

For the first time since the war, prostitutes were off streets in . . .

# London's killer smog of 1952

LONDONERS in the 1950s had long been used to their pea-souper fogs, a shrouding of their great city which inspired a Frank Sinatra song and evoked malevolent memories of Jack the Ripper and the fictional Mr Hyde.

When they awoke on Friday, December 5, 1952, to find a thick white blanket outside their windows, they braced themselves for train delays and tricky road conditions but little more than these familiar inconveniences.

They waited for the wind that would lift the capital's veil. But, as the day progressed, there was not even the hint of a breeze.

The fog, in fact, turned into something much worse, horrible enough to give another new meaning to the term Black Friday.

Trapped by a stationary mass of warm air overhead, the fog became mixed with the smoke and soot of millions of chimneys. The exhaust fumes of vehicles added their dirty mass to the "cocktail".

And London was hurled into a pollution nightmare, paralysed in a trail of chaos and death.

The killer smog, as it was called, penetrated homes, factories and offices, burning throats and tearing at lungs.

Victims choked in the streets, choked at work and choked in their sitting rooms and beds as the whole city was smothered in its fetid embrace.

For four days and nights, the swirling murk hung around. At the end, it had claimed 4000 lives, many of them children.

No more were London fogs cast as part of a world of mystery and romance, as pollution fighters were driven to act with deadly earnest.

On that morning of December 5, work-bound locals had given the fog barely a thought. It was denser than usual at this hour but everyone was sure it would disperse during the day.

By noon, however, the city was clogged with traffic moving at a crawl and, by mid-afternoon, drivers were abandoning their cars in the streets.

At Heathrow Airport, an incoming airliner became lost as the pilot tried to taxi to the passenger terminal.

After half an hour of going around in circles, the pilot cut his motors. Then a search party, which had set out in jeeps and motors to look for the plane, also became lost. From then on, all air traffic was suspended.

Shipping in the River Thames was also brought to a halt and, after reports that people were stumbling into the water at Royal Alfred Dock, seamen were escorted back to their vessels by police wearing lifejackets.

By the evening, the only



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public transport operating regularly was the underground railway. Long queues formed outside stations as platforms were jammed to overflowing.

As buses came to a complete halt, drivers were scared to leave their vehicles for fear of never finding them again.

A 17-year-old youth found a dozen of these buses straddled across the roads near his home in Beckenham, Kent, outside the capital. The drivers could barely see a hand in front of them, but the boy boldly assured them he could get them back to their garages.

"I have a radar mind," he explained. And after piloting all the buses back to their bases, he added that he had "always had a sort of sixth sense in the dark. I think I picked it up during the wartime blackout".

Most Londoners managed to grope their way home that night — whereupon, they banked up their coal fires and only made the smog worse.

By Saturday morning, the fog had become a pall of black vapor and medical authorities began to issue warnings that it posed a danger to human lives.

Radio broadcasts, urging householders to stay indoors if at all possible, began to go out every 20 minutes. But thousands developed violent coughs, fever turned eyes red and people with bronchial and asthmatic troubles began fighting for breath.

Doctors were overwhelmed

## HISTORICAL *Feature*

Inside the Earls Court arena, where a livestock show was being held, powerful lamps were used to cast light on proceedings but visibility in the main hall was still cut to five metres. Cattle died or became so ill they had to be slaughtered.

Some herdsmen resorted to tying sacking over their animals' nostrils and moistening the protection with whiskey to try to save their lives. Not only did the whiskey play work for one American rancher from Illinois, but his Aberdeen Angus heifer won the award for best heifer in the show.

Despite the grim conditions, Londoners insisted on taking their pleasures as best as possible. Many still went out to the cinema, walking there in a "crocodile" file, hanging onto the coat of the person ahead.

At some cinemas, managers invited potential patrons to inspect the auditorium before buying their tickets to "see what the smog levels are like first". People gladly took the advice and bought the cheaper seats nearer the screen. Often those who stuck to the traditional "smooching rows" at the back found it almost impossible to see the film.

