

THE DECLINE OF DRUDGERY?

WOMEN AND THE HOME

David J Eveleigh

The years around 1880 marked a critical point in the development of household technology: the introduction of the modern WC, and the arrival of cheap gas cookers, electric lighting and improved gas lighting. Would it be an exaggeration to talk of a revolution in domestic technology between 1880 and 1939 which had a major impact on the lives of women?



Above: In the 1930s many women coped with conditions from a century before. This shared courtyard of eight houses in Bilston was photographed in about 1934.

Right: The gas cooker was rapidly adopted at all social levels. With its thermostatic control and 'easy to clean' surface, this 1930s Cannon was manufactured at Bilston.



From the collections of Wolverhampton Archives & Local Studies P/4683.

Courtesy David Eveleigh

For working-class women, burdened with the responsibility for cooking and washing clothes for the family, doing the household cleaning, sewing, darning and ironing and looking after young children, improved technology could only be a boon. The quality of the lives of women in Birmingham and the Black Country – as in other urban areas in Britain – improved markedly over this period. Reliable supplies of clean water and effective drainage saw significant falls in the death rate as infectious diseases were brought under control. Better lighting and the introduction of new domestic equipment for washing, laundering and cooking also helped make women's lives at home easier.

Working-class Accommodation

Progress, however, was often faltering and assessing the impact of improved technology in the homes of women who often also formed part of the industrial labour force is not easy. How they lived at home went largely unnoticed, unless accidents or infectious diseases brought the household to the attention of the local doctor or Medical Officer of Health. At the close of the period under review, on the outbreak of the Second



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Flushed by waste water, inefficient Tipper closets like this c.1905 model from Walsall, were common in parts of the West Midlands. Tipper WC by James Duckett of Burnley, Lancashire.

World War, many women were coping with conditions and using technology that would not have been out of place a hundred years earlier.

The reports of Medical Officers of Health from the 1860s exposed the poor state of much working-class accommodation: overcrowded and often damp, houses were often lacking the two most basic of amenities identified by Edwin Chadwick (1800–1890), the great sanitary reformer, a generation earlier – piped water and adequate drainage. Crowded courts, back-to-backs, straggling rows of jerry-built terraces and small cottages typified much working-class housing across the region in the late nineteenth century.

Water Supply

Piped water had reached most English towns and cities in the mid-nineteenth century: Birmingham was early with a private company supplying water from 1831. In Wolverhampton and Willenhall, for example, private water companies were established in 1852.

But the provision of mains water to working-class housing across the region long remained inadequate. Supplies were sometimes intermittent and usually stopped short of individual houses, forcing families to share a communal pump or stand pipe. The absence of water in the home was a major restriction for women needing water for washing people and things, cooking and filling the tea kettle.

The WC

Toilet provision was another area where a huge gap existed between technological progress and reality for many working families across the region. Between the late 1870s and the mid-1880s, sanitary ware manufacturers perfected the modern all-ceramic pedestal water closet; but this was of little relevance to most working-class families who continued to rely on more primitive arrangements. The ancient privy midden consisting of a wooden seat over a pit that received the raw sewage remained common. Although from the 1860s, local sanitary authorities introduced first introduced ash closets and then the pail system, both of which involved the regular emptying of the facility.

Birmingham introduced the pail system in 1874 and by 1884 had 37,361 pails (or pans) in use but in that year it was estimated there were no more than 10,000 WCs in use in the Borough. Many sanitary reformers regarded the privy system in any form as inadequate and gradually the use of water closets was extended.

But the primitive WCs installed in working-class homes in the region – the inefficient hopper closet and the tipper closet – both of which were flushed with waste water – were difficult to keep clean; moreover they remained back yard closets which usually had to be shared. As late as the early 1920s in Dudley, the Medical Officer for Health discovered a court in the town where just one working WC was used by 63 people and could only be flushed by carrying water from a stand pipe in the yard.

Cooking

For most women, cooking was a major responsibility. As many women were involved in some sort of employment, hot meals often consisted of stews such as the famous Black Country dish, ‘groaty pudding’, which could be left to simmer in the pot whilst the entire family was at work. Meals were cooked over the kitchen range that was the centre of the home – a cooking appliance but also a source of warmth, comfort and light.

The kitchen range – a coal-burning grate flanked by a cast-iron oven and sometimes a hot water boiler – had not changed much since John Farey (1766–1826) had reported their use in Derbyshire in the 1770s. For many women they were a source of pride but also of hard work: managing the fire – even finding small quantities of coal – removing the ash and polishing with black lead paste were unavoidable and repetitive tasks.

Cooking by gas offered a labour-saving alternative. The technology was in place by the mid-1870s but remained beyond the means of all but a few. But in the late 1870s, the gas companies – keen to find new business – joined forces with the manufacturers such as John Wright of Birmingham to promote the use of gas cookers.

