

The outpourings of caught-short shoppers

Public toilets, or the lack of them, was an issue that infuriated residents throughout my years with the Richmond and Twickenham Times series - both during the period of Conservative control in the late seventies and throughout the Lib Dem 18 year tenure. And the problem has not gone away.

Three decades ago local authority lavatories were being closed down all over the country to cut council tax and to quell the complaints about their misuse for soliciting and by drug addicts. It must have been one of the most stupid penny-pinching measures ever conceived and, followed to logical conclusions, would have taken us back to Chaucer's London when chamber pots were emptied into the street. No thought was really being given to the social and practical consequences.

In the towns planned by our Victorian and Edwardian forebears, every shopping

centre, park, station and swimming pool had a public urinal and two or three closets. Both Richmond and Hounslow boroughs were well served. But often they were probably disguised as cottages (a slang term later adopted by the homosexual community) or screened by trees, generally hidden from the public gaze underground or hidden in a dark corner or back street.

This absurd prudishness, from the long gone age when a glimpse of stocking was looked on as something shocking, was one of the reasons they were misused in later years when the caretakers started to be made redundant in the foolhardy quest for greater economies.

Unlike the French, who put their pissoirs in the centre of town squares in full view of all who passed - and without offending the local pruders - the British considered bodily functions as something you would want your wives

or servants to face and needed to be far away from the public view. Consequently when no longer cared for by attendants, they became centres of wrongdoing by rampant solicitors and desperate drug addicts.

The letter pages of these newspapers were filled with the outpourings of angry readers when one by one the toilets were boarded up and the drunk, incontinent and the elderly were left to find an empty door, hedge or front garden as a substitute.

To try and solve the problem, the coin in the slot toilet Tardis started to appear on the streets in the vain hope that this would meet the need.

They were doomed from the start - miserably claustrophobic, constantly out of action, expensive and to most people quite terrifying, as they were windowless and airless. They did little to meet the need.

The main users of the old free toilet were the very young, the vagrant and the late night drinker, none of whom were willing or able to spend 10p for a pee and be locked into a plastic prison from which they felt they might never emerge.

Another scheme adopted was to encourage pubs, fast food outlets and restaurants to allow the public to use their facilities - yet they were reluctant to do so, feeling quite rightly that it is the duty of a local authority to ensure that such essential facilities are available and not private businesses.

The Community Toilet Scheme pioneered in Richmond upon Thames and which involves the council paying businesses a small annual fee for advertising their right to use their loos, is certainly a step in the right direction as the Minister for Local Government has acknowledged.

But it is by no means the complete answer. All tube stations and bus depots need them, so do parks and open spaces. Few have them.

Most pubs and restaurants close at 11pm - just the time of greatest need when their customers spill out into the streets.

The French pissoir, cheap and simple, could provide a partial solution.

They cost next to nothing to install, require minimum maintenance, don't attract vandals or undesirables and no entrance fee is necessary.

It would take only slight adaptation to make them suitable for use by women - who in 2006 drink beer as voraciously as men and for whom the need is just as great.

What about Richmond Liberals or Hounslow Tories launching another pioneering and even more imaginative venture?