

What lies beneath: Thames Water works to remove 105-tonne solid lump from 4ft 2ins sewer

by EMILY FINCH

ARMAGEDDON was the 1998 smash-hit film of the summer where a team of eight men led by Bruce Willis launched into space to destroy an asteroid headed straight to Earth.

But unknown to residents of Finsbury, a similar drama was unfolding beneath their feet as a crew of eight Thames Water workers sought to drill through and destroy a concreteberg the size of a blue whale this week.

"We fought to do this job ourselves because we really care about the network," said James O'Donoghue, field operation manager for Thames Water, who is overseeing the site.

Mr O'Donoghue explained that similar work is usually contracted to third-party companies but his men are so "passionate" they wanted to do



Far left: Thames Water employees work in the confined space before breaking up the concrete, above, and putting it in bags, circled left; The concreteberg in situ is seen, right

This is what you call hard work! Workers remove 'concreteberg' the size of a whale

it themselves.

The 100 metre-long clump of concrete under Goswell Road was

discovered in April. It weighs more than 105 tonnes and could lead to devastating flooding



Shaun Andrews and Ross Reed in good spirits

around local streets if not destroyed quickly.

Mr O'Donoghue said: "We have four guys in the sewer at one time. There's one man on a pneumatic drill, another with a shovel, another waiting in the gallery and then a fourth hoisting up the concrete."

"It's very tight down there and hot," he added.

The Victorian sewer is just 4ft 2ins tall and the temperatures can reach 27C. The workers have received extra training so they can rescue any colleagues trapped in the confined space in an emergency.

"We deal with London sewers on a daily basis but this is one of the smallest we've worked in," said Mr O'Donoghue.

"You constantly have to crouch down. But you acclimatise quickly. After shovelling I plonked myself on the side in the sewage because you get used to it."

He said they were also greeted by a "family of rats" every morning.

"They come up to us and say hello. It started with two rats and now there's five," he said.

On Tuesday, the men's personal gas alarm system went off to alert

them that they were breathing in potentially toxic fumes.

"It's because of the sewage. We've cracked the concreteberg," said area capital manager Martin Codling.

A huge mass of fat and other toxic waste has built up behind the lump of concrete, which at its highest reached just under four feet.

"It's a sign we've reached the peak. We've created a gully down the side so the sewage can flow through now. The workers are going to have to be walking in it now. General flow should only be to your ankles," said Mr O'Donoghue.

Shaun Andrews, who has been with Thames Water for 13 years, had a message to whoever put the concrete down the drain.

"Don't put concrete in the sewers. When piling, look where you put it. When it goes missing let people know but, other than that, it keeps me in a job," he said.

Works at the junction of Goswell Road and Ashby Street are set to continue next week.

Thames Water are still investigating how the concrete came to be in the sewer.

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