

# Toilets: A potted history in words



## Toilets through the ages

Humans have been looking for ways to manage their waste for thousands of years. It is estimated that 4,000 to 5,000 years ago, there were already toilet systems using water in places such as Syria and China. The Greeks had toilets and sewerage systems as early as 2500 BC. About a thousand years later, the Romans built the cloaca maxima, ancient Rome's huge drainage system. Furthermore, the Romans had public toilets that were reserved solely for the rich, who would meet in these loos to discuss business – while 'doing their business'.

At the same time, communities in what is now Pakistan and north-west India had water-flow toilets linked to drains



covered with clay bricks. Early toilets that used flowing water to remove waste are also found at Skara Brae in Scotland (left); in some of these, the toilets had a drain running directly beneath them.

The Middle Ages are not known for setting high standards of sanitation. In Europe, the nobility made use of a garderobe – a small room with a hole discharging into a cesspit or moat. Cesspits were emptied by people known as 'gong farmers'.



The modern flush toilet is said to have been invented by an Englishman, Sir John Harrington, in 1596. This new kind of 'water closet' comprised a raised cistern with a small down pipe through which water ran when released by a valve.

Queen Elizabeth I had one installed in one of her palaces. Then, in 1775, Alexander Cumming developed the S-bend, a shaped pipe underneath the basin to keep out smells. The basic design of the toilet has not changed much since.

1861 was also a significant year in the history of the toilet. Louis Pasteur published his Germ Theory that year, after discovering that 'germs' (microbes) caused disease and illness. He encouraged surgeons to wash their hands before operating on people. When Prince Albert died in 1861, apparently of typhoid, a grief-stricken Queen Victoria demanded that piped water and sewage treatment be installed throughout Britain. From Britain, sanitation spread to France, and then the rest of Europe and the world.

See our *'A Short History of the Toilet'* poster for fun facts surrounding the history of the loo.

## Sanitation today: a crisis and a right

In 2010, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution officially recognising sanitation as a human right. World Toilet Day is celebrated every year on 19 November, a UN-designated day to raise awareness of the importance of safe sanitation and of the plight of the people around the world who still lack access to it. Currently, that number is estimated to be 2.4 billion people.

Lack of proper sanitation facilities forces people to defecate in the open, in rivers or near areas where children play or food is prepared. This increases the risk of disease. Globally, more than 1,400 children under five die every day as a result of diarrhoeal diseases caused by a lack of safe water, sanitation and basic hygiene. That's more than the total number of children dying each year because of HIV, malaria and measles combined.

See 'Get involved' to find out what you can do to help people in the poorest communities on the planet get a decent toilet, clean water and all the information they need to stay healthy.

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