



TOWN OF
VICTORIA PARK

LOCAL HISTORY AWARDS

• 2025 •



Hallowed Halls of Flatulence

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Category
Personal Memoirs

The Hallowed Halls Of Flatulence

I realise that that some people may consider this a subject, which is not really in good taste. But like it or lump it, “Dunnies” were an integral part of our daily lives, in Victoria Park, as well as in most other areas, in decades past. Every residence had one! So even though they were usually “down the backyard”, out of sight, and out of mind, they did exist. And in their own way, were a part of the history, of the early Victoria Park families too. So I consider it worthwhile, to make some mention of them. Mainly because quite a few of the present younger generations, would have never seen one, or even knew that they existed. So for the sake of “posterior-arity” I wrote this story. It is a “Bum“ story, I know, but there you have it, because that was what it was all about!

In the days when I was just a child, an indoor toilet was a thing of luxury and generally only afforded, by the rich folk. This meant that in those days, most toilets were relegated to external locations. Even with the advent of sewerage, a lot of the toilets still remained out of doors. Although they were slightly more refined, in that they had glazed China toilet bowls, rather than a simple metal can, and could be flushed, by pulling the chain, on an overhead Cistern. I can imagine that a visit to the toilet, down at the bottom of the yard, at night in those days, would be most daunting for a young child.

Which usually resulted, in the frequent use, during the night, of what was known as the family “Poe” or “Gzunda” whatever you like to call it! “Gzunda” was short for “Goes Under” the Bed”. It was an item, that was well used by the family. Particularly on winter nights, when the weather was a little inclement!

Toilets that were not so blessed, with the availability of sewerage, were usually located on the rear fence line of the property. In those early times, in such locations, not served by sewerage, a laneway existed, between the rows of houses. Adjacent to their rear fence lines. This was to facilitate easy access, to the workers, who had the onerous task, of removing the toilet waste, on a weekly basis. Each toilet had a hinged wooden flap, on its external rear wall, that opened onto that laneway, to allow this to happen.

The truck that carted this human waste away, became known in the local idiom, as the “Dunny Cart”, and the waste was politely referred to, as “Night Soil”. The vehicle they used was thus, also referred to as the “Night or “Dunny Cart”. Which, in itself was a bit of an anomaly, because the removal of said waste, was made during daylight hours. So understandably, the workers, who carried out this onerous task, became known as “Night Carters”. In this day and age, they could possibly have been referred to as W.D.M’s. Or “Waste Disposal Managers”.

These “Night Carters” were employees of a Western Australian Government department, which was commonly identified, by the Acronym M.W.S.S. & D.D.

This stood for, the Metropolitan Water Supply, Sewerage and Drainage Department. These letters can be seen, on the building, in the photograph below. But it has since simply become known as, the Water Corporation. A lot of the items used by them, in past decades, carried the M.W.S. logo. You can still see that in places, particularly on some old concrete drainage products.

But the word “Metropolitan” in its title, became redundant, and the name was changed to simply be the Water Corporation. Mainly because it had the responsibility, for the provision and maintenance, of all those services, throughout the state. The Water Corp. also maintains

and controls most major state water storage, and sewerage facilities. Accounts for services rendered, to the householder, are issued by them, roughly every two months.

The job these “Night Carters” were employed to do, was to drive along those laneways, between the houses, lift the rear lid of the toilets, and remove the “used” toilet cans. Then, place a secure lid on it, and stack it on the flat bed, of their truck, with all the others, so collected. Having done that, they then put a replacement empty can, back into the toilet, and shut the lid again, and moved on to the next “Dunny”.

When the truck was thus laden with “full” cans, it was then driven to a Sewerage treatment plant, where the cans were emptied, and possibly hosed clean. Another load of empty cans taken on board, and the process repeated. These “Dunny” cans were circular in shape and made of steel.

They were about the size, of half a 12 gallon oil drum. They probably stood about 40 cm high, and were about the same in diameter. They resembled a very large boiling pot, and like those, possessed two handles on the sides, for ease of handling, and loading, on and off the truck. The standard disinfectant, to counteract the smell and discourage the Blowflies, that the householders used at the time, was Phenyle.

The subject of “Night Carting”, was also the butt of many jokes. One which comes readily to mind, from my memory banks, was in the form of a question. It asked “What has 24 Cylinders and Flies?” The answer of course, was the “Night Cart”! Making reference to the metal cans it carried, and the ever present, Blow flies!

