

Historic Building Appraisal
Wellington Street Public Toilet
Junction of Wellington Street and Queen's Road Central
Central, H.K.

The Wellington Street Public Toilet (威靈頓街公廁) was built at the junction of Wellington Street and Queen's Road Central (皇后大道中) in 1912–1913. It was built in response to the bubonic plague outbreak in May 1894 in Taipingshan District, demonstrating the government's efforts to improve the sanitary condition of City of Victoria and was part of an ongoing process since the first outbreak of the plague.¹ *Historical Interest*

The government began to provide public privies in 1867, following a cholera outbreak from 1865 to 1866. However, it was difficult for the government to find land to accommodate latrines in convenient locations as property owners objected to the construction of latrines near their properties because they considered that latrines would affect the values of their properties. Government latrines or privies were outnumbered by private ones established by businessmen who regarded them as collection points for night soil to be sold as fertilizer in the Mainland.² In April 1874, Dr. Ph. B. C. Ayres, Colonial Surgeon, completed a report on the sanitary condition of City of Victoria. He found that pigs were commonly kept in houses all over the town, such as in kitchens, in gullies at the back of houses and even under beds, and that Chinese dwellings had neither toilets nor bathrooms.³ He urged that such insanitary condition should not be tolerated any longer.⁴ Notwithstanding, both the local Chinese people and government officials were apathetic about housing and sanitary reforms because of concern about the cost and the potential need for higher taxes and rent.

Dr. Ayres submitted the “Medical Report on the Epidemic of Bubonic Plaque in 1894” to Stewart Lockhart, Acting Colonial Secretary, in March 1895. He pointed out that one of the most important factors in the spread of the disease

¹ The bubonic plague broke out in Taipingshan District again in 1896. From 1894 to 1923, Hong Kong was frequently hit by plague epidemics, which occurred almost every year before 1904 and every few years between then and 1923.

² For instance, there was only one public privy operated by the government, on Pound Lane, but about 10 privately run public privies can be identified from the rates records of Taipingshan District from 1868 to 1894.

³ Dr. Ayres conducted inspections of brothels in the Chinese community between 1873 and 1874. It was observed that generally there were one or more hutches used in the kitchens as privies. The hutches were composed of a few boards knocked together to form a screen, and from age and neglect, they were saturated with filth. There were no proper containers for night soil in the hutches (sometimes a broken pot, sometimes a leaky old tub, and sometimes nothing at all). Or the men went to public privies, while the women and children used covered pots, which were kept under their beds. Ayres stated that the very poor condition of the privies in brothels was equally applicable to private houses.

⁴ “Report of the Colonial Surgeon on His Inspection of the Town of Victoria, and on the Pig Licensing System. Hongkong, April 1874”, *Hong Kong Administrative Reports, 1879*.

was the poor condition of latrines. Both public and private latrines were used by the Chinese population because few Chinese dwellings had toilets. But there was practically no disinfection of the faeces in the latrines, and an abundance of the plague bacillus was found in the faeces. One remedial measure Aryes suggested was the provision of public latrines by the government in a clean condition on suitable sites throughout City of Victoria.⁵

Government Latrine Ordinance was passed in 1897 to regulate the erection of public latrines by the government on sites that did not receive objections or were approved by Legislative Council after objections were considered.⁶ The provisions of Government Latrine Ordinance were later incorporated into Public Health and Buildings Ordinance, 1903.⁷ The policy for the provision of public latrines was reiterated by the government in 1912.⁸ But in reality, it was easy to recommend the erection of latrines but not easy to find sites for them.⁹

The Wellington Street Public Toilet (formerly referred to as the Underground Trough Closet, near the Fire Brigade Station in government records) was situated on a triangular piece of land at the intersection of the west end of Wellington Street and Queen's Road Central and was nicknamed the "triangular public toilet" (三角公廁).¹⁰ According to a 1911 plan showing the districts of City of Victoria at that time, this piece of land was situated at the southeast corner of Chung Wan District (meaning "Central District" in English), which adjoined the northeast corner of Taipingshan District at the junction of Gough Street and Aberdeen Street.¹¹ The rates records show that most of the private properties on Wellington Street were Chinese shops and dwellings.¹²

The original intention was to construct an ordinary latrine above ground on Wellington Street, but because of objections from the owners and occupiers of

⁵ "Medical Report on the Epidemic of Bubonic Plaque in 1894", *Hong Kong Sessional Papers*, 1895, pp. 211 - 212.

⁶ In the case of a government latrine that would be provided on Crown land, the proposal to erect a latrine would be published in the Gazette, so that the public could submit objections to the government. Also, the Sanitary Board had the control and management of all the latrines erected under this ordinance.

⁷ "The Public Health and Buildings Ordinance, 1903" (Ordinance No. 1 of 1903), *The Hongkong Government Gazette*, 27 February 1903.

⁸ Report of the meeting of the Legislative Council on 19 October 1911, *Hong Kong Hansard*, 1911, p. 196.

⁹ Report of the meeting of the Legislative Council on 27 February 1902, *Hong Kong Hansard*, 1902, p. 4.

¹⁰ 「地下公廁變形記」, PMQ 元創方 <<https://www.pmq.org.hk/leisureculture/the-underground-toilet-breaks-new-ground/?lang=ch>>, accessed on 24 August 2022.

