

London's Killer Fog

When you think about London, you may think about its famous heavy fog, drifting up from cobblestone streets and swirling around flickering gaslight lamps. It's a picturesque scene, but several times in London's history, the thick fog has caused a variety of problems in the busy city and created air so foul and thick that many people died.

One of those occasions occurred in 1952. Thursday, December 4, dawned gray with temperatures in the upper 30s. On that day, a high-pressure system covered greater London with a layer of warm air, trapping a layer of very cold air near the ground. Temperatures fell throughout the day, and by evening, the fog began to form. In order to ward off the chill that evening, London residents put extra coal in the furnaces they used to heat their homes. The inversion layer trapped smoke from the chimneys, so the sulfur-rich smoke remained near the ground, mingling with the thick fog. By the next morning, the air was thick as pea soup and visibility was near zero.

The weather was much the same for the next three days. There was no wind to clear away the smog. Residents left their cars and trucks at home because drivers could not see pedestrians in the fog. Walking was treacherous, but when people did venture out, some became disoriented in the thick greenish smog and wandered onto railroad tracks or into the river. Business came to a standstill.

It was not just business that suffered because of the foggy weather. The number of sick people skyrocketed. Some remained ill as long as nine days but they eventually recovered. Others weren't so lucky. Many began to die from breathing in the heavy, acidic smog. The first victims were infants and elderly people, especially those who had respiratory ailments or heart disease. Hospitals didn't have enough beds for all the sick people.

