How did we get from the tin bathtub in the kitchen and the standpipe in the street to today's glittering temples of hygiene and high style? Sarah Wise charts a century of increasingly efficient ablutions

The great washed

"At Brideshead, I was always given the room I had on my first visit; it was next to Sebastian's, and we shared what had once been a dressing-room and had been changed to a bathroom 20 years back by the substitution for the bed of a deep, copper, mahogany-framed bath that was filled by pulling a brass lever heavy as a piece of marine engineering; the rest of the room remained unchanged; a coal fire always burned there in winter. I often think of that bathroom — the watercolours dimmed by steam and the huge towel warming on the back of the chintz armchair — and contrast it with the uniform, clinical little chambers, glittering with chromium plate and looking-glass, which pass for luxury in the modern world."
"Brideshead Revisited" by Evelyn Waugh.

So even the aristocratic Flyte family had had to wait until the turn of the century to be able to plumb in a bath and dedicate a whole room to cleaning the body. The bathroom is a very late addition to the British home, as foreign to 18th- and 19th-century domestic builders as a scullery and pantry are to Beazer and Barratt today. (And it's the first thing to go when you have no money; Shelter estimates that of the 23,892 Londoners in B&Bs and hostels, the majority will not have use of their own bathroom.) It was 1870 before those who could afford it began to convert their least-used bedroom, or ensuite dressing-room, into a bathroom, and homes constructed in the last 25 years of the century included the first purpose-built bathrooms. These early bathrooms had the same dimensions and decoration as the bedroom they replaced: a large, carpeted, wallpapered, room (often with anti-peep stained-glass windows) which just somehow had to endure the steam and splashes.

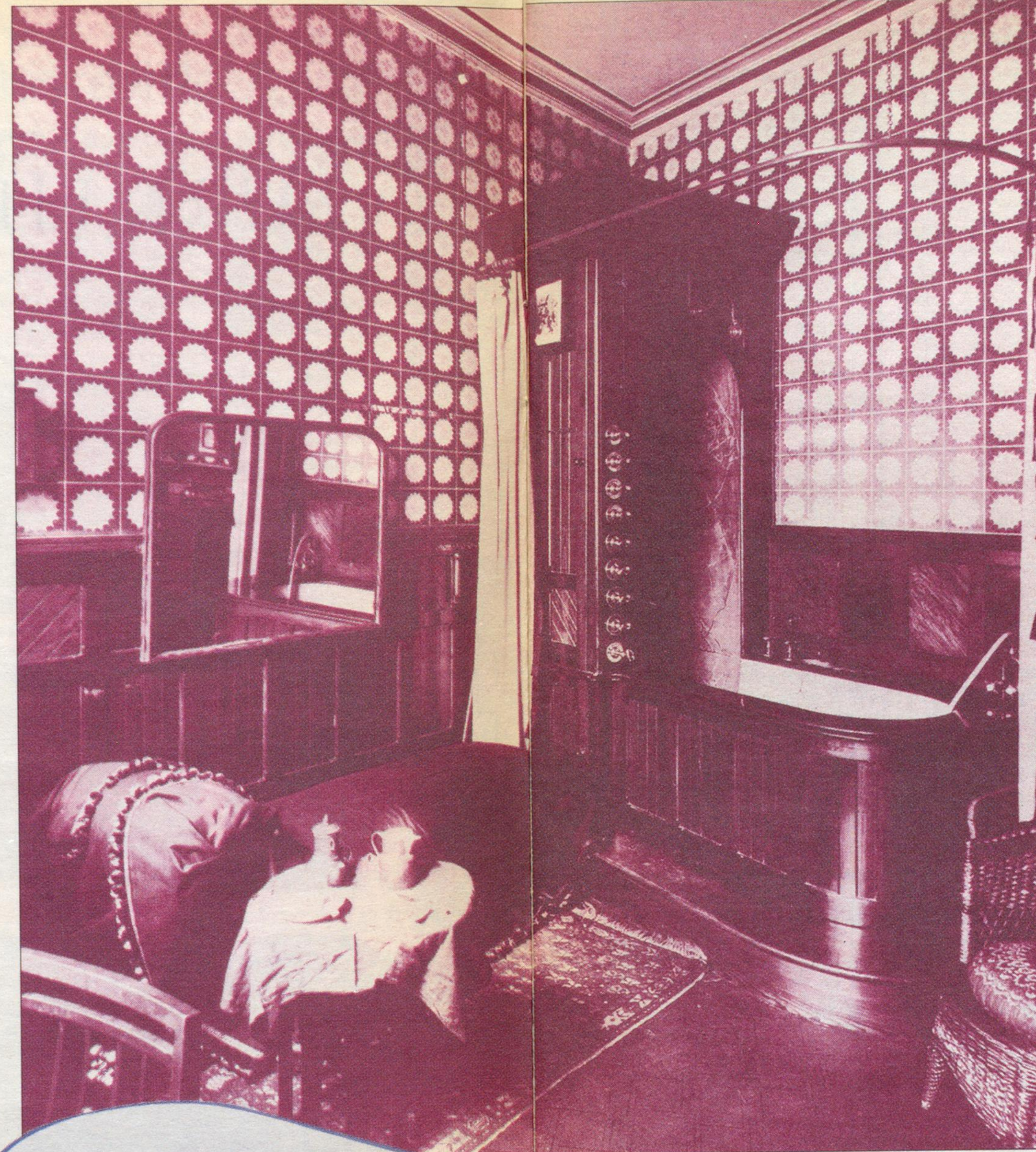
London was unplumbed until the middle of the last century, and only a few homes had water coming in and going out. The wealthy and the reasonably well off had always been able to bathe in a tub, but the bath itself was peripatetic, settling, once or twice a week, in the bed-chamber, filled by a relay of servants with copper jugs of water that had been heated on the kitchen range. For the poor who had homes, bathing took place where everything else did: in the kitchen, in a tin or zinc tub that hung on a nail for the rest of the week. The poor who had no home just had to learn to love the smell of mankind. For an everyday, all-over wash, most people settled for a sponge-down first thing in the morning, standing at a marble-topped, iron washstand on which stood a bowl and a jug containing warm water if you had servants; cold if you were the servant.

