

Smelly city drains made unpleasant news 120 years ago

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An interesting item appeared in this newspaper on October 23 1894.

It was a report that an official's attention "had been called to every cockey in Lakenham that smelt badly".

I think it's safe to say that today, 120 years later, very few people in Lakenham, or anywhere else for that matter, would understand what this report meant.

What on earth, they would ask, is a cockey?

The clue is the bad smell. By the time that report was published, the word cockey, as used in the Norwich area, had come to mean a drain or sewer.

The sad truth is that the word had originally been used to refer to the several, no doubt rather pleasant, watercourses that flowed through medieval Norwich.

But over the centuries, these had been used more and more for waste and sewage, and they were eventually covered over and often built on.

The Little Cockey was a stream that started in the area of Chapelfield Gardens and flowed across St Giles' and down the line of Willow Lane and Ten Bell Lane, across St Benedict's, and then into the river.



■ The name Cockey Lane was used to refer to the bottom part of London Street, Back of the Inns, and Little London Street.

The best known of the cockeys was The Great Cockey. It started by the top end of Surrey Street and flowed through the All Saints Green area, across Red Lion Street, along the Back of the Inns, down the line of Little London Street, across Bedford Street, through School Lane, and across St Andrew's.

If you go out to the back of the Playhouse on St George's and walk to the edge of the river, you can look across the Wensum and see there's still an outflow there emerging from under the multi-storey car-park.

At various points in the history of Norwich, the name Cockey Lane was used

to refer to the bottom part of London Street, Back of the Inns, and Little London Street. The word cockey seems to be purely a Norfolk and Suffolk word – in the English Dialect Dictionary there are no reports from anywhere else – but its origins are obscure.

The "ey" bit comes from an Anglo-Saxon word for river, which also occurs in the names of the rivers Waveney and Wissey.

But there's much less certainty about the first part of the word.

The expert on Norwich street-names, Prof Sandred, tells us that it could be Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, or Scandinavian.

But the honest truth is we don't know.