Exhibitions were staged – an early one was held in the Town Hall in Birmingham in 1878 and another was held shortly afterwards in Wolverhampton – to convince an initially sceptical public that cooking by gas offered substantial advantages over the coal-burning range, especially in saving time and labour. A further incentive was the offer of gas cookers on affordable rates of hire and then in 1887 a Tipton man, Rowland William Brownhill (1834–1895), invented the first penny-in-the-slot gas meter. A penny’s worth of gas was enough to cook a meal and enabled low-income families to buy gas within a small weekly budget.

Soon manufacturers such as Cannon of Deepfields, Bilston, who turned to the manufacture of gas cookers in 1894, added cheap and affordable penny-in-the-slot models to their range. In Walsall by 1909, the cheapest gas cookers hired from the Council were fitted free with rents starting at 1/- (5 p) per quarter and penny-in-the-slot cookers were fitted for free. Like the coal-burning ranges, the cookers were made of black cast-iron and still required polishing with black lead but the instantaneous heat was a great attraction and the gas cooker was rapidly adopted from the 1890s at all social levels.

A second generation of lightweight enamelled steel cookers from the early 1920s, furnished with a thermostatic valve, enabled busy housewives and mothers to turn the knob to the appropriate ‘gas mark’ and then leave the cooker to do the rest. By 1939 it was estimated that 90 percent of British households cooked by gas.

Washing and Ironing

Doing the weekly wash was another repetitive task done without any mechanical aid. Pounding the washing in the 'maiden' or dolly tub with the dolly stick was hard physical work and the rinsing, starching and wringing of the clothes would take all day. In Birmingham and the Black Country, laundering usually took place in a separate brew house – or brew'us which contained a cast-iron boiler set in brickwork.

The lighting of the boiler early in the morning was one domestic task traditionally assigned to men. Many working-class women had to share this facility with their neighbours. It remained the usual method of washing clothes throughout this period – few would be able to consider spending ten guineas on the hand-operated mechanical washing machines advertised in the 1920s and 1930s – and women recounted how important it was to leave the brew house spotlessly clean once they had finished their wash: reputations depended on it.

As the name implies, the brew house had once been the place of brewing and there were isolated examples in the region of this practice surviving into the early 1900s along with the baking of bread; then once a year the wash boiler was used for boiling the Christmas pudding.

Washing was followed by ironing which could take another day. Flat or 'sad' irons of solid cast-iron were heated on the range and used in turn. Many bore the names of their makers in Wolverhampton, West Bromwich or Birmingham. From the 1870s and 1880s, laundry irons heated by charcoal or gas were introduced and gas irons enjoyed some limited use in the early twentieth century.

Lighting

Women were also kept busy trimming the wicks of candles and paraffin lamps. Elihu Burritt, the American Consul in Birmingham, described a scene of 'illuminated darkness' when he entered a cottage below Dudley Castle in 1868 lit by two small yellow candles. Paraffin lamps were introduced from the 1860s and, thanks to cheap American oil, these became common from the 1870s.

Gas was little used until the advent of the brighter incandescent mantle in the 1890s and in some of the crowded courts of Birmingham, the inhabitants shared the light of a single gas lamp fixed to a bracket in the yard. Electric lighting was available by the early 1900s but remained rare before the 1930s and none of Birmingham's shared courtyards were lit by electricity before 1939.

Electricity

The revolution in household technology continued after the First World War, assisted by the building of the first council homes in the region from 1919 and the creation of the National Grid in 1926, which furthered the spread of electricity. Council house



Left: Cooking by gas encouraged the adoption of lightweight enamelled cookware. 'Judge Ware' kettle made by Ernest Stevens of Cradley Heath, 1936.



The 'Combination Grate' with its open fire and oven was popular in both council and privately-built homes; tiled surfaces were easier to keep clean. This model was manufactured by the Triplex Foundry Co. in Great Bridge, c.1932.

construction in the 1920s set new standards of domestic comfort and convenience with indoor WCs and bathrooms and incandescent gas lighting; the coal-burning range remained the usual fixture for cooking although a back boiler introduced the convenience of running hot water in the home.

In the 1930s gas lighting gave way to the electric light and many women were keen to save the few shillings to purchase an electric iron and consign the sad irons to use as door stops. As early as 1923, the Electricity Supply Department of Walsall Council was hiring out electric cookers for 7/6 (37.5 p) per quarter although it is doubtful if many working-class families seriously considered this option before 1939.

Council house building, however, was limited in its impact and progressed slowly in some boroughs. In 1939, many working-class families continued to occupy older properties where the introduction of new labour-saving technologies had to wait until the 1950s and 1960s when a new wave of electrical consumer goods was to render the kitchen range and brew house obsolete.

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Further Reading

George Barnsby, *Social Conditions in the Black Country 1800-1900* (Integrated Publishing Services, 1980).

David J. Eveleigh, *Bogs, Baths & Basins. The Story of Domestic Sanitation* (Sutton, 2002).

Francis Goodall, *Burning to Serve. Selling Gas in the Competitive Markets* (Landmark Publishing, 1999).

Chris Upton, *Living Back to Back* (Phillimore, 2005).

For more on the collections at the Black Country Living Museum visit www.bclm.co.uk

View the History West Midlands film about Elihu Burritt at www.historywm.com