What would London have been like in the 18th Century?

Not a very nice place.......

 **1) Unplanned housing**

Every visitor to 18th-century London was impressed by the noise and the throngs of people. But the city itself was neither quaint nor clean. Most residents lived in appalling conditions. After the Great Fire of 1666, which destroyed more than 85 percent of the city, London was rebuilt in a hasty and haphazard manner. Then rapid surge in population - from 675,000 in 1750 to 900,000 just 50 years later - caused enormous pressure on city planners to get buildings up quickly. Houses and tenements were thrown together in a slapdash manner, with little attention to plans or codes. Buildings were patched up, subdivided, and subdivided again to cram as many people into as little square footage as possible, which left a jumble of narrow, unlit passageways between residences and shops. Walking through one of these stinking, airless alleyways - especially after dark - was terribly risky, since the convoluted pattern of streets provided **excellent cover for lurking criminals.**

Commercial streets were no less hazardous. Many London buildings were made with such shoddy materials - crumbling bricks and knotty timber - that it was not unusual for them to collapse. Heavy, pendulous shop signs projected out from storefronts on large iron bars. The signs, regularly whipped by the wind, could create such force that the entire façade of a building would come crashing down. Often this happened on top of passers-by. The din and danger from these creaking signs led the city to pass many ordinances restricting their use.
 **2) Dirty, stinking, dangerous streets and alleys**
London was filled with the **smell of wet horse**s and the waste materials associated with them. Sanitation was unheard of. Water was unpurified, and raw sewage ran down city streets in open drains. It was common practice for people to empty their chamber pots out of their windows, and to leave **garbage out in the street to rot.** C.P. Moritz wrote in 1782, "Nothing in London makes a more detestable sight than the butchers' stalls, especially in the neighbourhood of the Tower. The guts and other refuse are all thrown on the street and set up an unbearable stink." (4)

An amazing variety of filth slopped down London's cobblestone streets. Along with dirt, dust and animal manure, there was the ever-falling London rain to add to the mess. Cesspools of human waste collected in puddles everywhere. **Dead animals (dogs, cats, rodents, even horses) were left to decay in the streets.** In darker corners of the city, an occasional human corpse might even be found. To add to all this, horse-drawn carriages with heavy metal wheels often splashed through puddles, slopping the street's putrid muck all over strolling pedestrians
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**3) Water and waste**

In 18th-century London, water was delivered to the city's residents through hollowed-out tree trunks running beneath the streets. Wealthier customers could buy spring water from private companies, but **most residents used the sluggish, murky water of the Thames.** Like many European rivers, the Thames was both the source of the city's drinking water and the repository of its discharge. It was also crowded with boats and barges, since it served as the city's main thoroughfare for commercial shipping. No attempt was made to filter the water or protect it from pollution until the middle of the 19th-century.

In 1771, Tobias Smollet wrote, "If I would drink water, I must quaff the mawkish contents of an open aqueduct, exposed to all manner of defilement, or swallow that which comes from the River Thames, impregnated with all the filth of London and Westminster. **Human excrement is the least offensive part** of the concrete, which is composed of all the drugs, minerals, and poisons used in mechanics and manufacture, enriched with the putrefying carcases of beasts and men, and mixed with the scourings of all the wash-tubs, kennels and common sewers within the bills of mortality." (5)

In fact, water was so suspect that in the first half of the century, a huge **gin craze swept London**. Gin was tasty, intoxicating, unregulated and cheap. The rule of the day was "Drunk for 1d., dead drunk for 2d., straw for nothing." Gin sellers set up on street corners and along highways, selling to any passer-by who expressed thirst. In London alone, there were 8,000 places where gin was openly sold. Henry Fielding wrote in 1751, "Gin...is the principal sustenance (if it may be so called) of more than a hundred thousand people in this metropolis. Many of these Wretches there are, who swallow Pints of this Poison within the Twenty Four Hours: the Dreadfull Effects of which I have the Misfortune every Day to see, and to smell too."

Sanitation in the 1700s was simply unheard of. Private bathrooms, later known as "water closets," did not exist until late in the century, and even then, they only appeared in the wealthiest of homes. Most London residents used **chamber pots, dumping them right outside their windows**. The raw sewage would accumulate and stagnate in cesspools until the night soil men came along to clear it all out.

There is no doubt that the sanitation systems, wells and public water supply systems became intermingled. A complex network of sewers did exist in London, but they were designed to carry rainwater rather than sewage. However, records of public complaints suggest that the drains carried much more than that - including the **refuse of pigsties and slaughterhouses.**
In addition, the city's underground pipes were poorly constructed, so water mains would regularly burst, creating sudden springs on city streets. These springs would carry and mix all of the city's debris together in a sort of running fetid soup that pedestrians would have to slosh through in order to get to their destination.
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**4) Coal, fog and the smell of the grave**

Coal was the main source of heat and energy in 18th-century England. In 1727, more than 700,000 pounds of coal were delivered to London alone. Residences and factories, tenements and shops, all regularly **belched thick clouds of black soot into the city's air**.

