



Evolution

The History of the Lowly Toilet

BY LUCY CORNE

It's an endless source of material for comedians, gross-out movie directors and dinner guests with no shame. But it has, without a doubt, changed humanity forever.

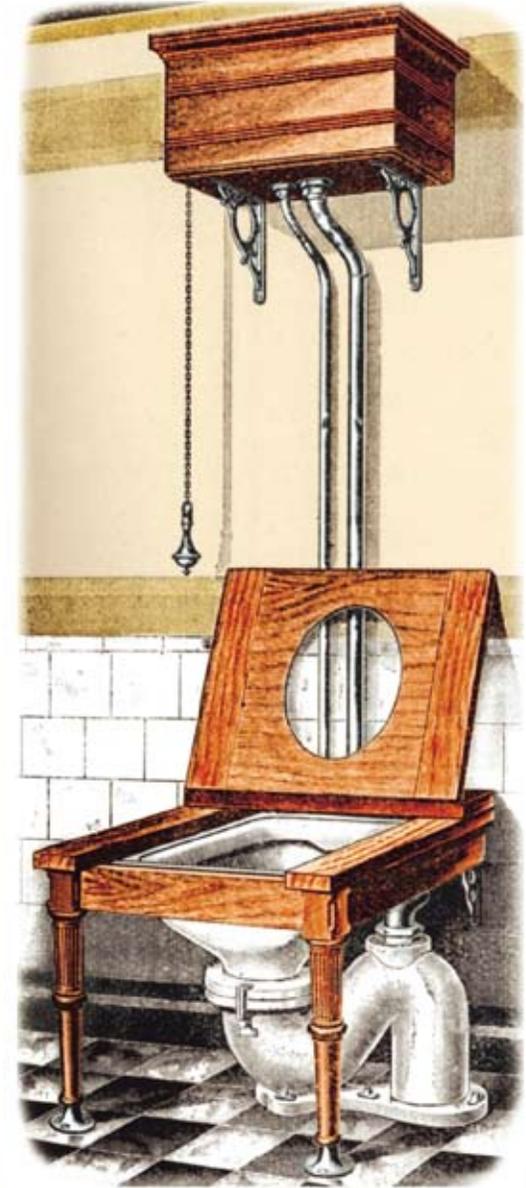
We use it everyday. It's a necessity. In fact, you might even be sitting on one right now. But short of knowing that it's cleaned up our streets and saved us from digging holes in order to dispose of... erm... business, just how well-acquainted are we with our toilets?

As long as man has roamed the Earth, he's been looking for a comfortable place to attend to calls of nature. You can imagine this deleted line:

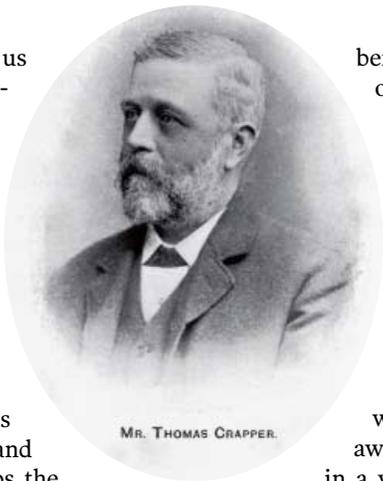
"And on the seventh day, before God rested, he made sure man would have somewhere to rest forevermore. He created the bush and Adam promptly went behind the leafy sanctuary to relieve himself."

Of course, Adam would soon have realised the drawbacks of this early design. Especially if the ground was too hard for digging or there wasn't a shovel in sight. Take it from my own awful experience - there is nothing worse than 'going bush' while camping only to find yourself treading in your own product a couple of days later. Hence began man's quest to create the perfect place to park his behind.

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Archaeology tells us that some of the earliest flushing toilets were widespread in the Indus Valley a shocking 40 centuries ago, but somewhere down the line the blueprint for a complex sewage system got lost. Sanitation took a huge step backwards in the Middle Ages, and who knows – perhaps the privies of the day contributed to the era’s more morose moniker: “the Dark Ages”. I can think of nothing that would put a dampener on your day more than taking a stroll down the high street only to have your new tunic and tights doused in the contents of someone’s early morning chamber pot.



MR. THOMAS CRAPPER.



Of course you can’t fault the convenience of this primitive waste disposal method – who wouldn’t want a pretty piece of porcelain waiting under the bed to save you that chilly trot to the outhouse in the middle of the night? Luckily someone decided that propelling poo out the window was somewhat uncouth, not to mention disgusting. It would be a couple of centuries longer though

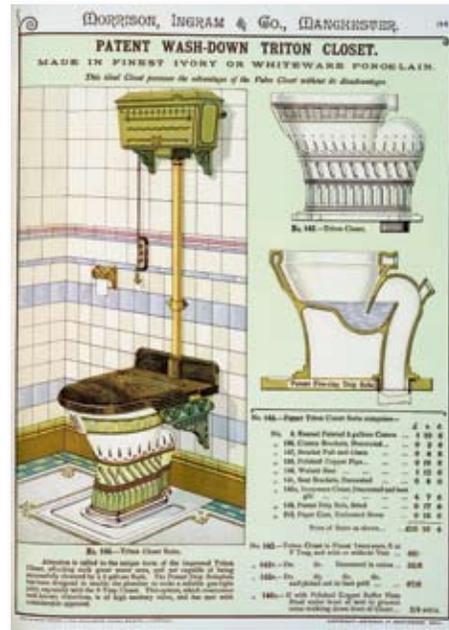
before the renaissance of the flush.

