

## Crookes History Booklets

These short explorations of local history topics were compiled by Constance Hallwright

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### Sewer Gas Destructor Lanterns

When sewers were first laid in London (after the Great Stink which so vexed Parliament), they had not considered the effect of the methane, which built up in the sewers. Methane is lighter than air, so it rises to the top of the sewer, but cannot escape. Methane is also highly flammable; a spark would ignite it, with explosive results. There were a number of cases of roads being blown up, injuring people and causing great destruction. This problem was worse in hilly areas, as the gas would rise to the highest point.

In 1894, Joseph Edmund Webb of Birmingham patented a solution to this problem – a Sewer Gas Destructor Lantern. This worked using a small flame generated by burning town gas, which acts as a chimney to draw the methane up from the sewer and up the post. The methane is ignited by the gas flame within a lantern. The invention was practical, needed hardly any maintenance, and gave off light, too. Obviously, the lantern has to burn all day and night; the illumination is just co-incident. The invention made Mr Webb reasonably wealthy. As Sheffield is so very hilly, we got more of these lanterns than anywhere else, 84 of them, making us the 'capital' of the destructor lanterns. 25 of them remain, of which 20 have received Grade 2 listed status. Three of Sheffield's lanterns survive in Crookes. Although no longer illuminated, they still fulfil their secondary function of preventing bad odours from the sewers, by allowing the methane to escape from the top of the pole. Amey has been instructed to restore the appearance of the lanterns, on Mulehouse Road, on School Road, and on Stothard Road.