

A public space of varying suffering:

Public lavatory provision in Victorian Bury-St-Edmunds¹

Barbara Penner asserts that Victorian women faced a world of unmentionable suffering due to non-existent female public lavatory provision: exemplified by the failed proposal tabled at St Pancras Vestry to build a female public lavatory on Camden High Street, London in 1900. She notes, having read the Vestry's minutes against the grain, published in the *St. Pancras Gazette*, a subtle, but ultimately overpowering, sexism that pervades the council's decision making process.² This essay will use an original case study of Bury-St-Edmunds Town Council's meeting minutes that proposed the building of female and male public lavatories in the town. By following Penner's lead of reading against the grain it will be found that the exclusion of women from public space evident in London was also prevalent in Bury-St-Edmunds, indicating the closeness of provincial and metropolitan attitudes. In seeking to go further than Penner it will be asserted that people with limited mobility were also excluded, whilst placing public lavatories in out of the way locations allowed users the ability to subvert the authorities' design of space.

Penner bases her theory on, among others, the feminist geographer Doreen Massey, and believes the creation of urban public space that didn't provide lavatories for women perpetuated Victorian patriarchy by excluding women.³ Massey asserts that organisation of space is integral to producing, and not just the result of, social relations and that women's mobility challenges patriarchy.⁴ The late nineteenth century saw an increasing standardisation and organisation of space through the development of town planning, which in turn created a

¹ This is a play on the article title Barbara Penner, 'A world of unmentionable suffering: women's public conveniences in Victorian London', *Journal of Design History*, 14.1 (2001), 35-51.

² Penner, pp. 35-6, 40.

³ Penner, p. 36.

⁴ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 4, 11.

knowable and, thus, governable space.⁵ Penner along with Maureen Flanagan, who in her work on the same St Pancras lavatories proposal unwaveringly concurs with Penner, use the growth in Victorian society's organisation of space as evidence of the exclusion of women from public space.⁶ By embracing these assertions, and following Penner's methodology, it will be observed that proposals for building a female public lavatory in Bury-St-Edmunds were met with apathy across the Town Council which sought to exclude women from its public space. The discussion of proposals for a public lavatory in the provincial urban centre of Bury-St-Edmunds breaks with the overwhelming bias of public lavatory historiography on London as the focus of study.⁷ In 1888 Bury-St-Edmunds, with a population of 16,255, officially became the county town of West Suffolk and with it the council took greater control over the development of infrastructure. Its growing civic importance saw it take a local lead in improving sanitation and providing a better welcome to the town's visitors.⁸ It was against this backdrop, along with concerns over how other residentially and commercially similar towns were sanitarily developing, that Bury-St-Edmunds looked to construct a public lavatory in 1899.⁹

The shortened minutes of the Bury-St-Edmunds Town Council meetings are reported in *The Bury and Norwich Post* from June to October 1899. An Editorial dated 19 December 1899 indicates the editor's view that preference lay with a dispersed system of urinals and not

⁵ Patrick Joyce, 'Maps, blood and the city: the governance of the social in nineteenth century Britain', in *The Social Question: New Bearings in History and Social Sciences*, ed. by Patrick Joyce (London: Routledge, 2002), 99-115 (pp. 99-104).

⁶ Maureen Flanagan, 'Private needs, and public spaces: public toilet provision in the Anglo-Atlantic patriarchal city: London, Dublin, Toronto and Chicago', *Urban History*, 41.2 (2014), 265-290 (pp. 266, 271).

⁷ Throughout my research I could find no academic writing on Victorian public lavatories outside London. For good examples of writing on London aside from Penner and Flanagan see: Lee Jackson, *Dirty Old London: The Victorian Fight Against Filth* (Padstow: T J International, 2014) and Lynne Walker, 'Vistas of pleasure: women consumers of urban space in the west end of London 1850-1900', in *Women in Victorian Art World*, ed. by Clarissa Campbell Orr (Manchester: Manchester University press, 1995).