As recently as the early 19th century, the lower classes were still pooping in a bucket. Yes, I’ll concede that the pail closet might have been a somewhat fancy bucket and was at least located away from the house in a wooden shed shared between numerous homes.

But comfort-wise, the wooden seat above the bucket was just a tiny step up from finding relief in a bowl under the bed. And in terms of hygiene, plumbing still had a long way to go.

It took a while for the flush toilet to catch on again, but it did. Credit for the invention often goes erroneously to the aptly titled

Thomas Crapper (pictured above) – no relation to the action performed on his supposed invention. The term predated him. Mr Crapper simply made the flushing loo more user-friendly. It was his predecessor John Harington – maybe that’s where the term *john* came from? – who revived the flushing lavatory.



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His 1596 design made it into Queen Elizabeth I’s boudoir, though legend says she refused to use it, perhaps preferring the traditional method of tossing last night’s treats out of the window. Over the next 200 years, the john gradually underwent a few nips and tucks and by the late 1800s one of the least appreciated and most important inventions known to man was well and truly in common use. At last, pedestrians and their clothes were now safe from flying splatter. Well, at least until the advent of skyscrapers and killer litter.

But just because the powder room was now the proud recipient of an improved centrepiece, it didn’t mean that loo upgrades were at an end. In fact, the water closet is being

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1 Live in one The Toilet House in Suwon, South Korea is the one-of-a-kind brainchild of Sim Jae-duck, known as Mr Toilet. Shaped like a loo, the house opened as a unique sleeping option with a \$50,000 per night price tag until Mr Toilet made it his home. After his death in 2009 the house reopened to curious visitors.

2 Learn about them The Sulabh Toilet Museum in New Delhi is probably the most comprehensive homage to latrines in the world. Delve deeper into their history and marvel at their elegant collection of commodes.





Clockwise from left: an early version of the sitting toilet; Japanese toilet technology with seats that automatically rise; Victorian 'water closets' that also act as status symbols



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continuously improved, adapted and embellished to the point where we have options. That's right, **OPTIONS**. We have water saving designs, like the scary-sounding incinerating toilet or the more hospitably-named Duoset – the dual flush toilet where you choose the flushing power that suits the business you're disposing of. We have lever loos, push button loos, weight triggered loos... we even have loos for those venturing out into zero gravity environs.

Other versions haven't quite caught on, never straying far from the homes of their inventors, like the German 'reverse bowl design' complete with a 'poo shelf' so you can admire your creations. The Anglo-Indian toilet likewise never really took off, despite

its efforts to please both sides of the east-west 'sitting versus squatting' debate. Strangely enough not many people fancied parking their bottoms where someone's shoes had just been. And climbing onto a seat to squat seemed fraught with the danger of slipping into the bowl.

Quirky inventors have even furnished women with a third option – standing. Indeed, women can now grab a 'Shewee' and stand alongside their male counterparts when nature calls during a forest hike. Of course, the stares you'll encounter as you pee through a non-drip plastic funnel are likely to be far greater in number than if you stuck to squatting behind a bush, but at least it saves you from disrobing in chilly weather.

Our evolootionary journey finally brings us to the Far East. Short of pulling your pants down for you, the techno toilets and Japan take all the effort out of a visit to the bathroom, with their washers and driers, their deodorisers, automatic seat-lifter buttons and fake flushing recordings that save you the trouble of running a tap to cover up embarrassing splashing sounds.

But technology is never without its pitfalls and you need to be well-versed in the workings of robo-bog before you start hitting buttons. I'm sure I'm not the first, nor will I be the last, to mistake the bidet symbol for a flush button, being rewarded for my ignorance with a face full of true *eau de toilette*.

Considering that some toilets these days perform as many functions as my iPhone, it's tough to imagine where the humble loo will go from here. How can the public convenience become any more convenient? Astute inventors have already devised a foldable lav to put in our handbags so we're never caught short in public. Many would consider the delightfully named Shit Box a step back to the Dark Ages though, because once your cardboard box is filled, whatever are you to do with your disposable bag of business?

Who knows, this might well be the future of the loo. I think we might have gone as far as we can go with the lowly toilet. The only place to head from here is back to the bushes. Just don't forget your shovel. ■

3 Eat out of one You have to have a quirky sense of humour to enjoy eating chocolate ice cream from a miniature squat toilet, but then Taiwan's Modern Toilet Restaurant is a quirky place. Settle down onto a toilet seat, drink out of a specimen jar and enjoy a meal served in a tiny toilet.

4 Admire them Based at the Gladstone Pottery Museum in Stoke-on-Trent in the UK, 'Flushed with Pride' looks more at the oft-overlooked exterior of the loo, rather than its inner workings. You can also enjoy the mock-up of a Victorian convenience, complete with the aromas of the day.

5 Honour them November 19th is World Toilet Day, a campaign highlighting the absence of toilet sanitation throughout the world. Events range from seminars to comedy nights and mass squatting sessions.

