



# STORIES FROM THE NIGHT SOIL



## WHO ARE WE?

The Field Detectives seek opportunities to survey fields that can tell us more about how our historic landscapes evolved. One avenue of investigation we are involved in is the collection, transport, and usage of Night Soil from Nottingham via the Grantham Canal. It may not be everyone's cup of tea, but we feel that the story is worth telling.

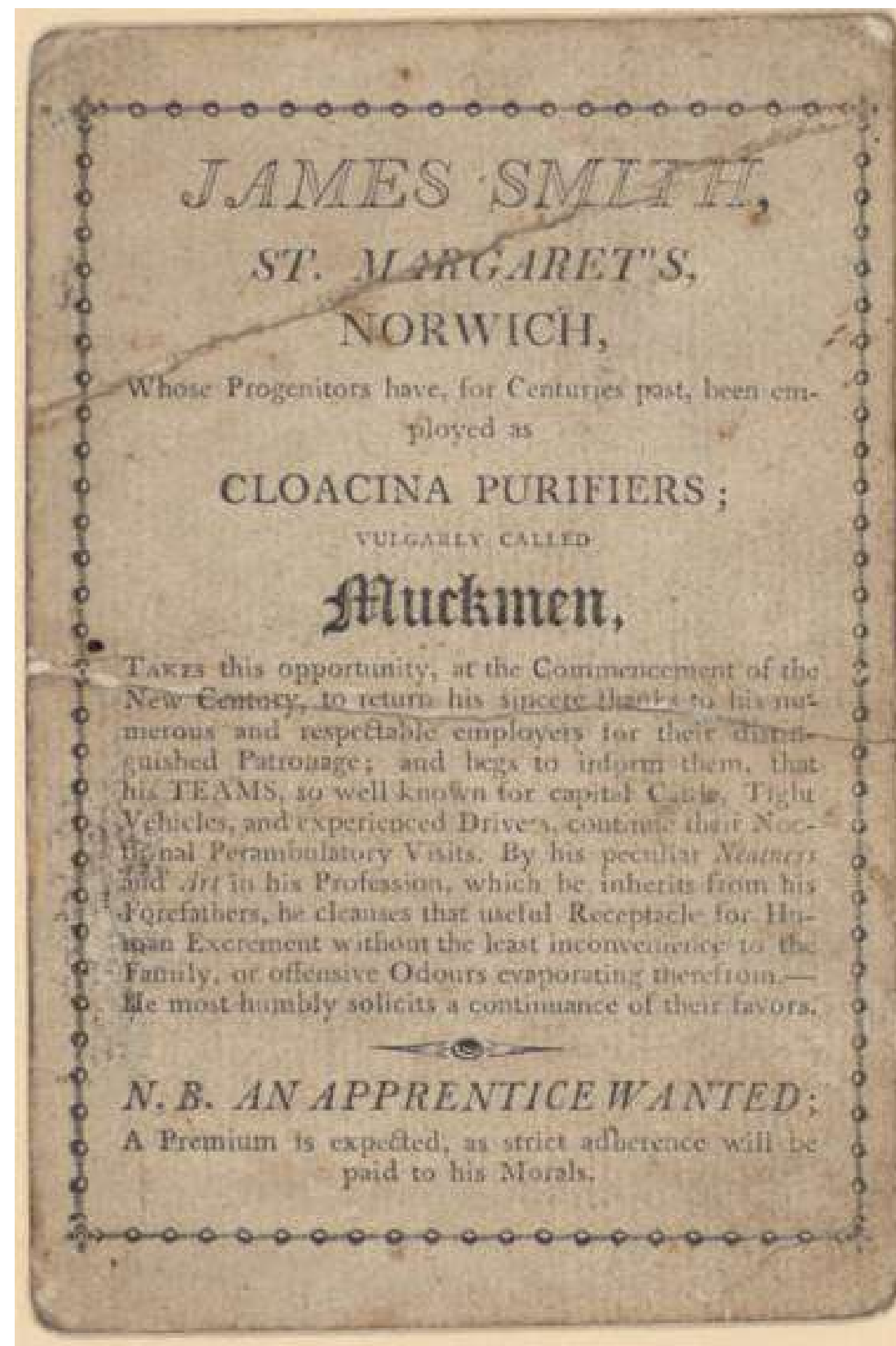
Over the last 22 years, we have worked with Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire landowners on several historic landscape investigations. One constant theme that has emerged in almost all of our field survey reports is artefacts relating to the transport of Nottingham Night Soil.

The story of Nottingham Night Soil is integral to the Story of Nottingham's Industries because it is a story about the people who were there, told through their visits to the toilet. They represent many untold stories relating to the life and times of people living and working in Nottingham during the 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## WHAT IS NIGHT SOIL?