⁸ Frank Meeres, *A History of Bury St Edmunds*, (Andover: Phillimore & Co. Ltd., 2010), pp. 141-142.

⁹ *The Bury and Norwich Post*, 19.09.1899, p. 6. This article reports the findings of inquiries made to other towns residentially and commercially similar to Bury-St-Edmunds on their provision and state of public lavatories. Towns included Shrewsbury, Yarmouth and York.

in support of a costly centrally located lavatory.¹⁰ However, with the availability of only shortened minutes it is important to bear in mind that, in the trimming-down process, arguments against the proposal may have been favoured. Either way the building a female and male lavatory was stalled, moved to-and-from committee stage and eventually shelved. The public lavatory question first came to the full Town Council at its 13 June 1899 meeting in the form of a proposal by the town surveyor for lavatories to be placed in the Town Hall's cellars.¹¹ The proposal had already been accepted by the Council's Sanitary Committee. Deputy Mayor, Alderman J. G. Oliver, attempted to stifle discussion on the matter by interrupting its proposer, and chair of the Sanitary Committee, Councillor Walpole, asserting that his failure to find a seconder for the proposal meant the council should move to its next business.¹² It was thus at the full Town Council meeting that opposition to the proposal first became apparent. The attempt to stifle discussion on a point of order indicates the mechanistic nature by which the proposals could be dismissed and the disguising of disagreement under a veil of procedure. It, furthermore, attempts to prevent the Council from having to hear the rationale and social consequences for such facilities. Helen Meller asserts that the professional men responsible for the provision of urban facilities rarely considered questions about urban planning schemes outside of design and cost, therefore a dismissal on procedure was not unexpected.¹³ Discussions over the proposal then developed more gendered reasons for disapproval, and suggest the extent to which the male town planners believed they knew, without consultation, the needs of women in the spaces they were planning.¹⁴ Mayor, Alderman J. Floyd, criticised the proposal as he failed to see the *need* for

¹⁰ *The Bury and Norwich Post*, 19.12.1899, p. 5.

¹¹ *The Bury and Norwich Post*, 20.06.1899, p. 6.

¹² *The Bury and Norwich Post*, 20.06.1899, p. 6.

¹³ Helen Meller, 'Gender, citizenship and the making of the modern environment', in *Women and the Making of Built Space in England, 1870-1950*, ed. by Elizabeth Darling and Lesley Whitworth (Aldershot: Ashgate publishing limited, 2007) 13-30, (p. 17).

¹⁴ Meller, p. 20.

a female lavatory.¹⁵ The historiography of Victorian separate spheres has presented a reason for this perceived lack of need, as the domestic women belonged in the private sphere, whilst the man occupied the public sphere, and so women didn't use the public space.¹⁶ However, more recent historiographical developments, especially of the later Victorian period, have broken down these rigid gender boundaries suggesting that female movement in the public sphere was heightened greatly by increased individualism and middle class liberalism.¹⁷ The Mayor, therefore, opposed the proposal through reliance on his personal, and possibly outdated, judgement of female needs. It is significant that attendees at Bury-St-Edmunds Town Council's meetings were entirely male, which prevented the consideration of a female view and a challenge to patriarchy.¹⁸ In both the decision making process, and the preferred decision of the Mayor, patriarchal control was perpetuated.

Concerns over cost formed the next centre of opposition. The Deputy Mayor, again on 13 June 1899, was reported to be the most vociferous in disapproval, suggesting that as far as the ladies lavatory was concerned it was 'entirely a wasteful expenditure'.¹⁹ The removal of justification for a female lavatory on account of expenditure fits with Meller's assertion of cost being an overriding factor. This may suggest, like the criticism of the Mayor, a presumed understanding of female needs and assumed low usage of the lavatory. A very real concern at the time, evidenced by the meetings discussions, was how ratepayers would react to the proposal. Councillor Owen Clark, however, offers a conclusion on this by indicating his correspondence with ratepayers, of all classes, showed they were in favour.²⁰ Furthermore, as

¹⁵ *The Bury and Norwich Post*, 20.06.1899, p. 6.