Also from my childhood memories, I remember a sewerage treatment facility, down near the intersection of Hordern and Armagh Streets, near the Causeway, in Vic Park. There were also the remnants, of a sewerage treatment area, which I knew of, on Burswood Island. It was locally referred to, as the “Filter Beds”. That, from memory was located roughly, just to the south, of where the Optus Stadium now stands, but all traces of it have long since been removed. I know that, that particular location was there, but not in operation, when I was a teenager, in the mid to late 1950’s. So, I am assuming that the Swan River floods of the 1930’s, that inundated much of Burswood Island, made its position on the Island untenable, and it fell into disuse.

But the establishment at Hordern Street, was definitely there, in the late 1940’s, when we lived close by, in Canning Highway. For that matter, it still remains there today, as the following photograph attests. I have distinct memories of an “outfall“ pipe, that emptied waste sewerage water, straight into the Swan river, directly opposite that plant. Little bits of human excreta, could often be seen floating in the river nearby.

These were jokingly referred to as Blind Mullet. These days, that wastewater though, is being utilized in several ways. In some cases, it is being totally purified, and fed back into our water supplies. Alternately it is being used to irrigate public gardens, parks, and or, golf courses. On one of my many travels, throughout Australia, I was informed that the fairways and greens, of the Golf course in Broken Hill, New South Wales, was irrigated with reconstituted wastewater. To the delight, of the local Emu, and Kangaroo populations.



The Sewerage Depot At Western End Of Hordern St Victoria Park – As it is Today - (May 2023)

Surrounded by high rise development

Those 1930 floods also would have also probably inundated some residential areas of Victoria Park, around Garland and Stafford Streets, on the Swan River’s eastern shores. With all these old “Dunnies” in vogue, at that time, such flooding could have created a health hazard. So, the Government of that day, decided to reclaim all that land, and create an “A” class reserve in lieu. Thus, we then had McCullum Park and its once associated tennis courts.

My maternal grandparents, who lived in that area, were affected by these reclamations and subsequently moved, to a house in Rivervale. Their home, in Ascot Road, (later to become, Great Eastern Highway), Rivervale, had a back yard Dunny, constructed in wood with a tin roof. And the Night Cart system was still in vogue there, at that time. Their toilet was, located right at the back, of their property, on the rear fence line. A laneway ran between it, and the houses behind it. I have definite memories of that, being the situation there. And they had moved from Victoria Park to Rivervale, in the mid 1930’s, because of those floods. I seem to recall that their toilet was still down their back yard, in the late 1950’s, with the “Night Carters” still doing their weekly collections.

From memory, the toilet at our house in 58 Canning Highway, was located just behind the house, close to the northern fence line, and was connected to the local sewerage mains. I don’t recall what it was constructed of, but I am guessing it was kiln fired clay bricks.

I also, distinctly remember, that my Paternal Grandparents who lived opposite, at No.53, on the corner of Taylor St, at the time, had a brick built, redundant “dunny”, at the bottom of their back garden. But I can’t swear that it was still in use.

Early, metropolitan suburbia, meant that residential areas were laid out, in the form of rectangular grids. Houses faced both sides of the streets, which were parallel, to one another. These houses formed the long sides of the rectangle. Other cross streets formed the short sides of the rectangle. And open laneway’s, ran between the houses, that faced the parallel streets, from one cross street to another.

These laneways, thus allowed the “Night Carters” access to the back yard toilets, along the rear fence lines. Some residents also used these lanes, to gain vehicular access, to their own back yards.

For a long time, those laneways remained separating the rows of houses, at least in the East Victoria Park area, long after sewerage was provided. I have distinct memories, of such a laneway near our house. It ran from Gloucester St. to Washington St, between the houses, that faced Canning Highway and Armagh St. Though, I cannot ever recall, seeing a “Night Cart” in that laneway. I think that, that particular laneway, must have been a remnant of those pre sewerage days. But from memory, it was definitely used, by the residents for the access, that I mentioned in the previous paragraph.

The construction of these backyard edifices was variable. Some were built in timber, others, with bricks and mortar. But even those varied, in the type of brick used. Most were of inelegant design, but then, the purpose for which they were built, was not one that required style. Their basic requirements were privacy. A seat with a suitable functional hole, to fit most bottoms, and a means to discretely remove the waste material so accumulated. Some used the standard kiln fired clay brick, while other people made their own Cement bricks. Almost all sported galvanised Iron roofs. Although, having said that, some of the more elaborate ones, may have had tiled roofs.

But whatever their construction, their locations, were largely the same. On or near the back fence line.

