

20th Century Sparks!

Work

Tradesmen

Before World War there were few accessible career paths for the majority of the population. There were few multinationals or global companies, and many people had no education. There was a need for people to be inventive and willing to do whatever it took to earn living.

On this page we explore pre-WW1 jobs and look at how local people found work as street vendors, house callers, dustbin and delivery men. Memories of other jobs are also explored here, including cleaning the trains on arrival at Brighton station and a scary recollection of doing engineering work in a lift shaft.



Chimney Sweep
Shop Books - Brighton 1900-1930

Street Vendors and House Callers

Plenty of street vendors and callers were about those days. Tea merchants called at the door; rag and bone men would call and ring a bell, give you a windmill in exchange. The fishmonger had herrings, 24 a shilling. Mum would take out her washing bowl to get them. At tea time, we would eat them as fast as she could cook them.

Doris Noakes - [The Town Beehive](#)

Dustbin men

There were no plastic sacks in those days, and in the winter the bins were heavy with ashes from the coal fires. The dustmen always wore a piece of leather over their shoulders to stop the bottom edge of the dustbin cutting into their flesh. To deliver the dust into the dustcart it was necessary to run up a small wooden ladder. It was a hard dirty job, especially in inclement weather.

Don Carter - [Just one of a large family](#)

Delivery men

Life was definitely in the slow lane in those days. Barrels of beer were delivered on a dray by two horses rather like Shire horses, and rolled down to the cellar on ropes by a very skilful drayman.



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The barrels were heavy wooden ones and had to be lowered carefully to another man who waited to catch them at the bottom of the stairs. He'd then roll them onto stollages (wooden supports) ready to tap and spile (pierce a hole in the cask).

Coal was also delivered by one of the big horses. Bread was delivered in a light van by two local firms: Clarks, who had a bakery at Newtown Road near the Brighton and Hove Albion Football Ground, and Giggins, who had shops all over town.

A fishmonger pushed an open cart through the streets at least once a week, calling out loudly, and housewives would take a dish out to him. He had a pair of scales and a bucket of water hanging from the cart handle, which he used to freshen the fish in hot weather. The fish all slid around and got mixed together on the cart, but he would pick out the one you wanted.

Marjory Batchelor - A Life Behind Bars

Cleaning the trains

As soon as a train came into a station and was berthed, twenty or thirty men came along to clean that train. The sweepers would go in and sweep it, the girls would go in and dust it, and change the napkins on the backs of the seats. It didn't matter whether they were clean or dirty.

John Langley - Always a Layman

Cleaning the toilets

The first thing you do in the ladies' toilet is get all your sanitary bins and empty them. If they haven't got bags you wash them. If they have, you replace them. You sweep up and then you get your hot water. You wipe your walls down, all the pipes, wash your seats and the fronts of the pans and wipe your doors - not with the same water, of course!

You wipe all your paint work and if you have any windows in your toilet you wipe them over. Then your floors - if it needs it you scrub it, otherwise you use the mop. You mop the floor and then you have to dry it. That's where the deck scrubber comes in handy. You can use it with your cloth to dry the floor. It's got to be dry in case people slip. You're not allowed to put cardboard down because anyone with walking sticks or a Zimmer frame might fall over. Then, you make sure you have got paper in all the holders and that all your chains are working.

Joan Parsons - Jobs for Life

Up in the lift shaft

A job which I hated was to sit on top of the lift in Bostel House. My mate would operate it from the safety of the cage taking me up three or four feet at a time in stages.



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Armed with a great pot of grease, I had to spread it on the runners each side. All was well until I was getting near to the top and the ceiling was getting closer. Auto cutouts would stop the lift cage on the top floor but I always worried these would not operate and a very flat apprentice emerge. Even worse was having to climb into the pit with the cage suspended above. A safety officer would have a lot to say about the procedure nowadays, without a doubt.

Tim Wren - Flying Sparks