

DOWN THE GARDEN PATH

From time immemorial all nations and their people have struggled endlessly with their consciences over the thorny issue of toilets and the products that emanate therefrom.

Neolithic man had a simple solution to this most vexing of problems - when the build up of rubbish and bodily wastes became offensive he picked up his chattels and set up home further away. Quite wrongfully many assume that the Victorians were the instigators of the privy or the ty bach as well as the foul water drain which assisted with the removal of unwanted matter. The Romans, god bless them, can, as usual, take the credit for the simple privy and it's long, illustrious and often right royal history through the intervening centuries. The principles of privies, latrines and drains may well have been 'removed' from the Greeks presumably during Roman forays into their lands. But the Roman legacy was ignored and unappreciated for centuries, our countrymen preferring to live in squalor until the privy and it's fortified companion the garderobe were conveniently re invented and used with great pomp and state by the highest in the land. Perhaps we should concede that the Victorians did at least introduce public sewerage on a large scale to compliment the privy in the largest of towns and cities although the countryside remained firmly stuck with almost prehistoric sanitation.

The Oxford Dictionary quaintly describes the privy as 'the place for easing nature' - far nearer the truth when we consider the location of many of these unsung little

buildings which developed their own brand of architecture. Whether in the middle of a field, astride a stream, on the edge of a cliff or even in a church tower they displayed a quaint rural vernacular feel and personal touch. In many instances the personality of the user was evident from the names they used to describe a visit down the garden path. Imagine a privy being called the House of Commons, Windsor Castle or the Long Drop! Some cottagers, particularly in medieval times, did not possess such a grand sounding edifice - they relieved themselves in a field just a bow shot from their hovel.

Privies came in all sorts of combinations, types and sizes - some were just downright Heath - Robinsonish in their quirky features and fixtures. Some were single seaters, others double, triple and even up to 6 seats where they were quite frequently graded according to size of seat, opening and height above ground. This 'personalization' could accommodate everyone in your family or all your neighbours in the street from the smallest to the largest! It has been recorded that one three seater privy was shared by some 40 people - a true case of bringing the community closer together!

Over many years the humble yet honourable privy developed unique and individualistic methods of waste collection - from common vaults to basic holes and later the tarred timber bucket or galvanised pail. To reduce the presence of smells ingenious chute devices were sometimes fitted which, when a lever was pulled, would release ash or earth onto the container or hole in the ground. As was human nature the need to regularly empty the bucket or clean out the pit was put off as long as possible - who could blame them? If clearance only

took place once a year some 90 bucket loads were often removed. Carting such a quantity away had to be very carefully planned particularly if the work was undertaken on a Sunday. Trying to avoid the congregation or the Vicar leaving after Holy Communion at the Parish Church was a fine art. Even if the fully indentured 'buckateer' did succeed in avoiding the crowd there could be little doubt, even from what was considered a safe distance, what business he was about.

Many can still remember the ghostly visit of the night soil cart, or fromarty as my father called it, outlined in the eerie glow of the old hurricane lamps as brave local men went about their duty emptying buckets from privies before heading for some specially selected field to deposit the night's takings!

Contrary to popular belief royalty also needed to 'ease nature' and engaged inventors and experts of their day to provide the most regal accommodation possible. Queen Elizabeth I had Sir John Harrington design her a flushing water closet described by the inventor as a 'privy of perfection'. It is quite likely that it was no more than an up market privy provided with a bucket of water to flush the contents through a chute into the street or the moat - as far away as possible from the Queen! Although Elizabeth I apparently had good relations with her privy two of our kings certainly did not. George II, it is recorded, let out a sound louder than the normal 'royal wind' and departed this life - literally on the throne! James II of Scotland fared even worse. Hiding from his pursuers in a privy he thought he heard the voices of friends come to save him. On lifting his head from the hole he pleaded 'Please help

me from this stinking mess' - and was promptly run through with a sword by one of his enemies.

Sanitation has advanced rapidly over the past 70 - 80 years although even today some isolated properties still rely on a privy quite frequently at the bottom of the garden. Many privies still survive whether through pure luck or a deliberate attempt by the owner to keep them, possibly for sentimental reasons, but albeit in a rundown and neglected condition - a reminder of past happy days when, if you had to go, you had to go down the garden path. Nowadays there is no need to spend time cutting old newspapers into squares to hang on a nail on the back of the privy door that inevitably leaked gallons of rainwater and offered little protection from howling gales. Long gone is the need for an urgent walk down the path in pitch blackness with flickering candle or faltering old cycle lamp to reach the 'thunder box' only to find it already occupied - by the local hedgehog or cat.

Many privies have succumbed and returned from whence they came whilst a few, and probably far more than we realise, have survived as empty shells denoting a past active life. Some have even been reincarnated as potting sheds or garden stores. They are gone but not forgotten. Today's gardeners really don't know what they are missing - 'bloomin' 'jynormus' vegetables!'

Hail to thee blithe privy.

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