But regardless of their construction, they all served their useful purpose admirably. Despite the reputation of Red Backs on the toilet seats! Dunny’s were a place’s of solitude and peace, where one could sit and think. Or in normal circumstances, where one could do what, in words, sounds crudely familiar! The solitude of the Dunny was only broken by the buzz of Blowflies, or vehicles passing along the lane, at their rear.

When these “throne rooms” fell into disuse, with the advent of the extending sewerage networks, there was a general downturn in their wellbeing. Through lack of use, and care, the wooden ones suffered from the weather, dry rot, and or termites, or all three, and simply collapsed. The more robust brick toilets, still stood for quite some time. Often being used as a small garden shed, until the householders decided they had become an eyesore, or an embarrassment, that needed to be removed.

But there are still people out there, who consider this relic of our past, to be of enough significant historical interest, to actually build their own replicas. My niece Sandra Irwin of Wattle Camp, in Queensland is one such person. Having a large amount of garden to play with, she has built a full size one, to adorn it. See picture following!

Though I also know, that in the early 1950’s it became the accepted thing, where no sewerage was available, for all new housing, to have toilets, that were connected to a Septic Tank. Toilets, were then, incorporated into such systems, whether they were located internally, externally or not. In those early 1950’s, my father built a house in Belmont, which used the septic tanks idea. The toilet there, was located just off the back veranda.

Again, as a variant to the septic tanks, on larger properties, and rural situations, where space allowed, some homes used a system called a Leach Drain.

This was a variant of the Septic Tank, and was also a below ground system. Sometimes in in two parts, that could be used alternately. In 1997 I had a house built on a five acre property, at Northcliffe, in the states lower South west. It utilized this Leach Drain system. It had two parts, controlled with a flip flop type switching arrangement, for alternate use

These humble establishments at the bottom of the garden were often referred to by many names in Australian slang. Depending on which state you came from. There were the rather more socially accepted “Little House”, “Loo” and “W.C”. But there were also more vulgar terms, like “The “Bog”, and “Sh*t” house, Etc.

There were of course also the humorous connotations like “Thunder Box “. But the most accepted term used, was “Dunny”. “Thunder Box” of course, generally related to the sounds of Flatulence, which could emanate from it, when one was in use.

With the term “Dunny“ however, research has revealed, that it is most likely derived, from two Scottish words, of the early 1800’s, that were joined together to make the term, “Dunnekin”. The first part of that word, denoted Dung, and the second part “Kin” or “Ken,” meant house or outbuilding. So hence we have Dunnekin, or “Dunghouse”. It is highly likely that early Scottish migrants, brought the term to Australia with them. But, with us Aussies having a penchant to shorten things, it simply became a “Dunny”. At least that is the most plausible explanation that I can offer.

You would be extremely unlikely, to find one of these “Hallowed Halls of Flatulence”, anywhere in the country’s major city or town areas today. But should you happen to visit a town, in the remote back blocks, the chances are, you may just get the chance to see one. Standing forgotten, in the back yard, of one of the towns, veteran residences.

Having said that, in the early 2000’s I became aware that, that the Department of Conservation and Land Management, otherwise known then, as C.A.L.M, and now as the Department of Parks and Wildlife, provided what are often referred to, as “Long Drop” toilets, at various rural picnic and BBQ sites. These singular free standing, little buildings of convenience, were in actual fact, not far removed from the design of the old backyard “Dunny”. At the time I lived in Northcliffe, and organised outings, for a group of seniors. We visited many of these sites, scattered throughout the surrounding districts, for picnics and BBQ’s.

So, I was aware of them, and where they were. One such toilet, is near where the Donnelly River boat cruise, sails from. There were others, but I am not going to list them here. It will be just suffice to say, that most were very similar to the backyard “Dunny”.

There is however, a great difference between the two. The back yard “Dunny”, with its Redback Spiders, is constrained within, its fixed fence lines, and a static garden scene, dependant on its can being regularly changed. Whereas the “Long Drop”, is out among the birds, in the everchanging panorama, of a rural scene, and needs no regular care. It is more likely to have a resident Huntsman Spider, than a Red Back!

