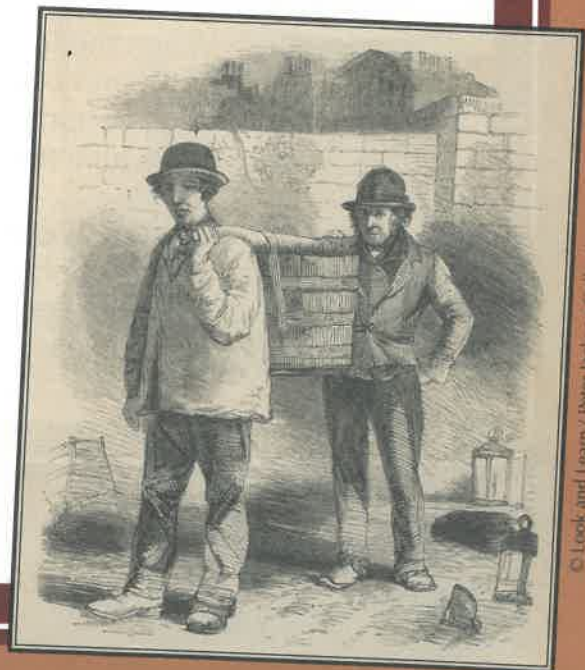
Throughout history, people have had to do all sorts of dangerous, disgusting jobs to earn enough money to survive. Luckily, many of these jobs no longer exist and children go to school instead. Read about these awful occupations and be thankful that you don't do any of them for a living...

Gong Scourer

These days, flushing toilets are taken for granted. However, until Victorian times, there was no adequate drainage system in most British cities. Most of what we now flush down the toilet was instead collected in vast holes dug into the ground called cesspits. The unenviable job of a gong scourer was to empty these foul-smelling pits.

The name 'gong scourer' first arose during the Tudor period, when an informal name for a toilet was a 'gong'. A gong scourer also went by other titles, such as a 'gong farmer' or a 'night soil man'.

Due to the very nature of their job, gong scourers were only permitted to work after nightfall, when there were fewer people on the streets to be offended by their sight (and smell!). They would shovel the waste out of the cesspits, transfer it into barrels and then transport it by horse and cart to rural areas. They could then sell the waste to farmers to use as much sought-after fertiliser on their fields.



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Leech Collector

A leech is a variety of worm with a mouth at one end, which it uses to suck blood out of other creatures. Leeches were commonly used in medicine for many centuries and were all the rage in the 1800s.

During that time, it was fashionable for doctors to use leeches to extract 'bad blood' from patients. Doctors of the period believed that 'bad blood' was responsible for many illnesses, and that applying leeches to the body could cure them. We now know this not to be the case — 'bad blood' is not a cause of illness.



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Leech collectors would wade tentatively into muddy marshes or stagnant bogs to collect leeches that they could then sell to doctors. Leech collectors would often use their own legs to attract the leeches. When the leeches had drunk their fill of blood, they would fall off and could be gathered. As a result of their unfortunate profession, many leech collectors suffered from blood loss or were badly affected by infected wounds on their legs.

As the 1800s drew to a close, so many leeches had been collected that their numbers were dwindling across Europe. Doctors stopped using leeches to treat their patients, and leech collecting began to die out as an occupation. What a relief!

Chimney Sweep's Apprentice

During the 1700s and 1800s, orphans (or children from very poor families) were commonly sent to work with chimney sweeps. Children were used to clean chimneys because, unlike adults, they could easily negotiate the narrow chimneys.

The work was not easy; it was punishing and treacherous. Clambering up the inside of the chimney would lead to cuts and grazes on the child's hands, knees and elbows. In an attempt to toughen up the children's skin, the master chimney sweep would rub these wounds with salty water while standing by a fire: an agonisingly painful process. While their apprentices were working, some masters would even light fires in the hearth below to encourage them to pick up the pace. These children also ran the risk of getting stuck up the chimney; if this happened, they had to be pulled out with a rope. However, if there was a fall of soot, they could suffocate.

Sadly, working with chimney sweeps often led children to an early death. Years of contact with soot could cause cancer, and inhaling soot gave many of them breathing problems. In 1840, a law was passed banning anyone under the age of 16 from being a chimney sweep's apprentice. However, this largely went ignored and it wasn't until 1875 that a law requiring police to enforce the previous ban finally abolished this cruel practice. From this point on, chimney sweeps were obliged to use flexible brushes instead.



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Fancy trying these gruesome jobs? I thought not! When you're doing your chores, remember — once you might have been doing something far worse!