

## HISTORIC TOILET TOUR

*A saga of convenience through the ages, from Roman Hygiene to the 18<sup>th</sup> C 'Sugar House' and 19<sup>th</sup> C attempts to prevent 'nuisance' and promote public decency. And the chance to sample the dubious comforts of medieval garderobes!*

### Cross road to LENDAL BRIDGE

Look downstream towards Ouse Bridge. In 1367 the first recorded public convenience was provided in an arch of the old Ouse Bridge. In 1380 William Graa of St Mary Castlegate left 3s 4d per annum in his will to provide "a light in the common jakes at the end of Use Bridge". This led to the saying "bridges are built for wise men to go over and fools to go under".

In 1579 the City Council was concerned at the filthy state of the water in the River Ouse, the source of much of the city's water, and they issued orders for the citizens to stop discharging filth into the river. But at the same time the city councilors were in the habit of nipping out of the Guildhall and peeing in the river in full public view! To conceal this spectacle the Councilors voted 5 shillings "to erect a wainscot around the pissing place"! This was just past where the White Rose boatyard now is, and the councilors' toilets are still in the same place, though thankfully inside the Guildhall!

### LENDAL TOWER

Recross the road and look at the plaque on Lendal Tower. It tells about the heightening of the tower in the tower in the late 17<sup>th</sup> C to house a water tank. Water was pumped out of the river Ouse and distributed through the city by means of water pipes made from hollowed-out tree trunks.

### MULTANGULAR TOWER

The Romans were in York from 71 to 410 AD, with the 9<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup> legions, which had over 5400 men. The Romans had very good sanitation; excavations on the site of the roman bridge opposite the Guildhall revealed the roman water main coming into York in a stone-lined culvert, dipping down under the River Ouse to rise up into the fort on the other side. Examination of pollen and seeds in the culvert indicated that the water was coming from limestone, which suggests that there was a roman aqueduct or culvert from the Tadcaster area.

The roman fortress must have had lavatories like those at Housesteads on Hadrian's Wall. These had proper loo seats, a flushing system, & running water for hand washing.

The Romans used sponges on sticks to wipe their bottoms, and the sponges were cleansed in disinfectant vinegar. This sounds dirty, but in fact ensured that the hand did not come into contact with your bottom. At Housesteads, and other roman forts, the lavatories were always in the corner of the fort, nearest a river or stream. So the Roman lavatories in York were almost certainly within the Multangular tower area, or somewhere else within the walls, along the river frontage.

### ST MARY'S ABBEY

Museum Gardens contain the ruins of St. Mary's Abbey, which would also have had elaborate lavatories (or "reredorters", as they were behind the dorter, or dormitory). The reredorter of the abbey was in the area of the Yorkshire Museum, and the York Archaeological Trust (YAT) have identified a great drain running across Museum Gardens, which may have been the main drain for St. Mary's Abbey. The recent excavations in the St. Leonard's Hospital area also revealed a great drain running from the Hospital area towards the river.

### KING'S MANOR

Built in 1490 as the Abbot's residence of St. Mary's Abbey, it was converted by Henry VIII into a royal palace. Point out the "smallest window in York", which lit the "Royal Flush", a garderobe used by Henry VIII, when he visited York with wife no. 5, Catherine Howard, in 1541. The garderobe emptied straight into the moat around the city walls at this point. "Garderobe" means to hang up a cloak, either because you hung it up while you did your business, or because cloaks were hung up so that the stench from the loo should kill all the bugs. In the middle ages people used broken pots or shells to scrape their bottoms and then finished off with rags, leaves or moss!

### EXHIBITION SQUARE

In the Tudor period there were public toilets at Monk Bar, by the Merchant Taylors hall on the walls, on Ouse Bridge and at Bootham Bar. These, and others, were largely financed by the church, and with Henry VIII's depredations lost their endowments and disappeared. By the 19<sup>th</sup> c this led to a great deal of "public nuisance", as men were in the habit of relieving themselves in public, particularly in the arches and barbicans of the Bars and Posterns, so that it was said that no lady of respectability could pass in or out for fear of what she might see or smell!