Much of London was built on top of rank and murky ground. Fleet Street actually started as a marketplace on the covered-over Fleet River, which was known for years by its awful stench. In addition, London cemeteries contained communal graves, or "poors' holes," which were deep enough for seven tiers of coffins, holding three or four coffins in each tier. These pits were left open until they were completely filled with bodies, so the pungent odour of putrefaction wafted about unchecked. Ministers often had to conduct their burial services from a comfortable distance. Churches were also sometimes afflicted by the **smell of decaying corpses** rising up from their crypts below.

The cinder smoke, mingled with the rank odour of the city's decaying garbage, open sewage, and decomposing corpses, and the stench emanating from the Thames created such a powerful stink that with a proper wind, **London could be smelled from several miles away**
**5) Untimely death**

"With public executions and public exhibitions of heads and quarters as well as bodies hung in irons, it is clear that the eighteenth century confronted its mortality in a way that is both intense and direct."
- Richard B. Schwartz, Daily Life in Johnson's London (6)

With its overpopulation, bad sanitation, and out-of-control housing, London was a breeding ground for bacteria and disease, and death was common. Epidemics, infections and occasional food shortages led to an extraordinarily high mortality rate. Medicine was still quite primitive. In fact, in 1775, **more than 800 deaths recorded in the Bills of Mortality were attributed simply to "Teeth."** Lice and dirt were everywhere. Soot and grime covered overcrowded tenements. In these circumstances, unbridled disease ran rampant, and even the smallest wound could lead to death by infection.

The connection between **personal hygiene** and good health was not fully understood. Francis Place wrote that in the 1780s well-off women "wore petticoats of comblet, lined with dyed linen, stuffed with wool and horsehair and quilted...day by day till they were rotten."(7) Baths were extremely rare - in fact, many people considered them harmful. In all six editions of Sir John Flyer's Inquiry into the Right Use of Hot, Cold, and Temperate Baths in England, **he never once mentions bathing simply for the sake of cleanliness.**
There was also a grave fear of fresh air, in part because of airborne diseases like "consumption," so windows were kept tightly shut. And because entire buildings were taxed according to the number of windows they contained, many landlords sealed them off, with disastrous results for their tenants.

There was a seasonal pattern of death. In winter months, when thick, heavy, encrusted clothes were worn day and night, respiratory tuberculosis, influenza and typhus raged. Dysentery and diarrhoea came around in the summer, when flies **transmitted bacteria from filth to food** and water was at its most foul.

**Of every 1,000 children born in early 18th-century London, almost half died before the age of 2.** Malnutrition, maternal ignorance, bad water, dirty food, poor hygiene and overcrowding all contributed to this extremely high mortality rate. And if an infant did survive, it then faced the perils of childhood - namely **malnourishment and ongoing abuse.** Many poor children were dispatched to crowded, backbreaking "workhouses" or were apprenticed to tradesmen who used them as **unpaid labourers**. A Parliamentary committee reported in 1767 that only seven in 100 workhouse infants survived for three years. Stephen Inwood notes in his book The History of London that "workhouse 'apprentices' swept London's chimneys, hawked milk and fruit round its streets, and laboured unpaid in the worst branches of tailoring, shoemaking, stocking making, baking, river work and domestic service. Later in the century industrialization offered new outlets and London pauper children were packed off to work in the cotton-spinning mills of Lancashire and Cheshire."
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**6) Learned pigs and other diversions**

With a population so vast and varied, so hungry for diversion, it is no wonder that London offered every conceivable entertainment to the paying customer. **Freaks and curiosities** of every kind were on commercial display, from hermaphrodites and dwarfs to operatic cats and acrobatic monkeys. **Hand-to-hand combat, puppet shows, conjurers, strange inventions, quack doctors and cock fighting** were all popular amusements. There was even a vogue for "learned" animals - pigs, mostly - who purportedly could perform arithmetic, play cards and tell fortunes.
When the real thing was not available, waxworks would do almost as well. Mrs. Salmon's Fleet Street exhibition of historical tableaux and horrific scenes in wax opened in 1711 and prospered for more than a century, until it was outdone by Madame Tussaud's new display in Baker Street.

Sex tourists interested in visiting one of London's brothels could even buy a guide book, **Harris's List of Covent Garden Ladies** (1773) to help them find a prostitute that would suit their taste and income.

Bethlehem Royal Hospital (Bedlam), a palatial **asylum for lunatics** in Finsbury Square, was open to the public until 1770 as a sort of human zoo. Visitors could pay a few pence to enter and gawk at the inmates for as long as they liked. Thousands of sightseers came each year, wandering through the wards and brutally teasing the patients in order to heighten the fun. At one point, Bedlam's governors felt that the **sightseers were behaving so badly**, they decreed "the doors be locked on public holidays against all visitors."

