

EXTRA EXTRA!

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Curious lost occupations from history

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The release of the 1921 Census of England and Wales uncovered a range of unusual occupations, from knocker-ups to lamplighters and rag and bone men to rat catchers.

Read on to discover more about unusual or lost jobs from history and what they involved.

Crossing sweepers

In April 1908, a “well-dressed” woman named Annie Biggs caused a scene whilst “sweeping a crossing at the junction of Pall Mall and Waterloo Place,” as reported in the Yorkshire Evening Post. Crossing sweepers were not an unusual sight in the towns and cities of the 19th and early 20th Centuries; with untarmacked roads and the debris caused by horses, they were employed to keep road crossings clean, and they were tipped for their labours by the grateful public.

Annie Biggs was dressed in a “velvet jacket, smart bonnet, and white gloves”. She was brought

before a police court for causing an obstruction whilst sweeping a crossing. She addressed the court as follows:

“Cannot a woman sweep a crossing as well as a man? What is a woman to do when she is out of employment? I am an organiser. I have re-organised the catering arrangements of some of the best restaurants and hotels in London, but I had a serious illness two years ago, and have been out of work since. When I show people my reference they say I am too good for them. I do not care what I do. I have offered to go to New Zealand as a domestic servant, but they would not have me.”

Annie, in reduced circumstances, had turned to crossing sweeping as the last resort, and the spectacle of a genteel women performing such a menial occupation caused a scene. She promised that she would not do it again, saying “it is not a pleasant occupation”.

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