

When you need to answer a call of nature

by Sabine Eiche

Richmond News, November 9, 2012, p.14

Last month, when there was an outcry about the lack of public sanitary facilities at Richmond's Canada Line stations, the local papers reported on it, using the words washroom, toilet, loo and restroom, which they chose from among a multitude of terms, nearly all of them oblique references.

For reasons of decorum, discomposure, or – why not – with a touch of humour, we've traditionally spoken of THAT ROOM in a roundabout way. We often call it a bathroom, but in fact a bathroom is for bathing, just as a restroom is – in British English – for resting. Toilet (from the French "toile," a type of fabric) signifies various things, most of which relate to the ritual of dressing. Only in the early 19th century did toilet become a synonym for – well, for that sanitary facility. We also use the terms lavatory and latrine, both stemming from the Latin "lavare," to wash. Properly speaking, the lavatory and latrine are places for washing the hands and face – a washroom, in short.

In fifteenth-century England, the room where one relieved oneself was known as the privy, from the Latin "privatus." Another name for it was house of office, a term recorded in 1419. Inside the privy, or house of office, stood the close-stool, which was a chair or box with a hole in the seat, beneath which was a removable pan. An alternative word for privy, first recorded in 1555, was siege, meaning seat, from the Old French "siège."

The origin of another word used in this connection – loo – is debated. Some say it's a corruption of the French "l'eau" in the phrase "gardez l'eau," meaning beware of the water (a euphemism). In the novel *Humphry Clinker*

(1771), Tobias Smollett wrote, "At ten o'clock at night the whole cargo of the chamber utensils is flung out of a back window that looks into some street or lane, and the maid calls 'Gardy loo' to the passengers."

Renaissance Italians, too, used circumlocutions when indicating THAT place. Most of the words are adjectives, describing a quality – usually a desirable quality – rather than nouns specifying the activity carried out there. Sometimes they called it a "privato," like the English term privy. It was also known as a "comodo," which means convenient. "Necessario," necessary, was another word they used for it. Occasionally they referred to it as a "destro," meaning dextrous, which puzzled me until I noticed on sixteenth-century architectural plans that the "destro" was often located in the cramped space beneath a stair, where dexterity was clearly needed.

So what IS the proper name for the bathroom, restroom, washroom, latrine, lavatory, toilet, john, jakes, powder room, gents, ladies, privy, loo, etc.?

It is water closet (abbreviated w.c.), a name first documented in 1755. The water closet (a forerunner of which – the "Ajax" – was invented by Queen Elizabeth I's godson in 1596) owes its existence to an eighteenth-century breakthrough in plumbing technology, and it is truly convenient, certainly necessary, though it sometimes requires dextrous manipulation (followed by a call to the plumber).