But it was the spectacle surrounding the punishment of criminals that was perhaps the most anticipated and popular form of mass entertainment. Whippings, floggings, being paraded through the streets in chains and enduring the "pillory" - an open forum for mockery and verbal abuse - were common punishments for petty crimes. **Executions were an even more elaborate affair and quite often were set aside as public holidays.** Occasionally, engraved invitations would be sent out. On average, around 35 criminals were hanged each year at the infamous Tyburn Tree, and later at Newgate Prison. Monday was the standard execution day so chaplains could spend Sunday evening preparing the condemned. Large crowds of rowdy, jeering onlookers - sometimes in numbers of 30,000 or more (80,000 was the record) - would arrive in the morning to follow the prisoner to the hanging platform. **Men, women, children, gentry and paupers alike, all attended these executions** in the hopes of witnessing a particularly dramatic declaration, a last-minute reprieve or a courageous, applause-worthy farewell from the doomed "malefactor."
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**7) Law and disorder**

"The cream of criminal society are the pickpockets, who are to be found everywhere - even in the best company - often clean and well-dressed, so that they may be mistaken for people of some standing. In fact, they may actually be so, for there are men who have fallen into want by reason of extravagance and are reduced to this way of living. After them in order of rank come the highwaymen, who ride on horseback, and often, in their desire to relieve the victim of his purse put him in terror with an unloaded pistol...Then comes the third, the lowest and vilest class of criminal, the footpads. Tragic examples may be read almost daily in English newspapers of poor people met on the road who have been brutally murdered for a few shillings..."
- C. P. Moritz, 1782 (10)

Dark, circuitous alleys coupled with tall, shadowy buildings and the ever-present shroud of fog made London a criminal's paradise. **Outrageous murders, robberies and assaults** of all kinds were commonplace. **There was no organized law enforcement to speak of** - the idea of a uniformed policeman patrolling the streets in order to prevent crime was considered too French (the originator of this scheme) and an affront to the Englishman's liberty. In fact, it was common practice for victims of a crime to pursue the perpetrator, often capturing and delivering the offender to authorities all by themselves

 **9) Trial and punishment**

The workings of a criminal court in the 18th century were quite different from what we expect today. For one thing, the magistrate often acted more as public prosecutor and chief detective than impartial judge. Between 1750 and 1850 most criminal cases were characterized by face-to-face confrontation between the prosecutor and the accused. Defence counsel rarely appeared. The assumption was that the accused had no need of counsel, since the burden of proof was on the prosecution and the accused was a greater expert on the truth. When clarification was needed, the trial judge was expected to assist the accused with advice.

Prisoners were not allowed to see the evidence against them before trial, and, once in the courtroom, were not allowed to testify (since they could not be trusted to uphold an oath). They were also not entitled to sum up their defense for the jury, though the prosecution was given the opportunity to make a final statement. Before trial, the **prisoner was expected to submit a written defense** that was to be read aloud in court. This was a grave disadvantage for the poor and the ignorant, who frequently could neither read nor write.

Some prisoners "stood mute," refusing to answer "guilty" or "not guilty" to the charges against them. In such cases, they would be **stretched out on the ground and pressed with crushing lead weights until they spoke.** Sometimes they died in the process.

Defense counsel, according to evidence of the Old Bailey Sessions Papers, began to make very rare appearances in criminal trials during the 1730s, but for the 18th century and the early part of the 19th century their role was not strictly defined. It was not until the late 19th century that cross-examination was consistently practiced, with objections to leading questions - but there was still a willingness to allow so-called expert witnesses to give decisive opinions on the whole question of guilt.

Up until 1774**, prisoners who were discharged or found not guilty through trial usually had to pay back the expenses** related to their imprisonment - these were known as "jailor's fees." Because many could not afford to pay, they found themselves re-imprisoned, this time as debtors. It was a vicious circle.
 **Punishment**
In an age virtually without police, the machinery of law was uncompromising and brutal. **In total, 240 offenses were punishable by death**, and hanging was prescribed for accessories as well. Punishments ranged from standing in the pillory to branding and whipping to burning (for particularly shameful crimes, like treason). A number of 18th century theorists believed hanging was not punishment enough for felons and proposed "breaking on the wheel" instead. In 1752, a law was passed that required "some further Terror and peculiar mark of Infamy be added to the Punishment of Death" for murder. The convicted murderer was to be kept on bread and water in a special cell, and after execution, his body was to hang in chains before the public, then go to the surgeons for dissection.

"Dr. Samuel Johnson was one who saw that capital punishment satisfied a sinister human craving for power over others' lives, but did not really deter crime. Undiscriminating severity simply made criminals more cunning and more desperate, and confused small crimes with great ones." -Clive Elmsley, Crime and Society in Society in England 1750-1900 (11)

Juries were generally loath to convict people for property crimes, since the penalty of death seemed disturbingly harsh. In fact, many victims declined to pursue matters through the legal system out of a sheer unwillingness to see the perpetrators hanged for their offense. However, imprisonment was not considered a reasonable alternative to capital punishment, since it placed young criminals into contact with older, hard-bitten ones, encouraging partnerships. The **ingenious idea of transportation** became an alternative punishment beginning around 1718. Criminals were deported to the remote colonies of Maryland and Virginia on the American shore and, later in the century, were sent off to settle New South Wales, Australia.