

THE 112th MEETING OF AYNHO HISTORY SOCIETY HELD AT THE VILLAGE HALL, AYNHO
ON WEDNESDAY 27th FEBRUARY 2019

Present:- Keith McClellan – Chairman
Peter Cole – Secretary

1) Secretary's Report

Peter said that on the 31st January he had attended a meeting of the Northamptonshire Heritage Forum in place of Keith, who was that day in hospital for his operation. This is an organisation that helps groups to promote their towns or villages throughout the county. He had been made welcome, starting with a tour of the very recently reopened Brackley Town Hall. Later on he was able to give a brief report to everyone detailing the enormous amount of history in Aynho, and giving out leaflets about our lovely old village.

He said that he had nearly finished sorting out the accounts for 2017 and 2018.

Doug Ward said that John and Gill Phillips who had moved away from Aynho had recently given him a sketch of Aynho where Hollow Way meets Blacksmiths Hill, drawn by quite a famous artist renowned for cycling pictures Frank Patterson. It had been drawn probably in the 1920s. Doug left it on the table for all to see. It will probably be hung in the Village Hall.

2) The History of Privies by Chris Bazeley

Chris asked everyone to think about an insanitary part of the world today. In the third millennium BC was the age of cleanliness. Sewers and toilets were invented in several areas of the world. We are talking five thousand years ago. In two thousand eight hundred BC some of the most advanced toilets existed of lavatories built into the outside walls of houses in Mohenjo Daro (Pakistan). These were toilets with seats on top, and vertical chutes where the waste fell into street drains or cess pits. These were for affluent people, the rest just squatted on pots in the ground.

Sir Mortimer Wheeler was Director of Archaeology in India in the 1940s, and he said that the toilet facilities in India at that ancient time could well be envied by many people of today.

Water flushing toilets were also to be found to have been used in Scara Brae in the Orkneys around 3100 to 2500 BC.

In Jerusalem in the eighth century BC there were good toilets.

When the Romans invaded England they often had rows of toilets in bath houses. These were mostly used in the sitting position, but the front of these was open, which seems somewhat unusual. In Rome there were said to be over 140 public toilets in AD 315.

What did people use before toilet paper? The most obvious thing was grass, leaves or fur. A lavateria bush is so-called because it is strong and effective. In the north of England dock leaves were often used, and they were also used to cure haemorrhoids. However never use a sumac leaf, as this can be a terrible poison. The ancient Greeks used stones and pieces of clay, and the Romans used sponges on the end of a stick. Mid-easteners always used the left hand, which is still considered unclean in many Arabian countries to this day. We don't know who first had the idea of sitting on a toilet, but ancient cultures were certainly adept at using water to avoid stepping into their faeces. When the Romans finally left Britain their idea of toilets were lost in the West. In Cropredy Chris was walking round and spotted a little lean-to. He said "Ah, you have a little privy there". She replied "No, that's where we keep the gas boiler."

The first real toilets in England were in castles and were set in the walls, which were regularly whitewashed to clean the brown stains going into the moat or stream. He showed an example, and said that clothes were hung in there as moths didn't go in. It was known as a garde-robe hence our

name today – wardrobe. In some cases this may have been a weak point in defences, as it would have been possible to wait until nightfall when the lights went out and then immediately fire a bow and arrow through the hole to kill defenders. So the builders started to build almost vertical shafts cut into the thickness of the walls. Long poles would be used to clear any blockages.

In the 14th century there were three public toilets in London. One was on London Bridge, giving rise to a saying “It was built for a wise man to walk over, but a fool to walk under.” Ordinary people would use a field, but the rich would use a commode. If you visit Mary Arden’s house in Stratford you will find that upstairs there are chamber pots. Urine was very important, particularly in our part of the world as it was used in the tanning industry, so it could be sold. In this house they made a mistake as they built a privy.

So we come to the arrival of the privy. In 1848 the Public Health Act came into being. This stated that every household should have some form of fixed sanitation. This was due to a severe cholera epidemic in the 1830s. Sewage, dead animals, horse manure and chemicals from factories had poured into the Thames. Until 1875 all the sewers from Northampton ran into the River Nene.

So privies had to be built. The posh had some sort of privy, the rest used squat or seated toilets.

One was shown from High Furness in Cumbria. It looked good in summer, but not with cold winter weather. The lady owner said she went down there when a little girl one night frightened that her candle might go out, and found that it was warm. She was sitting on a tramp, who had wandered in for the night.

