

## The Fleet still flows . . .

jondoe

We'd arranged to meet our newest exploring companion, Mr. T, at around 8.30am to complete our exploring trio, so when we finally arrived at 9.40am we weren't surprised that he'd been and gone. A quick phone call and desperate hunt for toilet facilities later and we were back on track with Mr. T in tow, all be it two hours behind schedule. We reached our entry point with much associated paraphernalia, proceeding as usual we were kitted up and ready to go in five minutes.

Our initial entry point saw us hunched over in a five-foot section of branch sewer, of which London possesses hundreds and hundreds of miles. Fortunately we only had a quarter of a mile of stooping ahead of us before reaching the main Fleet Sewer tunnel, which varies in height from eleven to twenty five foot. So after ten minutes of back breaking stooping which left the Stoop\_Master himself feeling decidedly dodgy, or was that the prawn mayonnaise sandwich, we emerged into the main Fleet tunnel. At this point none of this was new ground for Stoop or myself, things seemed relatively unchanged since our first visit at the end of last year.

We started off down River with the goal of reaching the Thames or as close there to as we could get. I'd done a few sums and knew the approximate distance and time it should take based on said distance, so we weren't set to simply walk and walk. If within the time scale, which I'd been more than lenient with, we hadn't reached our goal then we'd turn back rather than continue on into the unknown. We passed the familiar sites of our previous visit, the big stepped water fall with handrails, the adjoining branch sewers with stone cut entrance ways into the main sewer. Soon enough we were in new territory and unlike last time things seemed much more tranquil, the air was much better and there was just average water flow. The main tunnel stretched on in front of us, occasionally the water level varied but always due to construction changes, returning to the same level again once back to the original brick tunnel.

According to my timing of things we were getting pretty close to the Thames as we reached the first major feature, the main tunnel split into two equally high, but narrower, lozenge shaped tunnels which run parallel to each other. Occasionally along the length of these parallel tunnels there was an interconnecting passage with three steps on each side leading up to manhole access. It has since been reported by Mr. T that these parallel pipes are likely located beneath the lower reaches of Farringdon Road where the road itself splits and almost mirrors the proportions of the tunnels below. Further down both tunnels rejoin in what can only be described as a cathedral like space, unbelievably tall with brick vaulted ceilings leading into the continuation of the main tunnel, which was now a massive twenty-five foot tall.

We had noted at this point that the water depth was slightly increased but this was simply due to being so far down the system and having had many branch sewers join the main tunnel, increasing the water volume. My timings had not taken into account any stops on the outbound journey, and so far we hadn't had any so we were on target, I planned to get any photos on the walk back to the exit to break up the thoughts of having to cover the same distance again!

Stoop took out his big ass torch, which he'd been reserving for photos, so that we could get a look further down the tunnel. The beam stretched out ahead of us through the vapour and mist, "That's it!", I had caught a glimpse of the huge end chamber looking just as I'd seen it in an archive picture. Just ahead was the end of our journey down River, we strode ahead and using two iron rails set into the tunnel wall we climbed over the diverting wall which sends the flow into the intercepting sewer. The chamber beyond was free from any water flow, having just a thin layer of Thames sludge, it was an impressive array of iron gates, walkways, brickwork and ladders. We wandered around for a while to take it all in and then set to getting some photographs.

For some reason I was a little anxious of spending too much time taking pictures and was keen to start the long slog back to our exit. Getting back over the diverting wall again and stepping into the flow was to be done with some caution, any wrong footing and the speed of the water at this point would likely have taken your foot straight out from under you and sent you down the interceptor as well. We all got back into the main

tunnel and started the walk back, we knew it would be harder work going back due to walking against the flow. The best technique in my opinion was to lift your feet out of the water with each step and place it firmly back down, rather than any sliding or dragging your legs through the water and that's all fine and well so long as the water depth permits. It hadn't been long since we started back that we all began to wonder if the water had been quite this deep on your way down river? We put it down to not noticing due to having been walking with the flow and not meeting any resistance. We pushed on at about half the pace that we had been traveling down river, occasionally stopping to grab a picture, but growing ever more concerned at the pace and depth of the water. "It's definitely got deeper" we all agreed and decided to can the photos idea in favour of getting out as soon as possible.

