This Date in Safety History: December 5, 1952: Thousands of Londoners Perish in the “Big Smoke”

This is the story of a fatal yellow mist that opened the eyes of the world to the toxic health and environmental effects of industrial air pollution.

The Big Smoke Descends Over London

It began on December 5, 1952, when a cold, moist air mass moved in over London. Smoke, sulfides, and ash from the coal and industrial pollutants from unrestricted factory chimneys were trapped by the cold inversion layer, hovering across the city. Concentrations of smoke in the air increased tenfold.

At first, it seemed like no big deal. At that time, high-sulfur coal was the principle source of heat for the vast majority of homes in Greater London. That’s one of the reasons that London was known for its dense, yellow fogs, referred to by residents as “pea-soupers.”

However, this was no ordinary fog. On many streets people couldn’t see their feet. Films were cancelled because smog obscured the screen. The opera shut down, and soccer-mad Britons were deprived of scheduled

matches because the pitch was invisible in the murk. Driving became nearly impossible. But most Londoners didn’t own cars and noticed little unusual.

The Deadly Toll & Its Legacy

The Big Smoke, aka, Great Smog of London lingered for 5 whole days before dissipating in warmer weather. But the damage done didn’t become apparent until weeks afterwards. After the medical services records were compiled, it was found that the Great Smog killed or accelerated the deaths of 4,000 people. Many of the dead were simply unable to draw sufficient oxygen from the contaminated air. Others died of bronchitis and similar respiratory complications. Approximately 8,000 people died in the following weeks of causes related to the yellow mist. Another estimated 100,000 suffered nonfatal respiratory effects.

The Big Smoke was a pivotal moment in the environmental movement. In 1954 the first air quality legislation in Britain was passed. Other acts in 1956 and 1958 changed the quality of motor and heating fuels and regulated industrial smokes.