An opera performance of La Traviata at the Sadlers Wells Theatre was halted after the first act because the smog inside the theatre was too thick.

Not surprisingly, there was also chaos at outdoor sporting events, when organisers were foolhardy enough to go ahead.

At the West Ham greyhound track, the operator of the mechanical hare could not see the distance between race competitors and the lure. When the dogs beat the hare, the meeting was abandoned.

Weekend wedding plans were shattered for hundreds of couples when it became not so much a question of "get me to the church on time" as "help me find the church on time". At Caxton Hall registry office in Westminster, schedules were scrapped and couples married as and when they got there.

BBC radio and television programs were severely disrupted because many artists and technicians found it impossible to reach the studios.



A very murky Queen's man, with sabre at the ready, stands guard outside Buckingham Palace.

Meanwhile, criminals made hay in the lack of daylight or night light. A dramatic increase in the number of assaults, hold-ups, rapes and smash-and-grab raids was reported.

The trouble was that while, in many cases, the guilty parties could not be seen, they themselves could not see what they were doing. Bricks were hurled through the windows of shops and goods eagerly seized, only for the thieves to be dismayed by their insignificant hauls once they could see to examine them.

That Saturday night was reckoned to be the first time since The Blitz during World War II that the city's prostitutes were off the streets.

At one of their popular haunts, Piccadilly Circus, there was only a religious fanatic going about his business. "Prepare to meet your God," he shouted through the gloom. "Doomsday approaches — this is the end of the world."

By Sunday morning, the smog was thicker than ever, muffling the sound of church bells. At times, it was calculated, visibility was down to 30cm.

All over London, people were continuing to die, particularly the elderly and middle-aged. At least 50 destitutes died from exposure.

Thousands of pets were also dying, even inside houses and apartments. Wildfowl from the royal parks were among hundreds of birds that smashed into buildings or crash-landed in the streets.

A flock of starlings, weighed down by the soot accumulation on their wings, crashed through a skylight at Waterloo Station, raising a shower of glass which injured homeless men and women sheltering below.

Adding to the misery, electricity supplies began to fail and the threat of food shortages grew, as lorry drivers gave up trying to deliver their loads.

On the Monday, the monstrous blanket was still there as people went to work and, while there were signs of some relief by mid-day — you could sometimes see across the street — the smog had closed in again by evening.

People were starting to wonder whether it would ever give way. But just after midnight, a light breeze appeared and

began blowing the smog eastwards. By the time most people ventured out of their beds that Tuesday morning, the lethal mass had disappeared.

What remained, as Londoners gave a collective sign of relief, was to discover the full extent of the horror they had been through.

People continued to die from the effects of the smog and it was 10 more days before the mortality rates could be evaluated.

The shocking truth was that the four-day phenomenon had killed 4000.

Ninety per cent of those who died were over the age of 45. But the death rate among children under one year doubled during the period.

An inquiry set up by Prime Minister Winston Churchill's Ministry of Health to investigate the disaster found that the major killer was oxides of sulphur derived from coal and its products.

They brought on a type of spasmodic bronchitis, which was particularly harmful to those already suffering from serious heart and lung conditions.

In the days that followed the killer smog, thousands who had not dared venture out of doors joined a stampede on shops for London's greatest Christmas spending bonanza since the end of the war.

Never, it seemed, had their hearts been more full of joy as crowds gathered around the huge Christmas tree in Trafalgar Square and thronged the gaily lit streets of the West End.

Inquiries into ways of preventing any repetition of the terrible loss of life, eventually paved the way for the Clean Air Act of 1956.

This served to remove much of the smoke from the atmosphere of London and other British cities by establishing heavy penalties for all pollution.

In December 1962, London was blanketed by a fog which was just as bad as the one that had descended a decade earlier.

This time the death toll was about 700. Too many by far, but the lessons of creating a cleaner atmosphere were painfully beginning to be learned.