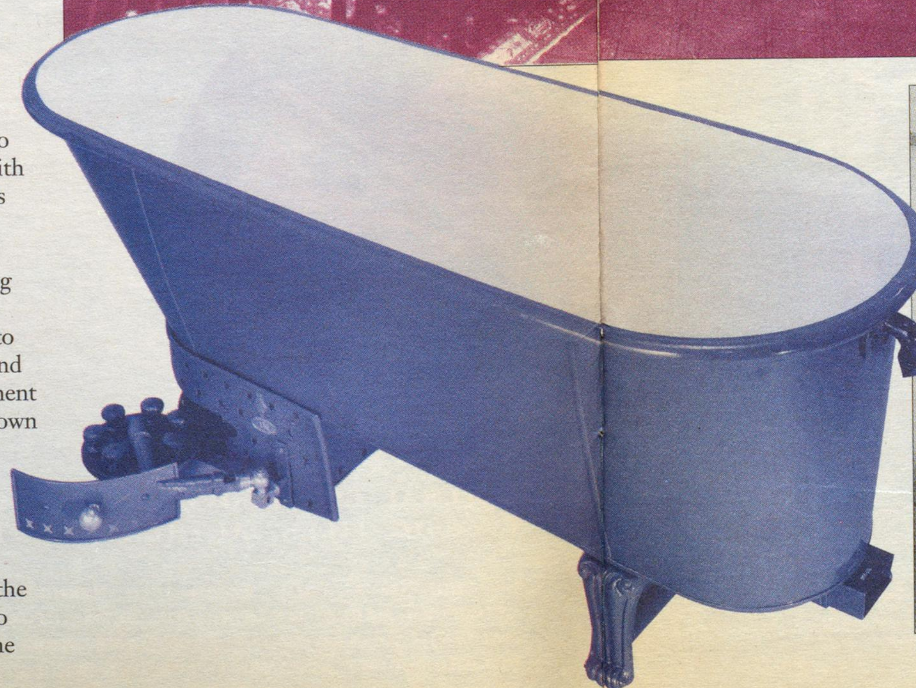
The standpipe in the street was the source of Londoners' water, and fighting over the sporadic, filthy supply was the road-rage of its time. It took the capital's outbreaks of cholera (killing 6,000 Londoners in 1832 and 15,000 in 1848/9) and typhoid (which carried off Prince Albert in 1861) for government to compel London's eight private water companies to clean up and increase the supply. Slowly, slowly, an army of Victorian sanitary reformers won the war to get water pumped to all parts of town and at sufficient pressure for it to reach higher up the house.

