A short history of the toilet

Roman

Going to the toilet in private has only been part of British culture for the last 150 years.

Medieval

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Today

So it’s only in the past century and a half that the water closet (WC) or toilet has graced ordinary homes in the UK. And that we’ve understood the importance of hand-washing to prevent disease.

Sadly in many parts of the world they still don’t have a toilet, which is vital for health and well-being. A third of the world’s population is still at risk from disease because they don’t have a safe or sanitary place to go to the toilet.

Every minute, a child under five dies because of dirty water and poor sanitation.

Toilet Twinning

By spreading the love of loos, you can help people without a loo, get training and help to create a safe place to go to the toilet.

Remember, loos save lives.

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In cities people used cesspits which were emptied by gong farmers. A gong farmer was a very smelly man who owned a horse, a cart and a shovel. He would empty out the cesspits for a small fee.

The lack of hygiene really got serious when the Black Death took hold of the population and spread like wildfire. Between 1348 and 1350 it killed nearly one third of the whole population of England. The disease was spread by the fleas on rats, which thrived in the filthy, poo- and wee-ridden streets.

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Legend has it that Sir John Harrington created a flush toilet for his godmother Queen Elizabeth I but she was too embarrassed to use it for fear that the roar of the rushing water would “inform the palace of the royal bowels being evacuated”.

The Big Stink

In the 1850s parliament had to shut down in the summer because of the smell from the poo in the River Thames. This delightful episode was called The Big Stink.

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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. A decade later, her son Prince Edward came close to dying of the same disease, and word about the need for flush toilets went out across the land. From Britain, it spread to France, and then the rest of Europe and the world.

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