Human sewage, the resource we refer to here as 'night soil', has been used as a fertiliser by market gardeners throughout history. It became an organised, if highly unpleasant trade, by the 16th century until the construction of a proper sewerage system in the 19th century. The night soil man was a familiar figure on our streets, and in some parts of the country, the collection of night soil was a system that operated well into the 20th century.

**"THE WASTE OF SEWAGE IS A NATIONAL CALAMITY...THE PEOPLE TAKE IT QUIETLY, AND DIE AS CHOLERA AND TYPHUS REQUIRE THEM."**



Night soil men, possibly Walsall, c.1910

## OUR NIGHT SOIL STORY

The following report about Nottingham pail middens appeared in 1875

The Nottingham pails or tubs are designed for the reception of excreta, ashes and ordinary domestic refuse as well; they are in fact small moveable middens possessing great advantages over even the best types of fixed middens. The main advantage lies in the fact that by the removal of the receptacle when full, and its replacement by a perfectly clean one, greater cleanliness is ensured than could possibly be secured by any other arrangement. A little antiseptic powder (chlorate of lime) put in every clean tub which is sent out helps to make them drier and less offensive.

The most essential point in connection with its use is the exclusion of such house-slops as can be poured down sink-stones or gullies. We are convinced of the importance of this, as most of the offensiveness of these tubs has been owing to the fact that the contents were sloppy, and this has been found due to the absence of proper drainage in the yards, courts, or streets. It should be a hard and fast rule, therefore, that wherever tub closets are erected, adequate arrangements for drainage (that is, for carrying away the house slops) should be provided.

It is unnecessary to remark that the frequency of removal is the one essential in the case of an all-pail system. Without this can be ensured, they must prove a failure. In this town (Nottingham) there are 18 carters and collectors, 9 horses for 4,500 pails. Where an ordinary dwelling, such as those erected recently in the new part of the town, is provided as it should be with a separate closet, the removal of the tub should be effected at least twice a week; where, as in the old town, one closet has to serve for 3 or more houses, more frequently in proportion in the case of some lodging houses, the removal is required once a day.



## FINDS FROM THE TOILET AND THE STORIES THEY TELL

The image shown left is an assemblage of Night Soil artefacts, representing a broad selection of finds associated with the Grantham Canal following over 22 years of field survey work around the Cropwell Butler and Cropwell Bishop areas of Nottinghamshire.

### How many can you recognize?

These artefacts have a human association, and they all have a story to tell. For example, a copper advertising token introduced us to the life and times of Mr Henry Spencer.

There were also some extremely valuable losses relating to the use of the Nottingham privies, including two gold coins recorded during our field survey activities.



Nottingham market place with wagons, vendors and shoppers, early 1900s

Spencer, tea dealer, Nottingham No. 32 Long Row was occupied in the name Henry Spencer 1873-4 as grocer & provision dealer, then as Henry Spencer & Co. 1875-87 as tea dealers & grocers, with no. 33 added in 1886. The business continued thus until 1899, though listed at no. 33 only (plus branch shops) until again 32 & 33 from 1893. The final phase of use of this address was as Spencer's Ltd 1900-10. The token 'guinea' was probably first issued within the first spell 1873-85 of using no.32 as sole address. A fresh phase began in 1913 under a firm styled H. Spencer & Co., tea merchants, at 15 Foreman Street.

Source: 1983\_BNJ\_53\_11.pdf (britnumsoc.org)

## BE A POO FIELD DETECTIVE & TELL US YOUR STORIES

INVESTIGATE THE NIGHT SOIL STORY FROM WHERE YOU LIVE AND TELL US ALL ABOUT YOUR INVESTIGATION

## WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

email: [fielddetectives@talktalk.net](mailto:fielddetectives@talktalk.net)

## DO WE STILL USE NIGHT SOIL TODAY?

Yes, we do. In the 19th century, sewage was marketed under creatively attractive names to remove its stigma, and today we can see it being repackaged and marketed in the same way. Retreated sewage sludge known as Biosolids is now big business and becoming bigger all the time.

Every water company in Britain is busy converting sewage sludge to fertilizer in a tightly regulated way. The dumping of sewage at sea, which still accounted for 30% of disposal in the early 1990s, was completely phased out by 2000, and by then, over 55% of sewage was 'converted' and put back on the land.

However, there are increasing concerns about the dangers biosolids pose. Not because of the obvious things associated with sewage but from the longer-term hidden effects of more recent 'introductions' to human waste such as antibiotics, pathogens, synthetic organic compounds, and contaminant heavy metals, such as arsenic and cadmium chromium, lead, and mercury.

