# Port of London Authority begins first mass mechanical removal of 180-tonne wet‑wipe mound from Thames



A mass of congealed wet wipes weighing an estimated 180 tonnes — roughly the weight of two double‑decker buses — is being excavated from a 250‑metre stretch of the River Thames near Hammersmith Bridge in an operation led by the Port of London Authority in collaboration with Thames Water. The deposit, described by authorities as the size of two tennis courts and up to a metre thick in places, will be removed mechanically over a period that could last several weeks. The material will be taken away and disposed of responsibly, the organisations said. (Sources: Port of London Authority, Daily Mail, London Evening Standard)

Sonar and laser surveys carried out by the Port of London Authority show the mound has built up over years and altered the local bathymetry, creating a permanent change in the foreshore where sediment and debris have accreted. The PLA says the deposit now poses an ecological risk to the tidal Thames because it smothers habitat and can trap wildlife. These scans underpinned the decision to attempt a large‑scale, mechanical removal rather than relying solely on hand‑picking. (Sources: Port of London Authority, Daily Mail)

Community groups have been documenting the problem for years. Volunteers from Thames21 have been monitoring the Hammersmith site since 2017 and report removing many tens of thousands of wipes during organised clean‑ups; the charity’s campaigning and survey work is one of the datasets cited by authorities. Different organisations report different totals — Thames21 cites more than 137,000 wipes collected across numerous events, Tideway has published figures showing around 64,000 wipes removed over a five‑year partnership with volunteers, while the recent coverage in some outlets states Thames21 volunteers have gathered in excess of 140,000 wipes. Those figures reflect differing timeframes and survey methods but all point to a chronic, long‑running accumulation. (Sources: Thames21, Tideway, Daily Mail)

Experts and campaigners say the way these mounds form is predictable: wipes flushed into the sewer network are released during overflow events or snag on structures, then bind with sediment and other material on the foreshore to create persistent lumps that do not biodegrade. The PLA’s technical assessments and Thames21’s field evidence both warn that most commercially available wipes contain plastic fibres that resist breakdown and contribute to microplastic pollution as the material fragments. (Sources: Port of London Authority, Thames21, Tideway)

The removal itself is a carefully choreographed logistic exercise. St Paul’s School, Barnes, has agreed to provide access to its foreshore to site an eight‑tonne mechanical excavator which will operate at low tide to scoop the mass into skips for removal. Operators say the work will be timed to minimise disturbance to the river and local residents, and the material will be transported for appropriate disposal rather than being returned to the environment. Local reporting indicates this is the first attempt at a mass, mechanical extraction of this kind on the tidal Thames. (Sources: Daily Mail, London Evening Standard, Port of London Authority)

The operation forms part of a wider policy and investment context. Thames Water has announced a planned £1.8 billion programme between 2025 and 2030 to improve river health across London, targeting upgrades to storm overflows, river restoration and treatment works. The company also points to the Thames Tideway Tunnel — a multi‑billion‑pound infrastructure project now connected to parts of the network — as a longer‑term measure that will reduce the frequency of sewage‑related discharges into the river. Tideway and water company statements stress that such infrastructure, alongside local screening and maintenance, will be necessary to prevent future accumulations. (Sources: Thames Water, Tideway, Daily Mail)

The Port of London Authority has placed the clean‑up within a broader “Clean Thames” initiative it is promoting to tackle sewage, chemicals and plastic pollution. The PLA has urged better monitoring, improved event‑duration reporting for overflows and refreshed litter strategies for the tidal river under its stewardship, stressing that collective action from government, water companies and communities will be required to restore and protect river health. (Sources: BBC reporting on the PLA manifesto, Port of London Authority)