The going just seemed to get more and more difficult, the situation was such that no thought was really given to the fact that it wasn't just water that was splashing and lapping up to stomach height! Each step sapped more and more of our energy and my thighs were now burning, not used to what had now been an hour of non-stop battling against ever increasing waters. We had reached about the half way mark when we had to stop for a second in a side tunnel. A previously sealed hole in my waders had given up the ghost and one of my feet now weighed in at a good three kg more than the other, "I'm telling you it's practically full up", they both looked a little unconvinced until I emptied out about three litres of poo cocktail.

We didn't stop for long, just long enough to empty my wader, it seemed to us that the water was, if anything, increasing so we cautiously stepped back into the flow and pushed on. We walked for what seemed like forever in single file, me at the back and Stoop taking up the front, Mr. T in-between. Occasionally I looked up to see that they had opened up a little of a gap between us, Mr. T would glance back to check I was still there, his head torch temporarily blinding me. None of us spoke, we just pressed on single mindedly, keeping our exit in mind and putting to one side any thoughts of the now knee high waters which leapt up to chest height every time your wader splashed back down into them.

In my head I had set distance markers, knowing that when we reached a certain point we only had X distance to go. The next big one was the stepped waterfall, as we rounded a corner and it came into view I was relieved and taken back in the space of a second! The steps were barely visible as such any longer, there was so much water coming down them that it was almost unrecognizable as the same place we had passed on the way down. As we neared the bottom of them the force of the water was intensified by the incline. We had to shuffle across to the edge of the tunnel and lean in slowly, making sure to keep your footing whilst trying to grab a hold of the rust encrusted handrail. I was also thinking that as we progressed further up river the flow would gradually decrease, something was not right, there was no let up and we still had a way to go.

I can only assume that some works elsewhere in the system had diverted the flow from there into this section causing a much increased water volume, it certainly was not as a result of weather as it was a sweltering day up above across the whole of London. We felt sure we were very close to the side tunnel we needed and things were getting kind of ridiculous. The brick floor was always slippery but manageable in normal conditions, now as we walked each step ran the risk of being pushed back down the tunnel in an ice-skating style. At one point I looked up to see Stoop was trying to anchor himself, he was standing stationary but the water combined with the slippery surface started him moving. As he slid back Mr. T braced for impact and took a stance to try to stop Stoop's slide, I looked on, Mr. T slowed Stoop a little but now they were both sliding backwards toward me. I stood as solid as I could just hoping that they had slowed enough for me to stop both of them! Arms outstretched I pushed against Mr. T as he approached me, I felt my feet begin to shift a little and had visions of all three of us being sent skidding off down the tunnel. My feet held and we didn't move any further, everyone waited a second and then continued on up hill! From here we changed walking positions with Mr. T taking the front Stoop central and me still at the back, there were several more slippery moments of one step forwards two steps back, one of which saw Stoop clambering for anything to afford him an anchor, finally grabbing an old chain fixed to the wall and getting a face full of poo River to boot!

After quite literally hours we sighted a distinct ceiling air vent, the side tunnel was only yards from here, Stoop hit the big beam torch down the tunnel and there it was, gushing forth, we'd never been so happy to see a branch sewer! The sewer in question is some way up the wall of the main tunnel and takes care to get into,

Stoop stepped up first and quickly was in the safe confines of the much calmer side tunnel. Next was Mr. T with a slight assisting shove from me he was in and safe, I passed all the bags up to them both and lunged for the hand-hold which saw me too safely inside. We couldn't help but pause for a second to talk, no one had said more than three words at a time for the past two hours almost and everyone's relief was evident.

We weren't in the daylight yet, another ten minutes of stooping was ahead of us, but the relief at being in safe surroundings made it feel like a walk in the country! We charged up the narrow tunnel, dodging the commonplace mangy rodents and ignoring the burning sensation throughout our entire bodies as our muscles protested at having had nothing in the way of a break for hours. I was in front and from behind I heard a deep thud, followed by a shout that can only have been the result of something painful! Mr. T had charged head first into a small circular pipe which cuts in low at the top of the already stoopy side tunnel, we stopped for a second to check he was ok. He was cut, but ok, we carried on. As I took the last corner of the steep uphill climb of the side tunnel it flooded with light from the manhole access above, we'd made it back! Passing out the bags to Stoop my mind started to re-engage and allow me to actually think about the reality of the situation we'd been in. There's a lot to be said for the selective thought process, any amount of time spent analyzing the situation whilst we were in it would surely have wreaked havoc!

All that remained now was the barefooted walk through central London back to our vehicle . . .