

FLUSHED AWAY



DOWN THE PAN: A splendid example of Victorian loos in Rothesay on the Isle of Bute, above, while a former public toilet has been converted into a sandwich bar in central London, right

If a civilised country is measured by its number of public toilets, what does that say about Britain where nearly 2,000 have been closed in a decade?

By Neil Clark

PUBLIC toilets are disappearing across Britain. Over the past decade a staggering 1,782 toilets have closed, according to the latest research. In a city as big as Newcastle, home to nearly 300,000 people, there are now no council-run public toilets. In Manchester (population 514,000), there is just one remaining public convenience. Of the toilets that remain, many have been "outsourced" to private companies, with some charging as much as 50p for entry. In large parts of the country, spending a penny has never been so expensive. How can we account for the demise of the once ubiquitous public loo? Cuts in local authority spending is given as the main reason for closures. Councils are under no statutory obligation to provide lavatories and so often they are the first things to be cut. Spending on public toilets has fallen by a third since 2012. In March the Isle of Wight council said they would no longer be funding public toilets. In quite a few cases conveniences have been sold for redevelopment. In Edinburgh the council closed 10 toilets earlier this year, with officials saying that they could be converted into cafes. In Reading a disused public toilet, sold for £80,000, was converted into a £1,300 a month one-bedroom flat. In Foley Street in Fitzrovia, London, a Victorian lavatory has been transformed into a coffee shop and café, appropriately entitled 'The

Attendant, while the site of a former public toilet near London Bridge has been transformed into a Michelin-starred eatery called Restaurant Story. Rather than provide their own toilets, some authorities have instead opted to pay pubs, cafes and coffee shops to allow the public to use their facilities, free of charge, under the so-called Community Toilet Scheme. But is this really a good alternative? "Using private facilities can be awkward," says Dr Clara Greed, Professor of Urban Planning at the University of the West of England, Bristol. "It's sometimes not clear whether the public can use the toilets and there can be misunderstandings. Women with young children may not feel comfortable

going into pubs to use the toilets. And people may still feel under an obligation to buy something." Professor Greed believes that the reduction in council provision is "incredibly short-sighted". "I call public toilets the missing link. They help create accessible towns and city centres and benefit local economies by drawing people in. With an ageing population and increased numbers of tourists we need more public toilets, not less." In 2008 a House of Commons report highlighted the costs to society of inadequate public toilet provision. "A lack of public toilets results in certain groups feeling anxious about going out. Older people do not readily leave home without the reassurance that they will have access to public toilets, which can lead to ill-health, with consequent burdens on the NHS." Despite the 2008 report things

have only got worse. In the early 1960s there were 15,000 public toilets in Britain. By 2009 the number had fallen to just 4,000. To reverse the decline, Professor Greed believes that councils should be legally required to provide conveniences and also that attendants should be employed to look after them. There was a time, not so long ago, when Britain could pride itself on its municipal toilet provision. The first public convenience opened in front of the Royal Exchange in London in 1855. The growth in public conveniences played an important part in improving public health. "When new towns were being planned after World War Two, public toilet provision was deemed very important - along with libraries, parks, swimming pools, and community halls," Professor Greed says. "No one said then we couldn't afford them. But now we're witnessing the privatisation of the public space." Many would argue that adequate provision of free, clean, easily accessible public loos is a hallmark of a civilised society. The new data tells us that unfortunately Britain is failing this test. "I have always said that you can tell a nation by its toilets," says Professor Greed. "They are a basic human necessity." Few who have been "caught short" in a town or city in the UK without a public convenience in sight, would disagree.

YOU HAVE TO SPEND MORE THAN A PENNY THESE DAYS

- 2theloo, Covent Garden Shopping Centre, London - £1**
London's Victoria railway station - 50p
- Westminster Abbey - 50p**
Leeds railway station - 40p
- Cleethorpes Boating Lake - 30p**
Grimsby Market Hall - 30p
- Market St, Llangollen - 30p**
Park St car park, Cambridge - 20p
- Royal Parks (including Hyde Park) - 20p**
Minions Toilets, Cornwall - 20p
- Trafalgar Square - 20p**
London's Cannon Street railway station - free



Pictures: ALAMY; GETTY

AND THEY ARE NOT THE ONLY HIGH STREET LANDMARKS WHICH ARE DISAPPEARING...

POST OFFICES
The first general post office in Britain opened in London in the 17th century. "Until August 1914, a sensible, law abiding Englishman could pass through life and hardly notice the existence of the state beyond the post office and the policeman," noted AJP Taylor in his book *English History 1914-1945*. But noticing and being able to use the services of a Post Office is not as easy as it once was. In 1968 there were about 25,000 of them in Britain - now the number has dropped to 11,500.

