

Renewing Mains-As it was!

My first experience of mains and service laying was in in 1958, immediately after I joined the Gas Board, but for the vast majority of the population was still the Gas Light and Coke Company. This was a world to change rapidly over a very few years. We were renewing gas mains and services in streets of terraced houses which had been built around sixty years ago. Whilst the odd run lead joint was still being made the majority where the flexible type with lead tipped rubber gaskets.

We worked out of a workman's hut, which was basically a wooden box on wheels, with a plank each side which served as a seat and it was 'heated' by a small paraffin stove. Only the main layer, as a perk, was allowed to heat his tin of beans or soup on the top of this. There was still a huge coke brazier outside, in case lead had to be melted and a weekly delivery of coke. This had to be carefully planned as when the hut was moved, so was the coke, so at that point the less the better. The hut held about ten men at meal times but some days a rota system was need to get in. The main laying gang could consist of six to seven men, the main layer, his mate, the third hand, a labourer with potential, plus three or four others. The services were renewed in conjunction with the main so there was a service layer, his mate and their third hand. Progress was being made but few had a compressor permanently on site so there was a tractor with a compressor on its rear which whizzed around gangs breaking out the top surface of the road and then returning to consolidate the backfill. When a certain number of services had been renewed there was a visitation from the bricklayer and his mate who made good the cellar walls. Last but not least there was a chap on light duties who kept everything neat and tidy and ran errands. So from eleven to fourteen plus any other casual visitors. We must not course forget the night watchman who whether there was a sniff of gas or not kept the paraffin warning lights going through the night and the long open flame fog burners in the smog.

The length of main to be renewed would be exposed before dinner and over the meal the decision made whether it should be broken out, for once removed it had to be replaced by tea time, irrespective of the weather. So if it rained early we were alright but otherwise we could get very wet. I do not recall seeing any nitrogen on site and the scientific test to ensure that the main had been purged consisted of taking a gas sample in a valved bag and then lighting it around the corner. When it burned blue the purge had been completed.

Many water services were encountered and as these were lead, more often or not they collapsed when exposed. As the junior it was my job to go and tell the occupier that we had just cut their water off. Never a popular job but even less so when the water jet was going through the open bed room window.

Gas Distribution Engineering by R.N.Le Fevre, 1948, still makes interesting reading on a wet day.

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