

Newton St Cyres History Group



Our Christmas meeting on December 13th 2012 was led by a return visit from Ian Maxted, former Head of the West Country Studies Library, whose interest and expertise is on the history of paper. His talk could not help but be amusing, given its subject 'Cloacal Paphryology', but in fact his knowledge of the use of lavatory paper is scholarly and thorough!

Of course, the history starts in China where paper itself originated, and the first documented reference is in 589 AD by Yan Zhitui, a scholar who mentions in an aside that he dares not use for toilet purposes the writings of the sages, implying that paper had been used in this way for some time already.

In the Arab world of the time, the use of paper was regarded as uncleanly in comparison to washing, and this is still the case. However, by the 15th century China was producing thousands of large sheets for the purpose, which were cut to size; by 1393 there is even a record of perfumed sheets being produced for the imperial court.

Paper took a great deal longer to reach Europe and the first mention of its use for toilets comes in Rabelais' 'Gargantua' in France, in a rude couplet. By the time of the Dissolution in England, there is reference to the use of old books from monastic libraries being used for cleaning boots,

candlesticks and 'the jakes' (or lavatory). Sir Thomas Urquhart's translation of 'Gargantua' dated 1653, uses the term 'bum-fodder' for waste paper, and this was a commonly used word (from which the slang 'bumpf' derives) also used as a term of criticism e.g. to insult a newly published newspaper. Newspapers were also, of course, used for the purpose. However, far more improving was the recommendation of Lord Chesterfield to his son in the 18th century, to use "a common edition of Horace" in the 'necessary house', so that he could read a couple of pages before using them and then sending 'as sacrifice to Cloacina' (Cloacina was the Roman goddess of sewers and drains).

The modern commercial use of toilet paper was developed by Joseph Gayetty, an American who patented Medicated Paper for the Water Closet, watermarked with his name, and selling in packs of 500 sheets for 50 cents. The perforated roll followed in 1870. In England, Bronco (British No 1 Thin) was first made in 1880. Thereafter a number of manufacturers in Victorian Britain produced dispensers and different types of paper with names tending to reflect strength (Bulldog, Samson, Virila) or health (Sanico, Izal) or softness (Sateen). By 1910 papers could be customised with the name of a firm or a town or district council, and each sheet would be so printed. Different perforations and printing marks were used and they often had messages on them such as: "now wash your hands please". Abroad, crepe papers were more popular and Andrex first produced soft papers in the 1940s, but they were not used in public lavatories for very many years because the rolls would be stolen. Examples of papers from the twentieth century are collectable and full of interest in their technicalities, to the extent that forgeries exist!

During both world wars, propaganda messages and drawings were printed, but throughout the century, scatological pictures, crosswords, music, and seasonal (Christmas, Easter and Hallowe'en) have all been produced.

Altogether, this was a fascinating talk on an unexpected subject!

But the evening was not finished, and Nick Baker

and Christopher Southcott had both brought in examples of local finds. Most of us have got the odd bottle or piece of china dug up from the garden, but Christopher had some very lovely examples of glass bottles which we could handle and discuss, some whose use for beer, ink or chemicals were obvious, and some which were not so clear. Nick had an impressive collection of bottles and iron work, all from local villages where he has worked. A most beautiful copper knapsack sprayer, probably Victorian, is a reminder of how plentiful fruit orchards were in the area. Nick had been given it covered in tar deposits and he has painstakingly cleaned it. Two bottles from Upton Pyne are of American origin, showing some sort of connection in the past, and an old gun had a surprisingly interesting history, researched by Nick. He also has some beautiful wood working planes from The Three Horseshoes, which as well as being an inn, has had a carpenter's shop, and by connection, a funeral parlour. A group of old keys also show different methods of manufacture, either cast in two halves, or lathe turned. Every object had a story attached.