A privy should have a straight path so that there could not be an accident on a dark or snowy night. If possible rhubarb should be planted nearby, as this flourishes on anything that can be off loaded. The third thing necessary is a woodpile. This is because ladies were reluctant for neighbours to see them visiting the loo, so if anyone was nearby, they would only pick up an armful of logs. Men cooperated with this by leaving logs in a suitable place.

Some squat privies were cleaned by water, where a stream was below or close by. If it was right underneath the seat everything was swept away downstream, if a little bit away then it could be emptied regularly by shovelling it into the water.

Queen Victoria was walking alongside the River Thames one day and she asked the Mayor “What are all those pieces of paper floating down?” Quickly he replied “They are all notices telling people not to swim in the River.”

In some privies where there was no stream they had a bucket of ash from the fire. A scoop of this was used to dry things out, so as to make disposal easier as it could be used as a fertiliser. Buckets were also used to empty some privies. Most people emptied their own into a pit. This might last for a few months, then they would have to move over and dig a new one. Vegetables really flourished in these areas.

An American was billeted at a cottage, and he complained that there was no lock on the privy door. The old fellow replied “Well nobody’s run off with the bucket yet.”

It was once said that man went to stay with his uncle in the country. He said “That’s a funny toilet you have. I pulled the rope but no water came out” The reply was “We aint got no water. You’ve just let the pigeons out.”

Another innovation was the Moules dry earth system. This would have some dry swill put in it by pulling a lever after use.

Another feature in some privies was the tippler system. It was in an outhouse, but in the kitchen the floor sloped down to a drain, with a hopper underneath. This was balanced so that when it filled to a certain level of water it would tip, sending a lot of water to flush away everything. An elderly lady said that when young she dreaded using it because she could sometimes hear this rumble coming, followed by an enormous flush of water rushing by. Chris said that this concept was actually a good idea, because today most excess water from showers, baths and rainwater is just wasted, so it is now being adopted by Ecohomes throughout the country.

Men who emptied privies for a living used to work at night, so were called night soil men.

There used to be a communal loo at Wadebridge station in Cornwall known as the Iron Duke. Another one is on the Severn Valley also with beautiful ironwork.

In some towns and cities there were blocks of 40 houses, with perhaps 360 people and just one block of toilets.

A pamphlet had been produced in 1596 by John Harington which included a detailed description of how to build a sort of flushed toilet. But no one had taken this up any further. It wasn't until 1775 that the first patent was taken out by Alexander Cumming for a flushing toilet, which had a U-bend to prevent smells from coming back up. Soon after Joseph Bramah improved the design for more or less the lavatory we know today.

We come now to Thomas Crapper. Many people regard him as the man who invented the toilet, but in fact he was not really an inventor, but more of a publicist. He was the one who popularised all the different types of toilets around in the 1860s. He caused an outrage as he had toilets in his shop window, which was not the done thing at all.

A final look at the privy. The picture which Chris sent to us and appears on our adverts for the talk is of Goat Peak, which is actually about 80 miles south-east of Seattle in Washington State, U S A.

There is a canal-side privy immediately below the bridge over the canal at Cropredy. (There are similar ones at Napton, Banbury and Thrupp.)

You can buy a camping privy, they are still on sale.

There is a garden shed privy at Middleton Cheney, two cottages - a four-door unit with a washing machine and flush toilet, and still in Middleton Cheney two former council houses with outside toilets.

Helmdon has a listed privy, but it has been undermined by rabbits and is sinking badly.

At Weston there was a chap called Bill Owen. His mum told Chris that he had been to the Rose & Crown and had quite a few bevvies and he decided that that would be a good time to empty the bucket into the pit. It was very dark, and he fell over spilling it all. When telling this story his mother always said "That poor woman" thinking of her having to wash all his clothes. Chris himself couldn't help thinking "Well, poor Bill Owen really."

A young lad had come home from the First World War. He saw the wooden privy and realised that things could be so much better, so he pulled out a grenade and chucked it at the privy. The privy went up and descended as matchsticks when he realised that his old mum was sitting there. He said "Oh Mum, I'm so sorry." She replied "That's all right, Boy. It must have been something I'd eaten."

Various members of the audience mentioned privies they had used or seen.

Keith thanked Chris for a fascinating and amusing talk.

3) Forthcoming Meetings: -

Wednesday 27th March - Romantic Decline - Preserving Chastleton House by Ruth Peters

Wednesday 24th April – The Sheep That Eat Men by Martin Sirot-Smith (in costume)

Wednesday 29th May – Victorian Inventors and Inventions of Northamptonshire by Jon-Paul Carr