¹⁶ Barbara Welter, 'The cult of true womanhood: 1820-1860', *American Quarterly*, 18.2 (1966), 151-174.

¹⁷ Jane Hamlett and Sarah Wiggins, 'Introduction: Victorian women in Britain and the United States: new perspectives', *Women's History Review*, 18.5 (2009), 705-717; Amanda Vickery, 'Golden age to separate spheres? A review of the categories and chronology of English women's history', *The Historical Journal*, 36.2 (1993), 383-414.

¹⁸ Coverage of Bury Town Council's meetings proposals for a public lavatory featured in *The Bury and Norwich Post* from 13 June 1899 and ran until 19 September 1899.

¹⁹ *The Bury and Norwich Post*, 20.06.1899, p. 6.

²⁰ *The Bury and Norwich Post*, 20.06.1899, p. 6.

early as 1878 a letter to *The Bury and Norwich Post* editor, by an A. E. Tollady, contains details of a petition of 268 ratepayers handed to the Town Council in support for public urinals in Bury-St-Edmunds, indicating a longstanding ratepayer acceptance of the need for this facility.²¹ A further September 1899 letter, again from Tollady, expands ratepayer support to that of lavatories, and indicates a new petition in support had begun.²² Wasteful expenditure on a male only facility was not a concern of Deputy Mayor, Alderman Oliver, who had agreed at a 9 July 1891 meeting to the construction of a male lavatory at the town's Corn Exchange which would open for just three hours in the week at a cost of £300. The cost of the proposed Town Hall lavatories was estimated at £589 7s. 6d: £280 for the female lavatory and £260 for the male.²³ Thus the Deputy Mayor's criticism of wasteful expenditure cannot be levelled against the possibility of low lavatory use or the possibility of the ratepayer not accepting the proposals. Instead it lies more specifically in the idea that the provision of a female lavatory was itself wasteful.

A further Town Council meeting on 11 July 1899 saw a proposal, by Councillor D. Paine, to use the Corn Exchange as the public lavatory. However, with this proposal came the removal of the idea for a female lavatory.²⁴ In an attempt to enshrine the principle of a female lavatory Councillor Jaggard proposed a motion that one must be provided. The motion was defeated by 10 votes to 15 and effectively terminated this idea whilst also indicating a wider disapproval than just the Mayor and Deputy Mayor, whose opposition the paper focused on.²⁵ It suggests the Town Council as a whole did not wish to provide a female lavatory and its desire to preserve patriarchal order. Lynne Walker acknowledges the extent to which Victorian middle-class women taking on greater public roles were restricted to areas close to

²¹ *The Bury and Norwich Post*, Letter to Editor, 30/04/1871, p. 8.

²² *The Bury and Norwich Post*, Letter to editor, 26/09/1899, p. 8.

²³ *The Bury and Norwich Post*, 21.07.1891, p. 7, and *The Bury and Norwich Post*, 20/06/1899, p. 6.

²⁴ *The Bury and Norwich Post*, 18.07.1899, p. 6.

²⁵ *The Bury and Norwich Post*, 18.07.1899, p. 6.

home or ladies clubs in Mayfair.²⁶ The restriction of public activities to places that provided lavatories indicates that the failure to provide lavatories excluded these middle-class women from public space and consequently from the public. The failed proposals to build a female lavatory in the provincial urban centre of Bury-St-Edmunds and lack of understanding about the needs of women displayed by Town Council members in many ways correlates with the exclusionary patriarchal order Penner describes in London, hence demonstrating the similarity of provincial and metropolitan attitudes.