Voices from the organisations involved framed the removal as both symbolic and practical. The PLA’s Director of Sustainability, Grace Rawnsley, said the authority was “inspired by the work of volunteers at Thames21” and wanted “a cleaner, healthier tidal Thames”; Thames Water’s head of Tideway integration, John Sullivan, described the operation as “a visible reminder of the damage caused by putting the wrong things down the toilet” and reiterated the company’s larger investment commitments. Chris Coode, chief executive of Thames21, praised volunteers for their long‑term monitoring and called for producers to develop genuinely plastic‑free alternatives to wipes and for water companies to increase screening and infrastructure investment. Fleur Anderson, the local MP, described the removal as long overdue and welcomed moves to reduce the flow of plastic wipes into rivers. These remarks were made to the media and in organisational statements accompanying the clean‑up announcement. (Sources: Daily Mail, Port of London Authority, Thames21, BBC)

Campaigners are using the moment to press for policy change as well as immediate remediation. Thames21 and others maintain that a ban on plastic‑containing wet wipes should be part of a package of measures that includes better public messaging (bin wipes — don’t flush), increased screening at sewage‑works and accelerated sewer upgrades to prevent overflow events. Industry and regulators argue that while bans and labelling reforms are important, they must be paired with targeted investment in capital works and improved operational monitoring to tackle the multiple pathways by which plastics reach the foreshore. (Sources: Thames21, Tideway, Port of London Authority, Thames Water)

Removing the mound will not, on its own, solve the structural causes that have allowed wet wipes to accumulate in the Thames. But authorities and volunteer groups say the excavation is a necessary, visible step that complements longer‑term interventions: upgraded infrastructure, better screening and clearer consumer behaviour. If those measures are pursued in tandem, they say, the likelihood of similar “wet wipe islands” re‑forming should decline — but that outcome depends on policy choices, investment schedules and public behaviour in the years ahead. (Sources: Daily Mail, Port of London Authority, Thames Water, BBC)

