

20th Century Sparks!

Home

Washdays

Nowadays, we take for granted the convenience which modern technology brings to our lives, especially in regard to cleanliness.

In the first half of the 20th century, cleanliness was often an expensive and labour intensive experience. These were the days before indoor toilets, bathrooms, washing machines and dryers.

On this page and on Saturday was bath night, The Scullery, Hard soap, cleaning the silvers and secrets of the outside toilet and Perils of the washing lines, you can explore memories of the routines employed, mostly by women, to keep clean.



Washing tubs hanging on the walls of a Regents Court backyard
Backyard Brighton

Wash day was a mammoth affair and was always on a Monday, come rain or shine. Mum and Gran got up at dawn, or so it seemed, lit the brick built copper with the galvanised pan. They kept it stoked with the rubbish collected from a local sweet shop. Two great wooden tubs were hauled into the yard and filled with boiling water softened with soda crystals, and with the scrubbing board and a stiff brush battle commenced. They wore aprons that had been made from empty sugar sacks scrounged from the grocer at the end of the street, and in this attire they scrubbed and rubbed everything in sight.

The 'whites' were put into the copper and boiled with a twopenny packet of Hudson's washing powder and a bar of Sunlight soap. The clothes were stirred and boiled till the place was like a steam bath. Tubs were emptied; one was then filled with clear water and the other with the blue water. This rinse was made with a penny Reckitts Blue, (a blue block of powder tied in a little muslin bag), and was swished about in the tub of water. It made the rinse that gave the clothes that 'whiter than white' look that we hear so much about these days. Starch came then in chalky lumps, mixed smooth with boiling water and then with the cold water added afterwards, it produced a bluey grey glue-like substance that stiffened everything from Dad's collars to the pillow cases.

Both Mum and Gran took pride in the wash and got great pleasure in seeing the clothes pegged out on the line. They took it in turns to turn the handle of the great mangle with the wooden rollers. Why they never finished up with hernias I'll never know.

Georgina Attrell - Backyard Brighton



Home

Saturday was bathnight

Today houses are built with inside bathrooms and toilets. Modern drainage and plumbing systems have made this possible. In the early 1900s new homes were being built with inside bathrooms, but only the wealthy were able to afford them. Older housing still had toilets built outside the property at the back. After the two World Wars estates were built, bringing the convenience of inside bathrooms to ordinary people.

Our only means of bathing had been in a zinc bath in front of the kitchen fire. This bath was filled with hot water from the saucepans.

Margaret Ward - One camp chair in the living room

We children were bathed once a week using carbolic soap, which was red and so strong that it was guaranteed to keep germs at bay!

Marjory Batchelor - A Life Behind Bars

Friday night was hair wash night. I did not say shampoo because ours was washed with a large square of Lifebuoy Soap. We always used this for washing or bathing. Before the performance could start, all our heads were combed with a fine tooth comb onto a black cloth, because headlice, being white, would show up on it. If any were found, a wash with Quassia Chips and Harrison 's Pomade rubbed in afterwards. If free of lice, after the wash solidified coconut oil was rubbed in. Then we could curl our hair in rags to make it look curly in the morning.

Daisy Noakes - The Town Beehive

Saturday was bath night. In the morning, one of us would take a sack to collect all the cardboard from our uncle's shop, Hook, 77 Islingword Road. This was to feed the copper for hot water for our baths. We would sit on the chopping block and stool and tear up the boxes before throwing them in. They smelt of chocolates and I always hoped one would be overlooked, but no such luck.

Daisy Noakes - The Town Beehive

It was not until I went to stay at Betty's house that I realised how poor my mother's home was. They had a bathroom while we still used the tin bath in front of the fire on Saturday evenings. Mother used to light the copper and fill it with cold water then empty the hot water into the bath. I used to hate coming home on Monday lunch time from school. There were no school dinners in those days. The copper would be lit and the kitchen would be full of steam and there was a smell of wet clothes everywhere.

Barbara Chapman - Boxing Day Baby

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Home

Saturday was bathnight - continued

When we outgrew the bath, Mum gave us 2d to go to the Ditchling Road Baths at the corner of Rose Hill Terrace and Ditchling Road. Two of us would go together, taking our clean vest and knickers rolled in our towel with our soap and flannel. The attendant would shoot hot water through a pipe into the bath by the bucket-full, according to what you had paid, and cold water was added by yourself.