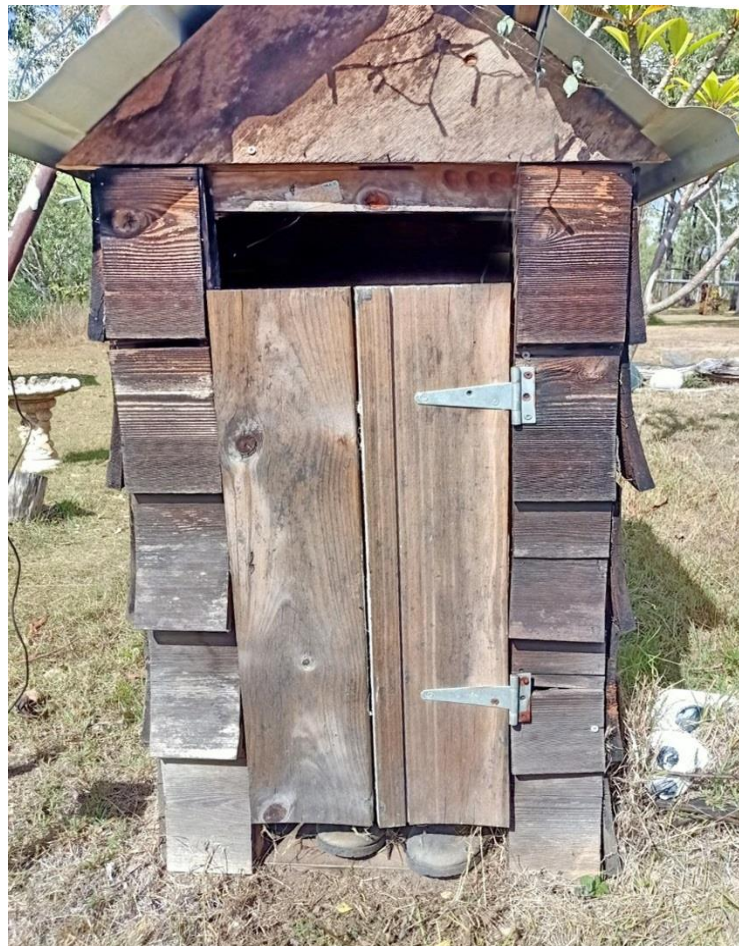
Despite all that, there was however, the answer to one question, with respect to the backyard “Dunny”, which did always leave me wondering! How many bare bums, poking through the toilet seat, did those blokes see, during their day, changing those “Dunny” cans? Because, they would have had absolutely no idea, if someone was using the “Dunny” at that time, when they lifted the lid to change the can!

Being an inquisitive type of person, I wondered, what the situation was, in other countries. So, as I have a cousin in England, and a friend in the U.S.A. I asked the question, of what

happened in their countries. It seems that “outhouse”, in one form or another, were also fairly common, in the early years, before the proliferation of sewerage, in those countries too!

So by the process of assumption, I would say that it is an educated guess, that most of the civilised countries of Europe, and the America’s, also had “outhouses”, in one form or another. So like it or lump it, “The Dunny”, or its counterpart, came into being, a long time ago. So in my mind, they must be given their rightful place in our history, which is why I wrote this story!!!.

To end this little expose, into my memories of the past, a comment that I must also make. Is that very few of those laneways, once used by the “Nightcarters”, in the course of their employment, still exist today, in the local residential environment. Some, or portions thereof, have been, I believe, incorporated into the holdings of their adjacent land owners. And the Redback and Daddy Long Leg Spiders must find other homes. While the Blowflies can simply buzz off!



My Niece Sandra’s Queensland “Dunny”

(Complete With Boots)

There is one thing however, that I am sure, that this story has done. That is, to bring a smile to the faces, of those generations born before the late 1950's. It has probably brought back to them, memories of that little establishment, at the far end, of the garden path, that they had almost forgotten existed.

R.I.P (Rest In Past) Dummies

And to also to further illustrate my story, I offer the following poems that I have written on that subject

Les Stevens Feb 2025

The Hallowed Halls Of Flatulence

There's something from our past history
That children today, no longer see
The existence of the lavatory
Called a Thunder Box or a Dunny

It may seem to you rather funny
To call it "Thunder box" or "Dunny"
A "little house" you no longer see
Its naming lost in antiquity

The Thunder Box I think defines itself
Flatulence that blew things off the shelf
But Dunny that came from Dunnekin
Of an ancient Scottish origin

They had an aroma of their own
Not related to Eau De Cologne
On the rear fence line was where it sat
That little house where residents "shat"

Blowflies were attracted by the smell
So Red Back spiders were there as well
Newspaper's cut to suitable size
And then hung on hooks to utilize

Some had tin roofs on a wooden frame
But they were rarely all built the same
For some were wood or bricks and mortar
Used by every son and daughter
Large metal can sat beneath the seat
Toilet facilities did complete
Was no chain to pull or pan to flush