¹¹ Public Records Office, "Plan in G.N. 231 of 1st August 1911" under Regulation of Chinese Ordinance (Ordinance No. 3 of 1888) (File Ref.: HKRS-1035-1-5).

¹² Public Records Office, Rates Records for 1895 – 1896, 1905 – 1906, 1908 – 1909, 1912 – 1913, 1915 – 1916 and 1920 – 1921.

the buildings in the immediate neighbourhood, an underground trough closet was proposed instead. This was a public latrine for men only, which would provide both latrine stalls and urinals. The only entrance would be by a staircase on the southwest corner of the then Fire Brigade Station.¹³ It was common to build latrines for men only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Hong Kong. One reason was that there were more males than females at the time. According to the 1911 population census, the Chinese population of males was double that of females on Hong Kong Island.¹⁴ Another reason was that only the houses of wealthy people were equipped with latrines. Working-class men used public latrines, while women and children used pots which were generally kept under their beds.¹⁵

The existing structure comprises toilet cubicles, urinals, an attendant's room, a room for flushing the water tank, a room for cleansing the water tank, and a meter room on a rectangular plan, as well as a staircase and a corridor in a rough "S" shape leading from Queen's Road Central. According to the government record and building plan, dated 1912, this public toilet was a concrete structure, with a cement concrete cove ceiling supported on concrete walls. Angle iron, angle plates and I-beams were used in the cove ceiling for reinforcement.¹⁶

*Architectural
Merit*

The existing entrance on Queen's Road Central was opened in 1965. In that year, the original entrance at the west end of Wellington Street was extended in a roughly "U" direction to the pavement along Queen's Road Central to improve traffic flow at the junction of Wellington Street and Queen's Road Central.¹⁷ In 2002, the typical roadside chain link fencing (a replacement in 1965) was replaced with the existing stainless steel patterned railing.¹⁸

¹³ Sources:

- (i) "Report of the Director of Public Works for the Year 1912", *Hong Kong Administrative Reports*, 1912, Appendix P, pp. 45 - 46;
- (ii) "Report of the Director of Public Works for the Year 1913", *Hong Kong Administrative Reports*, 1913, Appendix P, p. 53; and
- (iii) Public Records Office, architectural drawing of "Underground Trough Closet near Fire Brigade Station" dated 20 August 1912 (File Ref.: HKRS 913-1-722).

¹⁴ There were 200,160 males and 89,310 females in the Chinese land population on Hong Kong Island in 1911.

Source:

"Report on the Census of the Colony for 1911", *Sessional Papers*, 1911 (Table I on p. 103(10)).

¹⁵ Sources:

- (i) Annual Report for the Year 1874 from the Colonial Surgeon on 5 April 1875, "Sanitary Reports (Hongkong)" in *Hong Kong Administrative Reports*, 1879;
- (ii) Mr. Chadwick's Reports on the Sanitary Condition of Hong Kong, p. 18.

¹⁶ Sources:

- (i) "Report of the Director of Public Works for the Year 1912", *Hong Kong Administrative Reports*, 1912, pp. 45 - 46; and
- (ii) Public Records Office, architectural drawing of "Underground Trough Closet near Fire Brigade Station" dated 20 August 1912 (File Ref.: HKRS 913-1-722).

¹⁷ Chin Yung-ming, *The Wellington Street Underground Public Toilet: the Functional Relics from Trough Closet to Modern Toilet*. The University of Hong Kong, 2005 (MSc e-thesis), p. 65.

¹⁸ Chin Yung-ming, *op.cit.*, p. 35.

Internally, the toilet cubicles, urinals and automatic infra-red sensor water taps on vanity benches, as well as the wall tiles and floor tiles, were provided during the major renovation in 2002. There are some recesses in the ceiling, which were previous openings for the installation of sky-lights with glazed panels for natural light. The glazed panels were removed and the openings concealed with cement in 1975, as the former could withstand vehicular traffic only with the structural support with props and posed a potential danger to traffic.¹⁹

The toilet is situated in one of the earliest residential areas of the Chinese population on Hong Kong Island. It, therefore, contributes to the long and rich social history of the local community, from the years of the bubonic plague to the present day. Besides, as a century-old underground toilet that is still operating and situated at a convenient location, it has attracted the attention of the media, social media, historians, architects and heritage lovers.

***Social Value
& Local
Interest***

The Wellington Street Public Toilet is within walking distance of other historic buildings, including 120 Wellington Street, 172, 174 and 176 Queen's Road Central (123, 125 and 127 Wellington Street) (all Grade 1), and Central Market (中環街市, Grade 3). They testify to the early development of the Chinese community in Central and Sheung Wan, and continue to serve the daily needs of the local community.

Group Value

This century-old Wellington Street Public Toilet is the oldest underground public toilet still operating in Hong Kong.²⁰ It bears witness to the government's continuing efforts to improve the sanitation of the city after the bubonic plague in 1894, and has been providing service to local residents for a century. The toilet underwent a major renovation in 2002 to upgrade its facilities. Although all of the original finishing, sanitary fittings and internal layout were modernised, the basic form of the toilet has remained intact.

***Rarity,
Built Heritage
Value &
Authenticity***

¹⁹ Chin Yung-ming, *op.cit.*, pp. 55, 56, 78 - 81.

²⁰ The MacDonnell Road Public Toilet, situated at the top of Calder Path (歌老打路) and on the south side of MacDonnell Road (麥當勞道), is another operating pre-war underground public toilet. It has remained a public urinal since it was built in 1918.

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