

A PRIVY QUEST

'It's over there somewhere,' said my guide, Hugo Russell. 'It's not been used for a long time, not since the old cottages were demolished and the new house built.'

I was at Farley Green near Albury and armed with secateurs and a stout pair of old boots. My quest for the elusive Surrey privy had entered a new phase. Through the rampant and very prickly undergrowth I gradually snipped my way towards a wooden door, half hidden behind the slope of a heavily leaning birch tree.

Eventually, after what seemed to be an extraordinarily long time, I was at the door, its brown paint peeling off in slivers. With bleeding hand (I had left the gardening gloves at home) I made to push the door open. But, with hand on the door, I suddenly hesitated. 'Should I knock before going in?' I pondered. After all, it would have been the polite thing to do. I tapped twice and then gently swung the door back. And there it was! The wooden seat intact and down the hole I could see that the privy bucket was still in position, waiting for a caller who never came. There was a little hinged door at the front below the seat, kept in place with a metal catch, to enable the bucket to be extracted for emptying. A long frond of ivy growing through the wooden back wall was draped artistically across the seat.

'Where exactly were the old cottages?' I asked Hugo, as I extricated myself from the undergrowth.

'Exactly where the modern house is now,' he replied. 'There were two cottages but they were in a terrible

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Messrs Hugo Russell and Son, privy hunters – the tiled roof of a privy can be seen deep in the undergrowth behind the right-hand shed. (Roy Drysdale)

condition and were condemned,' he continued. I noted that the distance from cottage to privy must have been a good 30 yards at least. I was already beginning to learn something about the problems of visiting the loo in times past.

'Was there just one privy for both cottages?' I asked.

'Oh no, they had one each. There's another privy in there somewhere, on the other side of the shed,' he replied.

Eventually I found the second privy, but time had not been kind to this relic. It was built entirely of overlapping wooden planks like a garden shed. The collapsed corrugated iron roof had been pushed down inside the building. It was obvious that any attempt to get inside would probably lead to the entire structure teetering over to become a heap of unrecognisable rubbish. After a quick reconnoitre, it was left in peace.



Inside the privy at Farley Green. (Roy Drysdale) *~ Russell*

I knew before I started the hunt that there were several different types of privy. This trip to Farley Green had introduced me to what was to prove to be by far the most common type I was to find in Surrey – the bucket privy. There were then two basic versions of the bucket privy. The bucket was removed for emptying either via a small door beneath the front of the seat or from the outside through a flap usually provided at the base of the back wall.

Bucket privies usually had only one hole, which could be dangerous for younger children who sometimes fell in! Privies with cesspits could be much more sophisticated in hole provision – some had two holes including one of small dimensions, often with a step, for the younger members of the family. Three-holers and even four-holers were not unknown

so several members of the family could sit down together.

Some cottages in Pirbright had movable privies. A hole was dug in the garden and the privy, a simple wooden shed, was balanced over the hole. After a while (sometimes months!), when the hole was full or had become too 'pongy', a new hole was dug elsewhere in the garden, the privy repositioned and the old hole capped with some of the freshly dug soil. One of the problems, I was told, especially in a small garden was finding a 'fresh' patch of garden.

'We used to have a bucket of ashes from the fire on the floor in the dunny as we called it and, after you'd been, you had to sprinkle some ashes down the hole to cover what you'd done. The dry ashes seemed to kill off a lot of the pong,' a neighbour told me, having read about my latest interest in the local newspaper.

Marie Kite of Pirbright told me about her initial experience of using a privy: 'My first memory of an outside toilet situated some distance from the house was in 1940 when I met a young soldier at Aylesbury, who lived at Pirbright. The soldier was later to become my husband. He had a week's leave and took me home to meet his family. They lived in a lovely old bungalow with a beautiful garden, well off the village in the woods. There was no electricity, the bungalow was lit with oil lamps, and the toilet was about 25 yards from the house. There was a box and a shovel in the corner with the ash from the fire, which you threw into the bucket after use.'

