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# *Let's get to the bottom of this...*

Britons of a certain age have a quite erroneous view of French toiletry habits. Those in middle age and beyond recall the metal pissoirs in the street – and what a fine invention they were! I miss them frequently. As did many of their users, which is possibly why they died out in this age of political correctness.

I defy you to find one in Paris. I've tried on many a rugby trip, when busting for a pee, and been comprehensively defeated.

The only extant, working pissoir that I know is in Twickenham, Middlesex, and is a tribute to the good taste and sense of the local parks department. It does the job it was designed for. Not only that but it is/was attractively designed and made in fine, curving, filigreed metalwork. Keep it neatly painted and it looks a treat. Clean it well and it's a pleasure to use.

Men used to greet them like old friends (well, not quite like old friends - over here in France, old friends, male or female, kiss each other. No man of my acquaintance ever did that with a pissoir.) But you know what I mean. Well, you will do if you're a man who has had a full bladder and was wondering where he might decently empty it. Nothing cheered him more than the sight of a welcome pissoir as he turned the corner.

“Ou sont les pissoirs d'autrefois?” I hear you cry. Well, I wish I knew the answer. I rather assume they've all been melted down and made into something far less satisfying, like metal railings.

Strange, really, that the French should have got rid of something that was not only utilitarian but also beautiful and was entirely synonymous with the country. It was a work of art. It went perfectly with the art nouveau Metro entrances on Paris streets. I'm not prepared to label it with that dreadfully over-used and misused word *ic\*n\*c*, so let's just call it Gallic, quintessentially so. Gallique!

As a small aside, those who love their French food may be entertained to learn that I have lasting memories of one particular pissoir. This was not one in filigree metal but a much more utilitarian concrete wall with a channel at its foot. It was sited in the open air in the playground of a French boys' school. It was a long, hot, dusty summer when I was there. Warm July weather. Despite the surrounding heat and dryness, the pissoir was damp and green. The only area of dampness and green slime in the entire large playground.

Needless to say, snails migrated there. They love damp, green slime and Hoover it up with great efficiency. Well, this pissoir was a magnet for snails. It was snail heaven. Every snail in the district regarded it as a gourmet restaurant.

And so did some of the boys. You know, of course, how the French like to eat snails? Armed with a bucket, discerning lads would harvest the rich crop of snails and return home to a grateful mother who, in due course, would serve them up for supper.

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And there seemed to be a never-ending supply. No matter how many gourmet lads had plundered the snail restaurant, the next day it would be restocked with a new supply of those large Roman snails that we rarely (if at all?) see in Britain.

Having grown up in an English home, I had, of course, never eaten snails and was rather suspicious of them. Even more so when I saw where they came from! So when Madame who I was staying with very kindly asked if I'd ever eaten snails, "Non? Alors, I will cook them for you!", I was less than overwhelmed and tried to say that she was very kind but really there was no need for her to bother.

But my French wasn't up to the job and a day or two later she went ahead and produced them, having carefully explained beforehand that the live snails were kept in a clean bucket and fed on a diet (flour and water, I seem to remember) that purged their systems of any toxic matter they might have ingested on a pissoir wall.

They arrived at the table in a hot Le Creuset dish, steaming and smelling strongly of garlic. On my plate was a dish full of holes and next to my knife and fork were a pair of odd-looking tongs and a pronged thing. I was shown how to operate the tongs to carefully lift a hot snail into my personal snail dish. The hot steaming liquid on top, I was told, reassuringly, was purely garlic butter. I was told to look out for the inedible snail's 'front door', that had to be deftly removed with the pronged cutlery, and shown how to spear the fleshy snail's body, which was black and not immediately appetising. Then I was given the handy tip that the best way to remove the snail's body whole was to spear, twist and tug – that bit appealed to a schoolboy. And, before long, I'd mastered the technique.

I wasn't overwhelmed by the taste (still thinking of the pissoir wall, I think) but my taste buds were young and hadn't yet learned to appreciate garlic (A fault long since remedied, I'm pleased to say. Ever since, over many years, I have greatly enjoyed snails.)

But I digress...

I was talking about the Brits' dim view of French toilets. Those with long and puritanical memories will recall the dreaded footplates. You piled off a coach after a wearisome journey through southern England, soothed a little by a few beers in the ferry bar and a glass of wine or two over a meal and, after asking where the toilet was, were dismayed to find yourself in a cubicle that bore no resemblance to any toilet you'd ever seen.

In front of you on the floor was a shallow-sloped, white ceramic basin with a large hole in the middle. At the front of it were two raised and ridged footplates. Above it was a rusty cistern with a long chain dangling down. If you were lucky the chain still had a metal handle.

The ceramic basin was invariably smeared with shit from one of your predecessors. And, in the worst establishments, even the footplates had their ridges encrusted with unappealing brown tracer.

"How," you wondered, "had they managed to spray shit underneath their shoes?" Were they standing on one leg at the time? Or had they sprayed diarrhoea all over their shoes and it had dripped down? Or had they, in a moment of extraordinary athleticism, leapt upwards at the exact same time as they expelled a stream of brown ordure down and forwards? Or, finding the bowl and its footplates too gross, had they stood on the toilet floor and waved their butt gaily from left to right, queering the pitch for the rest of us? Or...

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It didn't do to dwell too long on the strange events that had occurred between these four private walls, as the stench was usually appalling and if you stayed in there longer than need be you'd probably start retching and there was absolutely no way you wanted to get your face closer to the turd-encrusted basin.

The one abiding memory of the stand-and-deliver French crapper was – no, there are several. Firstly, you regretted going in there. Secondly, you wanted to leave as soon as possible (taking a crap in Britain had been one of life's great pleasures. Nothing quite so satisfying as sitting on the wooden seat of a well-engineered Thomas Crapper throne and evacuating your bowels with a feeling of relief, a string of fine farts, each longer and louder than the last, then turning round to check your stools before flushing them with a satisfying slewsh that sent them to oblivion). And thirdly, you needed strong thigh muscles; if you dallied over your dump, the wossisname muscle that runs from your buttock to your knee began to quiver, then tremble, then spasm alarmingly, threatening to dump your bum in the crap-crusting basin. And that was a fate worse than death. So you had to hurry along and shit at speed, expelling your last solid with a stentorian blast before groping for the non-existent bog paper.

“SHIT!” you bellowed. “Merde, merde, merde!” Not a scrap of paper in sight. If you couldn't raise a helpful friend the other side of the door, there was nothing for it but to press into service a handkerchief or, in the worst case scenario, your pants. And then you'd try flushing those away down that cavernous hole. Would they go? Of course not.

And as you exited the torture chamber you'd get a black scowl from a large Frenchman who'd clearly been waiting some time and would push past you to get in. When he realised your Marks & Sparks Y-fronts were blocking up his long-awaited avenue of release, there'd be a long and loud string of oaths in which the words *cochon* and *anglais* were frequently repeated. And *salaud!* What did that one mean? Had to look that one up – ‘filthy beast’ is probably the kindest translation you can put on it.

But you didn't stay to listen to too much more, legging it for the safety of your mates.

So, do I miss the footplates of the French stand-and-deliver shithouse? Not one iota. In terms of design and engineering and pleasure they were as far removed from the *pissoir* as a Lada is from a Rolls Royce.

*To be continued... I haven't reached the bottom of this subject yet, readers will be alarmed to know.*

*Fin*

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