Daisy Noakes - The Town Beehive

Since I'd got too big for the tin bath we had been going to the public baths in North Road. I used to get into the bath first and then the lady let my mother use it, with a top up of hot water. I think it only cost 2d.

Barbara Chapman - Boxing Day Baby



Brill's Baths in the course of its demolition in 1933. With wall of advertisements for OXO, Camp Coffee, Bass and performers at the Academy and The Court and The Hippodrome.

Brighton & Hove in Pictures

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The Scullery

Behind the back room, which we called the kitchen, was the scullery. This had a concrete floor and contained a stone sink with brass taps which were always kept shining. There was also the old-fashioned copper under which mother had to light a fire. In this copper the washing was boiled.

In those days all the bed linen and towels were white. These had to go through the mangle when they were dry. As we didn't have a mangle, mother had to use Granny's, which was in her scullery next door. We would often hear her churning away at it long after we were in bed. It was a huge thing with very large rollers and it made a terrible noise as it stood on the concrete floor.

Margaret Ward - One camp chair in the living room



"Scullery - Interior Temple Cloud" by C. Elisabeth M Lake RMS
www.amillionbrushstrokes.co.uk

"My Mum had Monday as washday. She used to have a great big wooden tub in the middle of our back yard. She used to stand out there and she used to say, 'Go down to the oil shop and get a bar of Sunlight soap, two penn'oth of soda and a penny bag of blue'. Down John Street there was a wood shop. She boiled all the clothes in the wash house, then rinsed them, then blued them"

"My Mum was always standing at tubs washing"

"My Mum used to have to do all the washing for the crèche "

"They did have a hard life didn't they? No washing machines"

"All they washed with was soda and a bar of Sunlight soap. My Mum would stand there all day in a big sack type apron with a big mangle out at the back"

"And I used to have to stand and turn the handle"

Excerpts taken from the tapes made of the conversation at the 'Carlton Hill Tea Party', Lewis Cohen Urban Studies Centre at Brighton Polytechnic May 25th 1984, published in Back Street Brighton



Home

Hard soap, cleaning the silver and secrets of the outside toilet

Hard soap

Soap was always bought long before you needed it and stored so that it went hard, this way it lasted longer. There was no toilet soap then, you washed and cleaned the house with yellow household soap.

Georgina Attrell - [Backyard Brighton](#)

Cleaning the silver

There was no stainless steel in those days. Knives had to be cleaned on an emery board, which you sprinkled with a red powder. You rubbed the knives on it and then polished them up with a cloth. Forks, spoons and plated silver were cleaned with Goddards Plate Powder, which you mixed in a saucer of water. It's still on sale now, but comes ready-mixed. I use it today on a teapot, milk jug and sugar bowl, which were wedding gifts and are now over sixty-years old.

Marjory Batchelor - [A Life Behind Bars](#)

Outside toilets

An old earth bucket was the order of the day for the outside toilet. The men had to dig holes and bury the contents in a plantation on the plot of ground above the cottages in what are now the grounds of the chapel.

Margaret Ward - [One camp chair in the living room](#)

Toilet paper was very basic, consisting of newspaper cut into squares. A piece of string was threaded through a hole in the corner and this would hang from a nail... There was toilet soap and toilet rolls in the bathroom eventually, but in the outside toilet there were never hand-washing facilities.

Marjory Batchelor - [A Life Behind Bars](#)



Back Yards of Kensington Street, 1935
Brighton and Hove in Picture



Home

Perils of the washing lines

Because of the narrowness of the street, clothes lines were slung from the front of the houses across the street to the wall opposite. Woe betide any youngster who accidentally brushed against the washing as he ducked beneath it to get to or from his home. The old lady next door managed to set fire to her chimney, a common occurrence in those days, and the fire brigade was sent for. As the street was so narrow, it was impossible to get the fire engine into the street, so it was necessary to run hoses from a fire hydrant at the same time the children of the street were arriving home for dinner. The combination of sweating, struggling, swearing fire-men, kids yelling and generally skylarking, irate housewives berating the firemen while they struggled to get their washing in, whilst a black ball of soot and smoke settled over all. It looked like something from Bedlam.

Victor Henry Cox - [Back Street Brighton](#)



Claremont Row, 1935
Brighton and Hove in Pictures