

DESCENDING INTO THE SEWER

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Not long ago the toilet was one of the unmentionables, a taboo subject. It was both ignored and fascinating. While adults draped the toilet in euphemisms, adolescents out-performed each other with crudities.

I hesitated to explore the subject of Kandos's treatment of excrement over the last century. As I took the lid off the man-hole and peered into its workings, I found my nose wrinkling with distaste at sight, aroma, memory and imagining. Yet, I said to myself, that is a wussy reason not to investigate a subject. Toilets, no matter how primitive, are an essential part of living and a crucial if neglected part of our history.

Many of you will remember the dunny cart (also known as the night soil cart) and the dunny down the back yard (also known as the outhouse). Once a week the dunny man (or night man or sanitary man) would appear in the early hours of the morning wearing a hessian bag folded to form a hood and shoulder covering. He exchanged an empty sanitised pan for the smelly full pan and carried it away on the cart to be 'dealt with'.

No toilet rolls in those days. Just sheets of newspaper or butchers paper cut into squares. And be careful of the red-back hiding under the seat! That was the pan system.

Sanitation was even more basic in the first years of Kandos, when residents had to manage their own excrement. Some (landowners almost certainly) would have dug a cesspit, a cylindrical hole two to three metres deep and a metre in diameter, perhaps lined with bricks or stones. Others would have dug a trench, filled in with dirt or ashes occasionally. The least permanent would have used a shovel. And the most careless would have used a kerosene tin and then emptied the contents in the bush, in the dead of night.

It is no wonder that by 1918 concerns were being expressed in the *Mudgee Guardian* of the serious menace to district health: 'With the population of Kandos on the increase it is obvious that no time should be lost in putting a sanitary service into operation.' A septic system was considered but the Board of Health declared a pan system was the only sensible option.

Introducing a pan system involved formally extending the urban area of Kandos so that as many residences as possible could be included. Council had to set up a night soil depot which meant getting the Lands Department to dedicate a piece of crown land. A notice appeared in the *Government Gazette* on 24 January 1919 stating that portion 160 of 20 acres held by John Wesley Jackson was exempted from lease generally and reserved for a sanitary and rubbish depot. Council also had to construct a dam and buildings; and arrange a loan.

In March 1919 residents saw evidence that the new sanitary system would soon be in place. A large consignment of sanitary pans arrived at Kandos Railway Station and Mr Brennan the contractor was ready to deliver them to residents. No doubt householders were busy by this time constructing or refurbishing their outhouses.

However a small town is not a military operation and human nature being what it is, some residents failed the sanitation test. In November 1920 the Shire Engineer reported to council

that 33 closets were in an unsanitary state. Some premises were very primitive 'consisting mainly of a few bags on four sticks'. Others required a roof, door, regulation seat or concrete floor. There were also numerous humpies on crown and company land (outside the urban area) 'with little or no sanitary accommodation'.

It was a typhoid scare, a visit from the Department of Health and scathing reports in the *Mudgee Guardian* in 1924 that finally seemed to clean up the sanitation problems on crown land on the western side of the railway line, locally known as Criminal Hill. 'There are some things that are almost too disgusting to print,' began one article. 'It looks as if this insanitary shanty-settlement has been allowed to go its own unsavoury way...Councillors should know every detail of the sanitary arrangements that exist in every part of the area they govern.'

From then on unsatisfactory reports resulted not from the backyards of Kandos but from the depot – and not often. They were usually to do with an unsatisfactory cleaning process of the pans which involved emptying, washing out and deodorising. Most residents were probably very grateful that someone else was willing to do the work and would not have wanted to upset the cart.

Mind you there always seemed to be tenderers for the job. In 1933, the middle of the Depression, there were 23 of them. A local man Amos Bolton was successful with a tender of seven pence to one shilling a service. By 1950 council charged residents three pounds five shillings per annum for a weekly service (still only fifteen pence a time).

It was in 1960 that council approached the Department of Public Works for a 50% subsidy to install a sewerage system in the town. It was seen as a sign of progress and an inflator of real estate prices to have urine and faeces flushed down the toilet and transported in pipes to a centralised treatment plant. Out of sight, out of mind. Surprisingly there was adverse reaction from some sections of the community.

It was a big project for a small town with council deciding to be the constructing authority. In July 1968 council contracted engineering firm Matheson and Chapman to design the scheme including the treatment works. From March 1970 the same firm was engaged as supervising contractors to work with Council's Assistant Engineer (appointed full time) and Shire Engineer (part time). A site meeting was held fortnightly and the Department of Public Works inspected monthly.

It was an intensive operation. Besides the consultants and public servants there were seven contracting firms. In addition there was consultation with every resident/owner to obtain permissions, provide drainage diagrams and give building permits for additions and alterations. There was interaction with plumbers and drainers to outline requirements.

The pumping station site was purchased from T F Evans and signed under seal of council in March 1972. In the same month the treatment works came into operation, with its buildings, pipes, tanks, filters, fences, electricals, footpaths, landscaping and installations. The first property was connected two days earlier and construction of the pumping stations had begun.

On 20 October Kandos Sewerage Scheme was declared operational by Mr Davis Hughes Minister for Public Works. The opening ceremony involved an invitation lunch for the big wigs and afternoon tea for the general public. High praise all around - for meeting deadlines, below budget, and with only eight written complaints (all minor). The cost was \$750,000.

One notable change to the design, at an extra cost of \$9000, was the use of vitrified clay pipes instead of asbestos cement pipes, which it was believed would be susceptible to acids in Kandos soils.

No sooner were small country towns piped into a sewerage system than the world began thinking about sustainable living: on-site sewage treatment units versus a sewerage system.

There has been another change. It is only in the twenty-first century that we have become more comfortable with the subject of excrement. Now on film and TV men scheme and connive at a urinal. And young women sit on toilets. The image of the 'dunny' as an ordinary part of life has achieved acceptance at last.