Penner overemphasises gendered exclusion and the long term effects of public space design. Public lavatories were spaces synonymous with filth and pollution and were consistently concealed from the public eye throughout the Victorian era.²⁷ The desire to conceal female lavatories also centred on recreating the private within the public sphere in order to maintain female's pure and virginal qualities.²⁸ Penner acknowledges attempts to conceal the female lavatory on Camden High Street, but she relates it only to the patriarchal hold on ensuring women's purity.²⁹ Concealing public lavatories during the Victorian era often meant placing them underground. The male lavatory built in Bury-St-Edmund's Corn Exchange in 1891, despite strong objections from Councillor Stutter on the grounds of convenience and ventilation, was concealed underground.³⁰ In placing it underground Councillors Oliver and J. Gough asserted that the lavatory would be out of the way.³¹ Furthermore, the 1899 proposal for the public lavatory at the Town Hall were to have them in

²⁶ Lynne Walker, 'Home and away: the feminist remapping of public and private space', in *The Unknown City: Contesting Architecture and Social Space*, ed. by Ian Borden, Joe Kerr and Jane Rendell, (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institution of Technology, 2001), 297-315 (p. 301).

²⁷ Ruth Barcan, 'Dirty spaces: separation, concealment and shame', in *Public Restrooms and Politics of Sharing*, ed. by Harvey Molotch and Laura Noren (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 25-43 (pp. 25, 34).

²⁸ Terry Koogan, 'Sex separation: the cure all for Victorian social anxiety', in *Public Restrooms and Politics of Sharing*, ed. by Harvey Molotch and Laura Noren (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 145-165 (pp. 160-63).

²⁹ Penner, p. 46.

³⁰ *The Bury and Norwich Post*, 21.07.1891, p. 7.

³¹ *The Bury and Norwich Post*, 21.07.1891, p. 7.

its cellars.³² Placing lavatories underground meant access was often via steep steps. During construction of a public lavatory in Exeter, December 1900, the county surveyor advised that a nine inch step would be used, and that this was of no concern.³³ A series of often steep steps posed problems for those with limited mobility. Although contemporary attitudes to disabilities were to confine it indoors the construction of facilities that were not accessible to those with disabilities in general perpetuated segregation and worked against social tolerance.³⁴ By using Penner's theoretical stand point it can be observed that the design of the public lavatories in Bury-St-Edmunds would also exclude people with limited mobility from public space, confirming Anne Borsay's assertions that those with disabilities in Victorian Britain were consistently excluded from citizenship.³⁵ Therefore, by looking beyond Penner's over reliance on the explanatory power of patriarchy, other forms of exclusion in public space were perpetuated. Tucking public lavatories out of the way not only excluded people with limited mobility from public space, as well as women, but also altered the long-term exclusionary prospects of the male only public lavatories.

Penner as a design and architectural historian focuses on the exclusionary effects of the public lavatories' design, or lack of design for a female lavatory, and perpetuates a view that only the design process makes space and shapes the spaces' social relations. She misses an understanding of how people, through their use of space were also spaces makers.³⁶ Furthermore, Massey, Penner's theoretical base, recognises that not only does the

³² *The Bury and Norwich Post*, 18.07.1899, p. 6.

³³ *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post*, 01.12.1900.

³⁴ David Serlin, 'Pissing without pity: disability, gender and the public toilet', in *Public Restrooms and Politics of Sharing*, ed. by Harvey Molotch and Laura Noren (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 167-85 (p. 168).

³⁵ Anne Borsay, *Disability and Social Policy in Britain since 1750* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) pp. 1, 22.

³⁶ Elizabeth Darling and Lesley Whitworth, 'Introduction: making space and re-making history', in *Women and the Making of Built Space in England, 1870-1950*, ed. by Elizabeth Darling and Lesley Whitworth (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 1-11 (pp. 3-4); Anne Anderson and Elizabeth Darling, 'The hill sisters: cultural philanthropy and the embellishment of lives in late nineteenth century England', in *Women and the Making of Built Space in England, 1870-1950*, ed. by Elizabeth Darling and Lesley Whitworth (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 32-48 (p. 34).

organisation of space affect social relations, but that social relations are inherently dynamic and that a spaces' meaning cannot ever be fixed.³⁷ Andy Croll and his study of the provincial urban centre of Merthyr Tydfil, agrees that despite public spaces being designed by civic elites, they were overwhelmingly populated by the non-elite. He also suggests that control of space by the civic elites could only occur through what they could observe and keep surveillance on.³⁸ Victorian society could only govern and police what was knowable to it. Public lavatories are, though, what the Victorians sought to hide most and know as little as possible about.

