

## The Story of the Water Closet

A very brief, entertaining, and very English perspective on  
the history of the toilet

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*The British Standard WC*

Here is a bold statement. The WC has been described as **“one of the most important inventions of the last 1000 years.”**

None other than the London Times newspaper said this in its Millennium Edition. It compared the invention of the toilet with, amongst others, the development of the Gutenberg printing press in 1400s, the atomic bomb, and the moon landing of 1969.

Here’s another bold statement. “One of the most successful designs ever. It doesn’t only improve lives, it saves them.” None other than the Independent newspaper said that in a recent morning edition.

And finally, one more bold statement. “It has done more to improve the health of the people of the world than any pills or potions.” The origin of this statement is due entirely to the author of this piece.

It is true that the toilet is an important invention. But in the whole history of mankind it is relatively recent and as we shall see we had to wait for the great entrepreneurs of the Victorian times for it to be developed into what we know and love today.

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## Primitive Sanitation

Early primitives were, of course, the first sanitarians. They knew the rules – and learned them the hard way. They knew that they must keep their sewage away from their cooking.



They knew that they had to keep their kitchen upstream and their toilet downstream. If they reversed this layout there would be terrible consequences. Death would follow. Typhoid, cholera and dysentery were just a few of the terrible diseases which

thrive on poor sanitation. It is this fundamental principle that we work with today.

The toilet is part of the process of separating excreta from drinking water.

## Roman Latrines

The Romans were excellent sanitarians. They regarded ablutions as extremely important and built elaborate latrines in their towns and forts.



*Roma Latrines, Ostia, Rome*

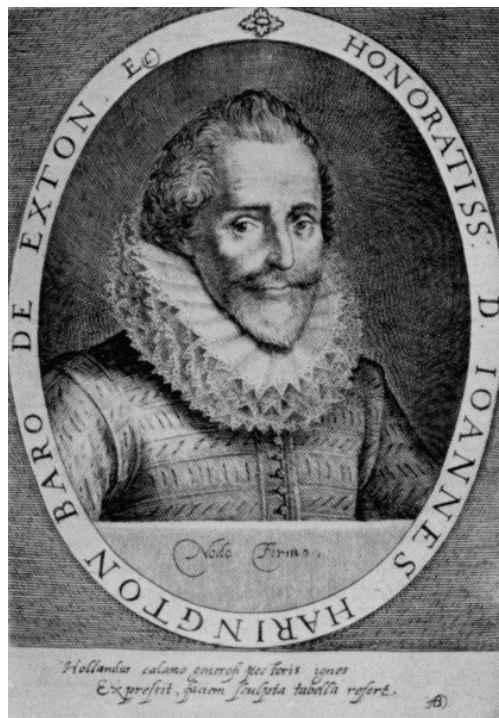
Evidence remains of bath houses and toilet blocks. Here communal latrines had been built. Users sat on marble slabs. Each slab, with its hole, was supported above gushing water to take away excreta. Fresh

water channels in front of the slabs allowed users to wash themselves using a natural sponge tied to the end of a twig or stick. Of course the invention of toilet tissue was years ahead and was not available to the Romans.

The Romans left Britain in 450AD and their civilisation and legacy of sanitary science went with them. Their heritage disappeared and Britain plunged into the dark ages. 1000 years unwashed.

### The First WC

We had to wait till 1592 before the next milestone in sanitary science was achieved. This is when the rather well-to-do godson of Queen Elizabeth 1<sup>st</sup>



got terribly bored with his lifestyle (he was a poet) and set about designing what we now know to be the first ever, fully functioning and self contained Water Closet.

His invention was something we can now all recognise but not many people of his time did. It was a major breakthrough in sanitary science and toilet design. It was an efficient and reasonably hygienic means of disposal of human waste.

It had a cistern containing water. It had a seat and a bowl to receive the deposit. It had a means of flushing away that deposit using a sudden rush of the water.

*Sir John Harington (1561 – 1612)*

It was a genuine WC. A brilliant invention. Years ahead of its time. And, like all great new products, devices and gizmos, it was very expensive. It came in at £1 10s 8d, around £1000 in today's money. Regrettably, it didn't catch on.

No-one could afford it, and only two were ever constructed. Harington made one for himself for use at his home in Kelston Manor in Bath, Somerset, England and the other for use by his

godmother, Queen Elizabeth 1<sup>st</sup> at Richmond Palace, on the River Thames. (Actually, a third WC was actually constructed in 2001 and is now on

display in the magnificent sanitaryware gallery at the Gladstone Pottery Museum, Longton, Stoke on Trent.)

Harington was ahead of his time and we had to wait another 200 years before the next glimpse of the sanitary future came along. This was when Alexander Cumming invented the first Valve Closet.

### **The Valve Closet**

Cumming was a watchmaker from London and he applied his knowledge of mechanics to inventing 'the sliding valve closet.' Again it was the brilliant invention of its time. A genuine machine for the disposal of human waste and a major breakthrough in design. A major success. But not for long. The trouble was that because the mechanism relied on a sliding valve it soon fouled up. The slider rusted and stuck fast. Muck and filth – the very reason for its existence - contributed to its downfall. So, not so brilliant an idea after all.

Regrettably it didn't catch on! But just three years later we saw another breakthrough. Joseph Bramah from Yorkshire, working as a cabinet maker and locksmith, took Cumming's sliding valve and converted it to a 'hinged valve.' This didn't stick – the mechanism would not allow it to stick. Now this really was a success. An effective device.

Thousands were sold. Every grand English country house simply had to have one and both engineers and potters were able to make a living constructing the clever device.



*The hinged valve closet on display at Gladstone Pottery Museum, Stoke-on-Trent.*

The Royal Doulton Company displayed them proudly in their catalogues well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, long after the development of the freestanding ceramic marvel we know today.

The hinged valve closet was expensive and complicated and for the likes of you and me it was well out of our reach.

So most people still relied on the humble privy; a plank and a bucket in a draughty hovel at the bottom of the garden.



*A privy at Gladstone Pottery Museum, Stoke-on-Trent.*

We still needed a design breakthrough that was cheap and cheerful, clean and decent, and it came at the height of the Victorian Era when great entrepreneurs set about changing the way we lived.

### **The Arrival of the Modern Toilet**

The middle of the 1800s was the time of the 'Great Stink' when The Thames was an open sewer and people like George Jennings, Edward Johns, and Thomas Twyford started the race to develop the 'modern' toilet.

What was needed was a freestanding, ceramic affair which required no mechanism and was relatively cheap. Many designs were produced and the bathroom industry was born.



*The Great Stink from a Punch Cartoon*