

# **The True History Of The Water Closet**

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When looking at today's society, it is evident that we are obsessed with cleanliness. Never before has the human race been so concerned with personal hygiene. More baths and showers are taken today than ever before. We notice a significant difference in how we feel when we attend outdoor activities, especially if they are for multiple days and nights. The biggest contribution to the health and well being of the human society today is modern plumbing.

Modern plumbing is largely taken for granted today. Every morning millions of Americans wake up to a hot shower or bath. Dishwashers, garbage disposals, and jetted tubs are in many cases considered a necessity to today's modern family. Within the realm of the modern home, there are hundreds if not thousands of incredible inventions that make life easier. We use them over and over again, every single day. They have always been a part of life, but at those times when our modern conveniences aren't readily available to us, we notice. Without them we feel as if we have regressed in time. One of the most, if not the most, important invention for our time is the water closet, or in lamans terms, toilet. Elvis died one, and Charles V, who ruled Germany and Spain, was born on one. Although we use them every day, most of us know very little about the modern toilet (Horan 1996).

There have been and always will be those who strive for improvement and convenience. It is these kind of men that we owe a great deal of gratitude for the invention of the toilet. There is a great deal of controversy surrounding the invention of the toilet. There are many interpretations of who exactly the water closet. And there is even greater

controversy concerning who gets credit for inventing the modern day toilet. As will be seen in this paper, it was not Thomas Crapper who invented the toilet. In fact, even though Thomas Crapper gets much credit for his work with the toilet, in reality he did not do much of anything in the establishment of the modern water closet.

### **Origin Of The Modern Toilet**

The water closet stems from noble origins. In 1596, the grandson of Queen Elizabeth I set out to improve sanitation conditions for his grandmother and himself. This invention, which was named the Ajax, would be Sir John Harrington's last invention (The Men That Made The Water Closet 1994). In referring to both the sanitation practices of the time and his new invention, Sir Harrington said, "This devise of mine requires not a sea full of water, but a cistern, not a whole Thames full, but a halfe a ton full, to keep all sweet and savourie (Horan 1996)." Harrington's invention was quite simple. This device had a seat, a bowl and behind it a cistern of water for washing away the contents (The Thomas Crapper Story). This device was the first known water closet to use running water.

Unfortunately, Harrington made the mistake of writing a book about his invention. People were disgusted by the book and insulted by the invention. Harrington's water closet was mocked and the majority of the public ignored his invention (Colman 1994).

Not interested in Harrington's "Ajax", much of the public continued to rely on old methods of sanitation. Glass urinals, or chamber pots were used by most (Colman 1994). These were very inexpensive, made of copper or pottery. When the pot was full, people simply emptied it out of the window onto the street (Colman 1994). This was a bad

situation for the typical passerby. For many people, the close stool was the instrument of choice. This device was a chamber pot hidden inside a wooden box with a lid (Horan 1996). The user simply lifted the lid and sat on top of the box (Horan 1996). Many of these boxes were very fancy, covered with ornate paintings and objects. Rather than hiding the offensive piece of furniture, many people made it a center of attention. Many close stools were decorated with gold and silver, engraved pictures, and velvet or leather cushioned seats (Horan 1996).

### **Sanitation Concerns**

Because the remnants of these chamber pots and close stools were never properly taken care of, serious sanitary health concerns began to arise. As more and more people began to crowd into the cities, conditions got worse. As one person said of Leeds England in the 1830's, "Whole streets were floating with sewage (Colman 1994)." Despite the conditions of the over-crowded cities, many people managed to simply ignore the awful situation. It was not until the Cholera epidemic that people started to take notice of the conditions they were living in. Cholera, the disease that killed millions of people had started in Asia. Many people in Europe thought because of the great geographical distance, the disease would not reach them. They were wrong (Colman 1994). In 1832 the first case of Cholera was diagnosed in London (Colman 1994). Many people died as Cholera struck again and again. Finally, an English doctor named John Snow proved that the Cholera outbreak was caused by the poor sanitary conditions within the city (Colman 1994). When this news was announced, a series of laws were passed requiring houses to

have a type of flushing toilet. Money was given by the government to establish safe sewer systems throughout the city (Colman 1994).