Although the initial site for the proposed public lavatory in Bury-St-Edmunds was in the Town Hall, a central location very much in the public gaze, it was precisely this that the Mayor levelled criticism against. He asserted that owing to the narrow residential streets flanking the Town Hall they ought to consider the enjoyment of the resident's outlook and re-site the lavatory.³⁹ Both the Mayor, and Deputy Mayor, as residents on these streets were thus outlookers.⁴⁰ The proposed lavatory in the cellar of the town hall would not involve any architectural change to the hall itself and so it can only be presumed that it was the lavatory users, or the very idea of a public lavatory, that the Mayor wanted to conceal. Furthermore, there was discussion to place a public lavatory on Woolhall Street, as an alternative to the Town Hall or the Corn Exchange, Councillor C. F. Felton suggested this was a good location as it was a less prominent site.⁴¹ By following Croll's idea that drunkards on backstreets could subvert civic codes, which they could not do in main streets as their misdeeds could be

³⁷ Massey, pp. 2, 4.

³⁸ Andy Croll, *Civilising the Urban: Popular Culture and Public Space in Merthyr c. 1870-1914* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000) pp. 9, 63-64.

³⁹ *The Bury and Norwich Post*, 18.07.1899, p. 6.

⁴⁰ *The Bury and Norwich Post*, 20.06.1899, p. 6.

⁴¹ *The Bury and Norwich Post*, 18.07.1899, p. 6.

observed by the respectable, placing public lavatories in less prominent backstreets might allow the gendered division of lavatories to be subverted.⁴²

Bury-St-Edmunds saw poorer people living close to the social elites resulting in the proximity of these backstreets, such as Woolhall Street, to main streets in which subversion could take place.⁴³ Subversion of the authorised use of public lavatory space could come from crime, an example of which was the report of a theft within a male public lavatory in Leeds that two men and two women were convicted for.⁴⁴ The participation in this crime by women demonstrates their usage of male public lavatories and subversion of the authorities' designated use of the space. Usurping authorities' control on space could occur because the authorities could not observe, know and thus control public lavatories as they were habitually sited in less prominent locations. Ultimately, as Croll questions the binary of middle class control over the working classes' use of space, so should Penner's binary of male control over women's use of public lavatories be questioned. As public lavatories were hidden away and the spaces' meaning constantly evolving by occurrences within it, so the perseverance of patriarchy cannot lie only with the failure to provide a public lavatory for women.

The evidence from the provincial urban centre of Bury-St-Edmunds demonstrates another attempt by a Town Council to not provide female public lavatories. By using Penner's methodology, it can be understood that the male patriarchy sought to perpetuate its control. However, Penner, by using only a gendered spectrum, fails to recognise the same prohibitive effects of public lavatories on other members of society, namely those with limited mobility. Thus failing to recognise that the patriarchy did not just exclude females, but also excluded those with limited mobility. Furthermore, by omitting part of Massey's theoretical standpoint and focusing on the design phase Penner removes female agency in the

⁴² Croll, pp. 81-3.

⁴³ Meeres, p. 151.

⁴⁴ *The Leeds Mercury*, 09.12.1982.

development of social relations. The unobservable and hence ungovernable spaces that lavatories occupied meant the designs for space could be subverted, substantially reducing the patriarchy's power. The overarching need to keep the public lavatory out of sight in Bury-St-Edmunds undermines the wish to not provide a female public lavatory. Suffering from exclusion then was not static and restricted only to women, but varied due to use of public space and to more than just its female users. Exclusion was thus not an all-consuming world of suffering, but one limited only public spaces.

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