So from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> C the city council pursued a policy of providing men's urinals at all the Bars and Posterns, a "cordon sanitaire", so that men could not enter or leave without passing a peeing place. However one of the York councilors, William Pearson, who lived in Bootham and worked as a solicitor in Blake St, objected to these urinals and waged a one-man campaign for their removal, but without success. The men's urinal at Bootham Bar was particularly necessary for the cab drivers waiting there. The rotating iron spikes on the steps up to the Bar were provided to stop them climbing over and peeing on the steps when the urinal was locked. When the walls here were opened to the public in 1889, a new urinal was provided in front of the steps, but with no roof so that ladies could see in! A roof was hastily provided, not to shelter users, but so that ladies sensibilities were not offended.

The toilets at Bootham Bar are the oldest public toilets in the same location in York. In 1935 there was a proposal to create an under ground lavatory in Exhibition Sq. To provide ventilation for this it was proposed to covert the plinth of Etty's statue into a gigantic ventilation shaft; fortunately this proposal came to nothing!

## SWINEGATE

At the junction of Swine gate & Church St, the YAT discovered massive roman sewers in 1972. These must have drained the roman bath complex, part of which lies under and around the Roman Bath pub; these baths too would have had extensive roman toilets.

Via Finkle St and the Roman Bath pub to:

## ST SAMPSON'S SQUARE

So far mention has only been made of provision for men. It was expected that women would not drink as much as men, and that respectable ladies would stay at home. In practice women would sometimes carry special bottles to relieve themselves into, under the concealment of their voluminous skirts. Others taken short would position themselves over a drain and relieve themselves: this was relatively easier then, as ladies wore split-crotch knickers! Many ladies were forced however to use toilets in shops, making unnecessary purchases in the process, or those in cafes; as they usually had to buy a drink to justify their visit, this only made the problem worse, as they soon wanted the loo again!

The first ladies toilet was provided in 1896 in Silver St. It had an attendant but initially was only open on Saturdays! However it was right opposite a gents urinal, also in Silver St., and there were complaints that the men were behaving lewdly towards the ladies using the lavatory; perhaps it was too much of a novelty to the men! Eventually in 1898 an underground gents lavatory, with both seating & standing accommodation, was provided in Silver St. The vicar of St Sampson's church objected, as the entrance was too near his church. A compromise was reached with the provision of a glazed hut to conceal the entrance. The vicar, far from objecting, then used the hut to prop notices advertising church events to the hut!

By 1900 there were 20 male urinals, 3 male W.C.s, but only one female W.C. in York city centre. By the 1950's this imbalance had been righted, but the 1960's & 70's saw a growth in vandalism and a decline in usage of traditional male urinals, so many were closed so that now there are only 9 public toilets (but for men and women) and one purely for disabled in the city centre.

In 1927 both ladies and gents toilets in Silver St. were dilapidated, so it was decided to provide new ones in St. Sampson's Square. These were to be underground. But the diggings hit roman remains, and the gents were abandoned, and new underground gents provided at the opposite end of Parliament St. This resulted in many families and couples losing each other in the crowds due to the sundered facilities! This was rectified in 1992 when a combined Ladies and Gents WC was provided at the other end of Parliament St.

## MONK BAR

Here it is possible to see a mediaeval garderobe, overhanging what was the moat. Go up to the Monk Bar Museum to look at it from the inside; probably the oldest surviving private loo seat in York. The proprietor, Mike Bennett, does not mind us going in for free, provided we linger in the shop, and encourage visitors to return to his museum. Descend back to the street, and you can see the entrance to a 19<sup>th</sup> C gents urinal, now blocked up, by the key cutters. In 1903 this urinal was provided with a 'shadow less gas lamp'; the mind boggles as to why this was necessary!