The weather-boarded privy that Mr Trower remembered as a child was constructed above a cesspit. 'At the old family home we had at Peaslake,' wrote Mr Trower, 'a box of lime and a box of sifted ashes were kept inside our loo with a small hand shovel and after using the loo you put a small shovelful of each down the hole.'

This use of ashes reminded me of a privy invention by the

gation of fevers around them; besides making the emptying of them a very difficult and offensive operation.

Lockhurst
Hatch
Farm,
Albury
(Favley
Green)

Would I find examples of the dry privy as recommended by Charles Richardson during my researches in Surrey? The answer came when I visited Peter Gellatly at his farmhouse south of Shere. The privy was solidly constructed of local stone with brick quoins and the mortared joints had been 'galleted' by pressing small pieces of ironstone into the mortar whilst it was still wet. It had a small window and was built into a steep bank behind the house. Although it had a door, of course, further privacy was provided by the fact that it was hidden behind the trunk of a large and venerable yew tree. Unfortunately, there was no roof.

'I'm afraid a large branch from the yew crashed through the roof during the Great Storm in 1987,' said Mr Gellatly. 'I'm hoping sometime to restore it.'

Inside, the privy had plastered walls and had last been painted in a tasteful shade of pale blue. It was full of slimy baulks of timber that had originally formed the main structure of the roof. Very carefully I removed the timbers and found the original seat but the elements had not been kind to this particular privy. The seat was so rotten that, had an ant in need tried to sit down on it, then it would surely have collapsed the entire structure! I removed the final lengths of timber, which were leaning in the corner, to find a globe-shaped glass jar, which would have contained the candle, still sitting in the corner having survived storm and tempest that violent night in October '87.

Mr Gellatly's privy looked on initial inspection to have been built as a bucket privy because there was the small door below the seat, but in this case collapsed underneath it. However, outside I noticed a sheet of corrugated iron



Inside Peter Gellatly's privy near Shere I found the glass jar for the candle still in position in the corner of the seat. (Roy Drysdale)

wedged against the side wall and half buried in the grassy bank. Could this hide an archway for a dry privy as described so well by Charles Richardson? The archway would have to be in the side wall as the back wall was almost buried in the bank.

Soon Mr Gellatly and I were enthusiastically shovelling earth. Eventually we managed to prise back the sheet of iron and exposed the top of an archway just as I had suspected. The privy had clearly been built as a dry privy but ended its working life as a simple bucket privy. When I left, Mr Gellatly seemed very keen on carrying out the restoration of his privy and I sincerely hope that he succeeds in doing so. The surviving privies of Surrey need all the help they can get.



The author looks on as Peter Gellatly digs into the bank in the hope of finding the arch of a dry privy behind the sheet of corrugated iron. (Roy Drysdale)



The remains of the arch revealed behind the corrugated iron sheet on the side wall of Peter Gellatly's privy near Shere. (Roy Drysdale)

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DOWN THE GARDEN PATH

The privy could be a smelly place, so mostly it was sited as far away from the house or cottage as possible. Thus those wishing to go were often required to embark on a hazardous journey in order to reach relief, especially at night. At Hambledon I was shown a pair of privies where some skill in mountaineering might have been useful! After leaving the cottage the desperate privy seeker firstly had to climb a steep flight of steps, then carry on up a one in three incline before turning left and going about 40 yards across a sloping garden to the top of the hill. From the privy door, the expedition successfully completed, the intrepid mountaineer could now look down upon the roof of their home!

June Spong of Dorking wrote to me about her fond memories of trips to one particular privy: 'George, my future husband, lived in Gadbrook Farm House. It was an old rambling building with the "dunny" at the bottom of the garden. We would sit in the inglenook fireplace and "spoon" (well it was the 1950s) and drink homemade lemonade and beer. Soon, I would need to "take a walk in the garden". George would walk me through the flower beds, past the cabbages, over a little bridge that crossed a stream to a blue painted "outhouse". "Don't shut the door," I would cry. "Don't shut me in!"

'George would have to stand with his back to me so that I could see the light of his torch. Panic would set in if he made a move towards the house, which had no electricity and was lit by oil lamps.'