These flushing toilets, which were now required by law, were basically the same device introduced by Sir John Harrington a hundred and fifty years ago. As these privies were used, sanitation became better, but there were still unsightly problems. Although with the aid of water the waste was washed down the privy into the sewer system, the absence of a trap and valve meant the waste was rarely completely washed down. And because the toilet connected directly to the sewer system, the odors continually escaped into the living area (Horan 1996). Improvements in these areas have led to the modern toilet of today.

### **Improvements With The Water Closet**

In 1775, Alexander Cummings received the first patent for a water closet (Horan 1996). Cummings' idea was to improve on the water closet invented by John Harrington. Like Harrington's water closet, Cummings' toilet used gravity to aid the flow of water to the bowl. But more importantly, Cummings used a valve trap to secure the area between the bowl and the pipes that took the waste to the sewer (Horan 1996). This valve trap aided in helping the water efficiently flush all the waste to the sewer. Additionally, the trap stopped foul odor from reaching the bowl and coming into the room. By the 1800's the golden age of toilets had come. Architects began incorporating water closets into their designs and entrepreneurs thought of ways to make the toilet big business (Horan 1996).

Building on the concepts of Cummings, three British entrepreneurs took the toilet into the next century. George Jennings, Thomas Crapper, and Thomas Twyford proved to be the most successful toilet manufactures in England (Horan 1996). Jennings designed a closet that siphoned the water, creating greater water pressure entering the bowl. This cleaned the bowl better than other water closets had. Thomas Twyford increased the beauty of the toilet. He hid the working parts of the toilet with porcelain. This was an aesthetic and functional addition. Porcelain made cleaning much easier, and provided a more pleasing site. Thomas Crapper developed a pull chain that reduced the noise and amount of water needed for the toilet (Horan 1996).

### **Thomas Crapper**

The common belief is that Thomas Crapper invented the toilet we use today. This is simply not true (Colman 1994). Though Thomas Crapper was an innovator and held nine patents, he had nothing to do with the initial invention of the water closet.

Thomas Crapper was born in Waterside, near the Yorkshire town of Thorne in 1836 (The Thomas Crapper Story 2002). When Thomas was around the age of fourteen, he moved to London to apprentice with a master plumber. After serving his apprenticeship and working in the industry for three years, he established his own company in 1861 (The Thomas Crapper Story 2002). In the 1880's Edward VII, the Prince Of Wales, purchased the Sandringham House in Norfolk. Wanting the home as the royal palace, Edward began making improvements. Crapper & Co. was invited to furnish, supply, and install all the plumbing fixtures for the bathrooms and drainage of the project. Thomas Crapper

had received his first royal warrant (The Thomas Crapper Story 2002). Four more royal warrants were extended to Crapper & Co. in the following years. This royal approval helped Crapper & Co. greatly. Crapper fittings were considered the best of their time. Many commissions were received all over the country. The importance of his work in the plumbing field won Thomas Crapper knighthood from the Queen of England (Horan 1996). But his is not what made the name crapper an ordinary household name.

“Crap” is an ancient word signifying rubbish (The Thomas Crapper Story 2002). Early settlers to America took this word with them, and it has been used here continuously ever since. American World War I servicemen were quite intrigued to see the name Thomas Crapper & Company stamped on the toilets in Europe. When the GI’s returned home from the war, they continued to use the word “crapper” in referring to the toilet. This is where we get the phrase, “I’m going to the crapper (Horan 1996).”

Thomas Crapper retired in 1904. He passed his company to his partner Robert Marr and his nephew George Crapper (The Thomas Crapper Story 2002). Thomas Crapper died on the 27<sup>th</sup> of January 1910 (The Thomas Crapper Story 2002).

If one were asked to name the most important invention of all time, the choice would probably be found on a short list of items, which include the jet airplane, or the automobile. In reality, the invention that has had the greatest impact of the human civilization is modern plumbing and the toilet. Without the toilet, urban civilization would not be possible (A History Of The Flush Toilet 2002). Without the toilet, high-

density areas would not be possible. And yet, because the toilet seems so simple and common, it is many times disregarded. The toilet is a relatively modern invention, developed at the same time as train travel and long distance communication (A History Of The Flush Toilet 2002).

We owe a great deal to those who ingeniously sought after better sanitation. Although John Harrington and Alexander Cummings received little or no reward for their inventions, without them our lives would be very different today. And while Thomas Crapper is not the inventor of the product he is most closely associated with, his contribution to plumbing is significant (Sir Thomas Crapper Myth Or Reality 1993).

## Citations

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