

Charles Kingsley (1819 – 1875)

The author Charles Kingsley was an Anglican Clergyman as well as a talented writer.

Whilst some of his written works were for adults he also wrote stories for children. He would, on occasions, write under another name (this is called a pseudonym), that of 'Parson Lot'. Much of Kingsley's writing was done to encourage people to think about the very poor living conditions that many people endured in Victorian Britain. Kingsley was very concerned about the lack of education for girls at the time and the terrible working conditions, particularly as some of the workers were young children.

Amongst his works for children is the fairy tale for which he is best remembered, 'The Water Babies'. In this story the central character is Tom, a young boy who works as a chimney sweep but soon becomes a 'water baby' living under the water. This tale was first seen in 1862 as a serial in a magazine. The following year it was published as a book.

In 1874 Charles Kingsley spent a very tiring six months touring the United States of America and died on 23rd January the following year.

Sweeping Chimneys

Chimneys need to be cleaned regularly as a layer of black soot builds up in them. In the past the sweeping of chimneys was a difficult and dangerous job. In large houses it was not uncommon for boys as young as five to be sent up into the chimneys to clean them. These children would have to crawl up the square flues, which were only about twenty centimetres wide. The 'climbing boys' as they were sometimes known were poorly fed to keep them thin enough to fit up the chimneys. In some houses, there were several chimneys that would meet part of the way up to form one big chimney. Due to the many twists and turns, children could occasionally get lost or even suffocate up there.

The 'climbing boys' had masters who forced them to do this dangerous job every day. As you might imagine, the young boys involved didn't enjoy the work and were often very reluctant to leave the fireplaces to enter/climb the perilous chimneys. To make sure the children went up into the flue their masters would sometimes light a small fire in the hearth so the boys had to scramble up the chimney to avoid being burned. If the chimney flue was too narrow then the boys could become stuck and being unable to move would die where they were.

During the reign of Queen Victoria, laws were passed forbidding the cruel practice of using young boys to sweep chimneys and now chimney-sweeps use brushes to clean the chimneys.