SEWER GAS LAMPS  Circa 1890’s – 1940’s

In the London area of England, in the mid to late 1800’s, many of the larger sanitary sewers were not always laid on sufficient grade or on true line and grade: Those factors, in combination with “old” sewage, often resulted in the creation of strong odors and methane. Mains of this type were often vented ... to take the odors up and out of the sewers to points of discharge near/above the level of the adjacent home’s, etc. Certain of these problem sewers were in locations where the adjacent buildings were multi-storied; making the use of standard free-standing vent pipes less than viable.

In the 1890’s, Joseph Edmund Webb of Birmingham, England invented and patented a sewer gas “destructor” lamp. The concept was to vent the methane up out of the sewer main, through the lamp post to the burner within the lamp; where it would be burned (as the sole source of fuel for the lamp). It was soon realized that this operational scenario did not always work effectively; so most of these lamps were converted to work on “town gas”... all the while still connected to the sewer below. The heat generated (700 degrees F.) by the lamp head created an updraft through the lamp post (functioning as a vent) from the sewer main –pulling the methane up to the lamp head, where it was consumed along with the town gas. These lamps were lit 24/7.

Over their first 10 years of availability, these lamps were installed and used – in numbers upwards of 125 or so – in areas around London. Over the years, plumbing practices changed: Initially, house/building laterals had interceptor traps installed along their route to a point of discharge into the involved main line sewer. Later, those were no longer required ... allowing the sewer mains to (in effect) be vented up through the buildings’ plumbing systems – to points of release (via the building’s plumbing vent pipes) at/above the involved roof levels.

Only a few of these lamps physically still exist; a lesser number are in service – with “town gas” only serving as the source of fuel. One, on Carting Lane (Trafalgar Square), may still be getting some of its fuel from the sewer beneath it.
SHEFFIELD'S SEWER GAS DESTRUCTOR LAMPS

Joseph Edmund Webb, a builder from Birmingham, patented his sewer gas destructor in the 1890's, forming the Webb Engineering Company. The lamps worked by creating an intense heat within the hood which drew the air from the sewers below and burned off any impurities.

The original Sheffield sewers were badly laid out and detailed and there was a danger of disease from the fetid stagnant gases which were poorly vented off. The gas lamps, fed by the town gas supply, were installed at high points in the system and were connected directly to the sewer - and were usually left on all the time. This gave a 'chimney effect' which drew air through the old sewers to draw out the stagnant sewer gases.

The columns are fitted with a ladder bar which also supports the hinged top of the hood when open for cleaning or maintenance. Maintenance requirements were low, changing the mantle and cleaning the glass would be the only regular items. The lamps carry base plates which state "J.E.WEBBS PATENT SEWER GAS DESTRUCTOR" and "WEBB LAMP Co. LIMITED BIRMINGHAM".

Eighty four of these street lamps were erected in Sheffield between 1914 and 1935, the largest number in any British town, due mainly to the many hills in the area where gas could be trapped. Twenty-two of the lamps remain in the city, although some of them are in a poor state of repair. Three lamps in the Nether Edge/Sharrow area are particularly well maintained and illuminated, thanks to the efforts of the local residents' association. Ten lamps survive in the area of Whitley Bay and Monkseaton in North Tyneside, whilst Blyth in Northumberland has five, which have been restored by the local council. Winchester has one, close to the Cathedral.

Within ten years of their introduction these lamps were to be found all over the country and in many other parts of the world. Now they are extremely rare.