And no such thing as a toilet brush

A rear lid lifted to change the can
By a person called the Night Cart man
For replacement cans he did dispense
From laneways passing behind back fence

Yet how often did the Carter greet
Big Bums poking through a toilet seat
Must have given people quite a fright
To have their bare bottoms in plain sight

Sadly humble Dunny is no more
For sewerage moved that lot indoor
Though you may see the remains of one
The old outdoor Dunny's days are done

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In The "Anal's" of History

There may be those who refuse to see
The Dunny as part of history
A place of peace and tranquillity
Place where you could let your wind blow free

Out in the back yard it was you'd find
Located out of sight, out of mind
Every house had its very own
With a wooden seat they called the "throne"

All made of bricks but of sometimes wood
Like sentinels those old Dunnies stood
Most hidden away but standing free
Guarding the back of each property

So many children suffered with fright
When nature called in the dark of night
And so if they really had to go
They made much use of family Poe

But sewerage changed that whole outlook
And wrote the next chapter in life's book
Their presence now you no longer see
Now we stay indoors to have our pee

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Backyard Views

At the bottom of the garden
 The humble “Dunny” Stood
 Constructed in bricks and mortar
 Though sometimes bult in wood

Was a magnet for the Blowflies
 Big Spiders and the like
 An edifice with a purpose
 Referred to as a “Dike”

Subject of many ribald jokes
 Was this back yard “Dunny”
 Some of which were quite Risque
 Most were just damn funny

For family convenience
 Each home did have its ‘loo
 Needed for the daylight wanders\
 And those at midnight too

The aroma that came from there
 Could wrinkle up you nose
 ‘Twas definitely not a place
 That one would choose to doze

Then progress made ideas change
 Dunny’s there were no more
 Put a stop to those backyard treks
 When bare bums went indoor

I have included the following poem because it is one that I wrote, on a similar theme, back in 2015. Because the preceding story, and its two associated poems, were written in 2023, I considered that maybe the reader, might also like to read the poem below. At the time it was a poem to introduce a little risqué humour. But with writing what I now consider part of our past history, I think I must include it!

Ye Olde Thunder Box

Now you may think, it kind of funny
 To call an outdoor toilet, "Dunny"
 Origins of this, are so obscure
 It describes a place, without allure

Constructed in wood, with roof of tin
 That often lets the, Red Backs in
 Also brick built, or cemented stone
 The outdoor Dunny, stood all alone

A normal part, of the back yard scene
 "Nosy Parkers", knew where you had been
 Often a snigger, maybe a laugh
 Down at the end of the garden path

Sometimes the smell, was hard to take
 And buzzing Blow Flies, kept you awake
 Not the right place, to go for a lark
 Or to stumble down there, after dark

All located, against the back fence
 Easy for the night cart, to dispense
 For in the laneway, they had to toil
 In taking away, the old "night soil"

But now the old Dunny, is no more
 For sewers, moved this lot "in door"
 But they remained there, all alone
 With no one using, their humble throne

Till finally, they pulled them down
 So no more Dunnies, around the town
 Though way out in, the far back blocks
 You might just see, an "Old Thunder Box"

It stands alone, surrounded by junk
 With a decided lean, as if drunk
 Sadly derelict, in the open air
 An Aussie icon, in need of repair

There is one thing however, that I am sure, that this story has done. That is, to bring a smile to the faces, of those generations born before the late 1950's. It has probably brought back to them, memories of that that little establishment, at the far end, of the garden path, that they had almost forgotten existed.

Les

Fact or Fiction

Families are such a funny thing
 As are memories to which they cling
 Each person tells a different tale
 That puts real truth on a sliding scale

For lots will believe the hearsay told
 About anecdotes from days of old
 Though some may have a true foundation
 Stories can change with each oration

Original facts are distorted
 Sometimes the truth has been deported
 Often hard to know just what is what
 When a story has been changed a lot

So one must then sort the sheep from goats
 And realise that there are misquotes
 For one must reach an understanding
 That as it's told it keeps expanding

Everyone adds their little bit
 All hoping it makes the story fit
 Though truth may be there in tiny crumbs
 But like Chinese Whispers it becomes

So then others get a biased view
 Of all the events that did ensue
 It really is not anyone's fault
 With what you hear, take a grain of salt

About anecdotes mystery remains
 Nothing the content simply explains
 A wise man once asked "Why is it so?"
 To tell the truth I don't really know