

Song To An Unsung Hero

The ultimate tribute to any inventor is the incorporation of his surname into the language without a capital letter. For some reason, the British have been especially generous with this form of accolade; the Earl of Sandwich, Lord Cardigan, Lord Chesterfield and the Earl of Davenport are regularly honored in everyday speech—and so are such commoners as Macintosh, Macadam, Gladstone and Bowler. But what of Thomas Crapper, the father of the modern toilet? While American slang has acknowledged Crapper with both a noun and a verb, it is still a dubious sort of fame—and the man whose Valveless Water-Waste Preventer perfected the efficient disposal of the unmentionable is still a prophet without honor in his own country.

In "Flushed With Pride," the latest manifestation of the British affection for water-closet wit, novelist Wallace Reyburn finally gives Crapper his due. Although the book has the ring of a classic hoax, Reyburn presents ample evidence that his man not only lived but made a lasting contribution to mankind's comfort.

Thomas Crapper lived and died in Victorian times, but in terms of sanitary conditions the age was still dark. To flush their toilets, the Victorians simply pulled a chain that lifted a valve that released water from a cistern into a flush pipe. In other words, they just pulled the plug. Since the plumbers who made the valves could rarely insure a snug fit, the water in most toilets flowed ceaselessly. This flow, multiplied by thousands, threatened to dry up reservoirs and spread drought and pestilence over the land.

Superflush: In the 1870s the British Board of Trade sent out a call for a more efficient system—and Crapper, a Chelsea sanitary engineer, came up with the best answer. His ingenious solution, which can still be observed beneath the lid of many toilet tanks, depends upon a float, a metal arm and a siphonic action to empty the reservoir. Crapper's Valveless Water-Waste Preventer passed its most critical public test in a demonstration at the Health Exhibition of 1884, achieving a superflush that completely cleared away ten large apples, a flat sponge, three wads of paper and four paper sheets stuck to the bowl with grease.

As his biographer cannot resist observing, Crapper's success "was no mere flush in the pan." He went on to develop Crapper's Seat Action Automatic Flush (tipping the seat activated the flush mechanism), a cantilevered toilet for prisons that kept all the piping hidden (convicts tended to bash guards with weapons fashioned from toilet pipes) and a revolutionary drainage system that did wonders for clearing the Victorian air (it was no accident that fainting damsels of the day were said to suffer from "the vapors").

Such breakthroughs earned Crapper a three-story headquarters on King's Road and a royal commission to install the facilities in Edward VII's new country home in Sandringham. Visitors to Sandringham can still observe a subtle example of the class distinctions of the period by noting that the toilet-chain handles in the servants' quarters are plain oval rings, while those adorning the royal lavatories are either "Crown Derby" or "Cream and Gold Fluted China" models.

Aquarius: Reyburn's portrait is embellished with cloacal trivia, such as Winston Churchill's preference in toilets and an account of the invention of the perforated toilet roll" (not a Crapper coup). Crapper himself lived to a ripe 73 and never lost interest in his vocation. His grandniece recalls visiting Crapper's factory in his last years and watching the old boy happily yank at the chain of an "Aquarius" or "Cascade" model to test some new modification.

Although the Crapper building has given way to a mod boutique, and most of the inventor's proudest fixtures have long since crumbled, at least one testimony to his memory remains. It can be found in the cloisters of Westminster Abbey, among the tombstones of England's most celebrated sons—the inscription "Thos. Crapper, Sanitary Engineer Chelsea." The inscription adorns a manhole cover.



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