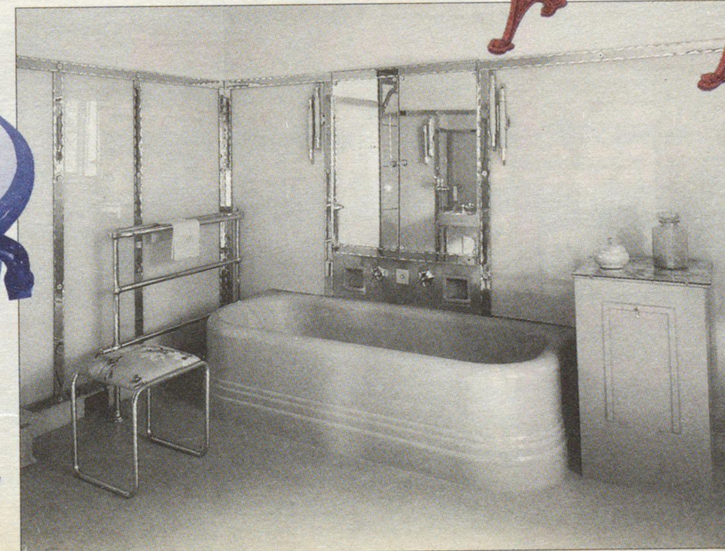
Gas pipes were on their way too, though they had an explosive start in the 1860s, killing and injuring many as kitchen boilers went skywards. In 1868 the first domestic geyser arrived, promising a hot bath in 15 to 30 minutes — all you needed was a room with a flue. (The General Gordon got round this one: it was a cast-iron bath with its own portable heater which applied gas flames directly to the bottom of the tub, simmering the bather like a sprout in a saucepan.)

With heated water able to make its way into one room, and used water able to drain out and into the sewer, the bath had found its permanent home. So had the washstand; its bowl sank down into the unit and gained a plug-hole, the jug disappeared in favour of taps and gradually the washstand metamorphosed into a basin.

The tub came in a variety of shapes, but by 1900 the "lounge" bath, 5ft long and made of enamelled cast-iron, had become the standard, possibly because it allowed you to wallow luxuriously as you washed — a home hammam for those who couldn't afford the swanky hydropathic hotels that had sprung up around the country.







Below left: an 1880s gas-jet bath. Left: an 1895 bathroom in Ashley Place, SW1 — the bath/shower has copper taps and side jets, in confessional-style mahogany casing. Above: an Edwardian shower. Right: a Twyfords Verona basin that reveals its washstand beginnings. Below: 1934 gloss and glamour

Bathrooms evolved quickly, not having much of a heritage to hold them back, and taking advantage of the technological leaps that made cast-iron, tiles, lino, chromium and various types of glass cheaply available. The vast, cluttered, Victorian bathroom, whose textiles harboured mould, shrank at the turn of the century into compact, bright, hard, easy-wipe cells (Waugh's clinical, glittering chambers were on their way). The Edwardian building boom saw the mass replication of white porcelain-enamelled basins and baths, glazed tiling, nickel and chrome taps and streamlined accessories (cabinets, towel rails, racks, shelves). These new, smaller family houses were built to be easy to run without servants, whose numbers had declined dramatically since the 1890s.

After the First World War, the London County Council created vast estates of ugly little houses in the suburbs — 50,000 new dwellings in the 1920s/early 1930s — which set extraordinarily high standards for the British bathroom. Given that most Londoners who owned their own home or rented privately were living in stock that predated the built-in bathroom, council-house inhabitants enjoyed a high standard of sanitation. Many evacuees in the 1939-45 war saw their first purpose-built bathroom when they were billetted on council estates.

The Thirties apartment blocks, of which 1,300 were built in Central London, saw the private sector catch up. Developers vied with each other to offer superior services, including constant hot-water piped into the sleekest, shiniest, best-appointed bathroom — the epitome of glamorous metropolitan living.

And that was it: give or take a few fads, the British purpose-built bathroom has changed remarkably little in a century. No other domestic space has ever been so conformist. Homogeneity set in rapidly, form following function very closely in a most un-British embrace of modernity.

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