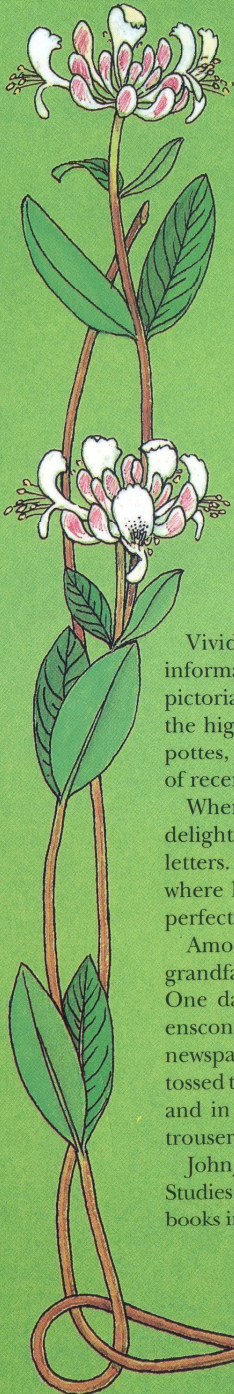
A PRIVY BY ANY OTHER NAME

The name 'privy' comes from the Old French word *privé*, which in turn was derived from the Latin *privatus* meaning private. The privy and the act of visiting it have been given a variety of names over the years. Here are a few that I have come across during my 'privy hunts' in Surrey.

Bog	Jericho
Boghouse	Karzi
Bottoms House	Latrine
Closet	Lav
Comfort station	Lavatory
Crapphouse	Little House
Dunnikin	Little room
Dunny	Loo
Dyke	Place of easement
Funny Place	Plumbing
Gang	Reading room
Garderobe	Shit Hole
Go and see a man about a dog	Shithouse
Going to drop a packet	Stoolroom
Going to powder my nose	The George
Going to spend a penny	The John
Going to the how's your father	The throne room
Gong	Wotyermacallit
Have a Jimmy Riddle	Yer Tiz
Have a Tom Tit	Yer Twas but t'ain't no more
Holy of holies	(after they moved the outside 'gents' inside at my local pub!)
Jakes	

Privies Recorded by DBRG - 1998

Albury - Lockhurst Hotel Farm 18-19c
 Bramley - Summerpool House
 Buckland - 3 - The Green 20c.
 Charlwood - Old Rosemary Cottage
 Chipstead - Fox Shaw ? 17c.
 Cranleigh - Little Vachery
 Fatterham - 112 The Street and Roseau
 Westcott (Tilton) Bushy Platt
 Westcott (Tilton) Old Well House
 Bramley - Tulips
 Normandy - Slade Cottage
 Seale & Tongham - 1-3 Seale Lodge Cottages
 Uckhampstead - Tolbotkian



Vivid, anecdotal, gruesome, crammed with outlandish information, shamelessly funny; *Surrey Privies* is a descriptive and pictorial tribute to the lavatories of yesteryear. It takes us from the highly insanitary Middle Ages ('Beware of emptynge pyse pottes, and pyssing in chymnes') to the more comic encounters of recent times.

When John Janaway began his quest for memories about the delights and horrors of the outside privy he was inundated with letters. This correspondence led him on a trail across the county where he discovered a number of privies, including several in perfect working condition.

Among the memories, a lady from near Guildford recalls her grandfather's privy and the prank her brother played on him. One dark night, he waited until the old gentleman was well ensconced and then went to the back of the privy, lit some newspaper, lifted the flap used to remove the privy bucket and tossed the flaming paper in. Suddenly there was a huge explosion and in a flash their grandfather was out of the door with his trousers round his ankles, yelling blue murder.

John Janaway lives in Godalming and has recently retired as Local Studies Librarian for Surrey. He is the author of several successful books including *Ghosts of Surrey* and *Surrey: A County History*.

£7.95

Cover illustration by Louis Mackay



SURREY PRIVIES



A NOSTALGIC TRIP DOWN
THE GARDEN PATH

by

JOHN JANAWAY