## Onto the walls to:- MERCHANT TAYLORS HALL

Behind the hall on the walls is a pair of garderobe seats, which acted as a public toilet in the Middle Ages. The steps up to them from the Merchant Taylors Hall still survive. These must have been a very 'public' convenience, in full view of the city; and as you sat on them, you must have hoped to God that nobody fired a bow & arrow up them! These are the oldest surviving public toilets in York.

Continue on the walls, to:-

## LAYERTHORPE POSTERN

From here there is a good view of the River Foss, which was a half mile wide marsh until drained in the 1850's. In the Middle Ages it was the King's fish pool and a swamp, into which much of the city's sewage emptied- the fish must have liked eating sewage!

Then via Peaseholme Green and St Saviourgate. To fill in this long stretch you can tell people about Graveyards and their threat to public health, as of course were all the open sewers and privies that abounded in the slums of the 19<sup>th</sup> C Hungate area. This story is suitable for St Cuthbert's churchyard (which was buried in twice over in the 1832 Cholera epidemic) or St Saviour's Church/ARC.

In 1840's York Journalist Hargrove of York Herald led campaign to get graveyards shut, as they polluted the wells and led to the spread of Cholera and Typhoid. Recorded incidents such as children seen playing in Walmgate with a human skeleton, which was still articulated, and a dog seen running down Coney Street with a human leg in its mouth to eat it! There are more dead people in York (about ½ million) than living as the last 1200 years population are still under the ground. These city centre graveyards finally closed in 1854-5.

## PAVEMENT/PARLIAMENT ST

In 1880 it was proposed to erect a tasteful a tasteful '*chalet de neccessite*' outside All Saints Pavement church. The Rev James Raine, rector of All Saints and a distinguished local historian, managed to get the proposal rejected on the grounds that the chosen site was on the site of a former graveyard, which contained the corpses of distinguished Lord Mayors & MPs of York. Obviously dead men took priority over the needs of living women! Eventually however an underground gents lavatory, with both seating & standing accommodation, was provided in 1894 near the church.

In 1992, as part of the landscaping of Parliament St., new combined underground gents and ladies were provided, and a disabled facility in St. Sampson's Sq. The Parliament St. loos have been christened 'splash palace'; the YAT have dubbed them 'the temple of Urinus', and others have called them 'a pretentious pillared piss-house'! The toilets echo the market cross in Pavement, demolished in the early 19<sup>th</sup> C, as it was 'the resort of dissolute persons'!

In the 1860's it was found that poor residents of the city area were going with buckets to take water free from the public toilets, as they had to pay for their supply to the York Waterworks. One urinal off Coppergate was using 1 1/2million gallons a year, most of it going to the poor residents of the area. Eventually the City Council got wise to this, sent a spy to watch the toilet, and switched the water supply off at night!

### JORVIK VIKING CENTRE

Here is a convenient place to talk about the Coppergate excavations and the Jorvik centre. Here archaeologists found what incredible squalor the Vikings lived in, and excavated numerous Viking period toilet pits. One even had a collapsed loo seat in it; one hopes that nobody was sat on it when it collapsed! Archaeologists love toilet pits, as they show what the Vikings ate and what intestinal parasites they suffered from.

A fossilized piece of human poo was found, now known as the 'Coppergate turd', which is now on display at the ARC.

### CLIFFORD'S TOWER

Point the prominent garderobes emptying onto the mound. One of the least popular jobs for peasants in the Middle Ages was cleaning out their Lord's pond or moat!

Then across Tower St. to St. George's fields and down to the river Ouse at:-

### DAVY TOWER

In the 1730's the 'New Walk' was created from this point along the riverbank towards Fulford, so that the upper classes could promenade and show off their finery away from the dirty narrow streets of the city. One hazard, or perhaps delight, of this was that men used to swim nude in the river. So the city council decreed that 'men exposing themselves naked in the water be prosecuted for a nuisance'!

To service the needs of high-class citizens using the New Walk Davy Tower was converted into a public toilet. This was known as the 'Sugar house', which shows that 'sugar' is a very old euphemism for shit!

From her it is possible to see back to Ouse Bridge, with which the tour started.