

Flush with Success

The advent of the indoor toilet made life sweeter for all

> The thing to do when discussing the history of one of the greatest inventions of all time is to flush away what you may have heard about Thomas Crapper. Because, although the London plumber did make and patent significant improvements to the invention in the late 1800s, he did not invent the flush toilet.

That honor goes to a gentleman (another fastidious and ingenious Englishman) named Sir Thomas Harrington, who, in 1596, came up with the idea for the so-called “water closet”—a seat perched atop a cistern of water that handily swished away whatever waste was deposited into it. The godson of none other than Queen Elizabeth I, Harrington designed it for her (leading many to speculate that’s where the term, “He’s on the throne,” comes from).

THE WASTE WOULD BE DROPPED INTO THE STAGNANT MOAT WATER BELOW, ADDING YET ANOTHER IMPEDIMENT TO ANY ENEMY FOOLISH ENOUGH TO CONSIDER STORMING THE REEKING RAMPARTS.

But we’re getting ahead of ourselves here. Long before there was indoor plumbing fit for royalty, there was the natural human desire to rid ourselves of the unpleasantness of what the Chinese euphemistically call “the big necessity.” Since the beginning of time, people have needed a sanitary (and, in most cultures, a relatively private) place to dispose of their bodily

waste, and they have put their ingenuity to work in a variety of ways.

Probably most popular across most cultures in early history was the use of a simple bowl or pot used day and night as needed and emptied outside in a field or nearby body of water. The English called this a “chamber pot.”

Ancient Romans built outhouses or latrines directly over an elaborate system of sewers that emptied into the Tiber River, flushing away waste immediately. Famous for their community bath-houses, the Romans also had commu-

nal lavatories where people could come in and, well, deposit their waste in giant toilets with long, bench-like seats while sharing gossip and the news of the day. Usually, though, ordinary Romans found it easiest just to toss their waste from chamber pots into the streets.

One of the more disgusting iterations of the toilet appeared during the



Middle Ages with the invention of the castle garderobe: a small room jutting out of the castle wall where royalty would go to deposit their waste. The waste would be dropped into the stagnant moat water below, adding yet another impediment to any enemy foolish enough to consider storming the reeking ramparts.

Many in England breathed a sigh of relief (and a whiff of fresh air) when Harrington came along with his idea. The queen installed Harrington’s invention—a raised bowl with a small pipe in which water ran down when released by a valve—in her Richmond Palace. It would be another three centuries until the appropriately named Thomas Crapper improved on the design and it began to catch on.

Today, we think of the flush toilet as a necessity and can hardly imagine our lives without it. But in truth, only 60 percent of the world has access to “proper sanitation”—that is, indoor toilets. There are many in the world using, if not garderobes and Roman communal bench toilets, their own versions of the chamber pot—something to keep in mind the next time you get up for your “big necessity” on a cold, dark night. ■