### 📌 Reference Map:

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14988401/Wet-Wipe-Island-mass-removal-River-Thames-London.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[7]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/wet-wipe-island-river-thames-london-thames-water-b1242130.html), [[2]](https://pla.co.uk/laser-scans-show-devastating-impact-wet-wipes-thames)
* Paragraph 2 – [[2]](https://pla.co.uk/laser-scans-show-devastating-impact-wet-wipes-thames), [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14988401/Wet-Wipe-Island-mass-removal-River-Thames-London.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14988401/Wet-Wipe-Island-mass-removal-River-Thames-London.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[3]](https://www.thames21.org.uk/2023/09/the-plastic-wet-wipes-issue-explained/), [[6]](https://tideway.london/news/press-releases/2022/november/volunteers-pick-up-64-000-wet-wipes-out-of-the-thames-over-five-year-period/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[2]](https://pla.co.uk/laser-scans-show-devastating-impact-wet-wipes-thames), [[3]](https://www.thames21.org.uk/2023/09/the-plastic-wet-wipes-issue-explained/), [[6]](https://tideway.london/news/press-releases/2022/november/volunteers-pick-up-64-000-wet-wipes-out-of-the-thames-over-five-year-period/)
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* Paragraph 6 – [[4]](https://www.thameswater.co.uk/news/2025/mar/london-rivers-investment), [[6]](https://tideway.london/news/press-releases/2022/november/volunteers-pick-up-64-000-wet-wipes-out-of-the-thames-over-five-year-period/), [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14988401/Wet-Wipe-Island-mass-removal-River-Thames-London.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 7 – [[5]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c72vw0wew5zo), [[2]](https://pla.co.uk/laser-scans-show-devastating-impact-wet-wipes-thames), [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14988401/Wet-Wipe-Island-mass-removal-River-Thames-London.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14988401/Wet-Wipe-Island-mass-removal-River-Thames-London.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://pla.co.uk/laser-scans-show-devastating-impact-wet-wipes-thames), [[3]](https://www.thames21.org.uk/2023/09/the-plastic-wet-wipes-issue-explained/), [[5]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c72vw0wew5zo)
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* Paragraph 10 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14988401/Wet-Wipe-Island-mass-removal-River-Thames-London.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://pla.co.uk/laser-scans-show-devastating-impact-wet-wipes-thames), [[4]](https://www.thameswater.co.uk/news/2025/mar/london-rivers-investment), [[5]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c72vw0wew5zo)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14988401/Wet-Wipe-Island-mass-removal-River-Thames-London.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://pla.co.uk/laser-scans-show-devastating-impact-wet-wipes-thames> - An article from the Port of London Authority reports sonar and laser surveys revealing a large mound of congealed wet wipes on the foreshore near Hammersmith. The scans show the deposit has grown over years to about the size of two tennis courts and over a metre in places, altering bathymetry and threatening wildlife. The PLA explains how wipes flushed into sewers and released by overflow events snag on the riverbed and bind with sediment to form persistent mounds. The piece calls for people to stop flushing wipes, recognises Thames21’s monitoring and notes the Tideway project will reduce sewage inputs.
3. <https://www.thames21.org.uk/2023/09/the-plastic-wet-wipes-issue-explained/> - Thames21 explains how plastic-containing wet wipes are entering the River Thames via sewage overflows and accumulating on foreshore to form 'wet wipe islands' that damage wildlife and create microplastics. The charity details its Big Wet Wipe Counts and volunteers’ monitoring, noting that since 2017 they have collected more than 137,000 wipes across numerous events. Thames21 highlights that most wipes contain plastic, do not biodegrade, and contribute to sewer blockages and fatbergs. The page calls for a ban on plastic wet wipes, better sewage infrastructure, more screening by water companies, and urges the public to bin wipes instead of flushing them.
4. <https://www.thameswater.co.uk/news/2025/mar/london-rivers-investment> - Thames Water announced a planned investment of £1.8 billion between 2025 and 2030 to protect and improve river health across London. The programme targets reducing discharges from 26 sewer overflows, river restoration and treatment upgrades under the Water Industry National Environment Programme, renewal of 14km of rising mains, and increased proactive maintenance at major treatment works. The company said the funding will focus on tributaries such as the Roding, Wandle, Lee and Brent, and aims to decrease pollution incidents. The announcement frames the investment as part of work alongside projects such as the Thames Tideway Tunnel to benefit river ecosystems.
5. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c72vw0wew5zo> - The BBC reports the Port of London Authority has launched a 'Clean Thames Manifesto' to tackle sewage, chemicals and plastic pollution in the Thames. The initiative, supported by several water companies, commits to bringing forward targets to reduce sewage spills and includes plans to remove a wet-wipe 'island' near Hammersmith Bridge. The PLA said the issue requires multiple solutions, including better monitoring, event duration monitors and updated litter strategies. The article quotes PLA chief executive Robin Mortimer and notes the organisation manages the Thames from Teddington to the estuary, emphasising collaboration between authorities and communities to improve river health.
6. <https://tideway.london/news/press-releases/2022/november/volunteers-pick-up-64-000-wet-wipes-out-of-the-thames-over-five-year-period/> - Tideway’s press release highlights a partnership with Thames21 and the Port of London Authority in running Big Wet Wipe Count events. It reports volunteers removed around 64,000 wet wipes from the Thames foreshore over five years, including nearly 2,000 from one Hammersmith transect within two hours. The release explains how wipes flushed into sewers become lodged in the foreshore after overflow events and break down into microplastics. Tideway emphasises that monitoring and community data are vital to understanding problems and says the Thames Tideway Tunnel will help prevent many sewage-derived litter items entering the river once operational and protect habitats.
7. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/wet-wipe-island-river-thames-london-thames-water-b1242130.html> - Standard reports work has begun to excavate 180 tonnes of wet wipes forming a 'Wet Wipe Island' along a 250-metre stretch of the Thames near Hammersmith Bridge. The deposit, about the size of two tennis courts and up to one metre high, has altered the river’s course and posed ecological risks. The operation, coordinated by the Port of London Authority with Thames Water and informed by Thames21 monitoring, will use a mechanical excavator sited on St Paul’s School grounds to remove the material for responsible disposal. The article quotes PLA and Thames Water officials supporting the action and local residents.