PUBS
The decline of the great British public house continues at an alarming rate. According to latest figures, each day four pubs in Britain call last orders for the final time. High taxes on beer, the widespread availability of cheaper supermarket alcohol and the ban on smoking in enclosed public places have been blamed for the high number of closures. In 2006, the last year before the smoking ban was introduced in England, there were 58,200 pubs but by 2013 they were down to 48,000.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES
Local council spending cuts have seen scores of libraries close throughout Britain in recent years. An investigation by the BBC in March revealed that since 2010, 343 public libraries have closed with a further 111 earmarked for closure this year. In 1970 there were more than 10,000 full-time or part-time libraries - today the number has fallen to 3,765. Children's author and library campaigner Alan Gibbons says that public libraries currently face "the greatest crisis" in their history.

LOCAL BANK BRANCHES
The local bank, with its Captain Mainwaring-style manager, was once a feature of British life. But in the past 12 months more than 600 bank branches have closed across Britain - with Wales, Scotland and the west of England the worst hit. Over the past decade about 3,000 branches have shut their doors for the final time, meaning people having to travel longer distances to do their banking. Last year it was predicted by consultant McKinsey that a further 2,400 branches would be closed in the next five years, bringing the number of bank branches in the UK down to below 7,500.

expressyourself Get the life you want

I quit the rat race to cycle 7,500 miles across Africa

AS A wild bull elephant charged out of the Zambian bush straight at her bike, Alice Morrison started peddling furiously and prepared for the worst. "It was so close and so big that I could feel the vibrations from its feet hitting the ground," says Alice. "Elephants can reach speeds of up to 30mph but I certainly can't, even on two wheels."

"And with those tusks I thought I was done for." Luckily for Alice the elephant tired after a few minutes. With her nerves and muscles shredded and sweat pouring down her face, a traumatised Alice rejoined the rest of her cycling group.

"My heart was pounding and I cursed myself, thinking that if I'd have stayed at home as my friends and family told me I should, I could have been enjoying a nice cup of tea."

Yet Alice, now 53, was a long way from her kettle. Having left her home, her beloved cats and a job as a high-flying chief executive of a media company in Edinburgh, Alice was several thousand miles into the Tour d'Afrique, the longest bike race in the world.

An eye-watering 7,500 miles in total, the annual event begins in Cairo each January and ends in Cape Town in May. Along the way contestants, who enter from all over the world, pass through 10 countries including Sudan, Kenya, Malawi and Botswana.

"It was the rains in Tanzania that brought me to my knees," says Alice, who started her mammoth journey along with 62 others in January 2011. "Drenched to the skin we rode through mud so thick that our bikes clogged up completely and we had to wash them in the river."

"At night we'd dig trenches around our tents so water didn't run into them. There was something rather magical about it though, being covered head to toe in gloopy red mud. It was like being a child again."

When Alice revealed her plans to cycle across Africa on two wheels to her mother Fredi, she thought her daughter had lost her mind. "Her first response was, 'You have left a great job in the middle of a recession to head off on a ridiculous fantasy?'" says Alice, who is the first to admit that she wasn't exactly in the best shape when she undertook such a gruelling

When **ALICE MORRISON** embarked on an epic four-month bike race, her friends thought she was crazy. She tells us why she hopes her adventure will inspire others to follow in her footsteps



NEVER GIVE UP: Alice on her bike, top, and one of the campsites she stayed in while in Sudan, above

challenge. "When the recession hit the cuts and redundancies had left my company in turmoil." Looking for a way to escape and wanting a new challenge she signed up for the Tour d'Afrique after hearing about it through a friend. "I was unfit and a bit of a softie but I thought I could do it if I put my mind to it," she says. "I foolishly believed that all I needed



was a bit of good, old-fashioned British grit. Plus I didn't have children or a partner so had nothing tying me down." Alice started training three months before the race start date. "The only cycling I'd done was in my front room on my exercise bike while watching Strictly Come Dancing," she says.

EXERCISING five times a week, including running and cycling, Alice slowly built up her endurance. The first leg of the race from Cairo to Sudan is considered to be the easiest section but Alice struggled from the start. "Setting off from the pyramids and heading past the Red Sea and River Nile, I knew I had to stay with the pack if I stood any chance of completing the distance I needed to cover each day. "If I dropped back, I wouldn't make it but cycling for six hours each day was tough. You have to

stop yourself thinking, 'I can't do this' and 'I can't cope'. I had thousands of miles still to go. "I took it minute by minute which helped me endure the pain." And endure it she did. Despite the 51 degree heat in the Sudanese desert, the gut-wrenching tummy bugs in Botswana and the back-breaking black lava rocks she had to pedal over in Kenya, Alice was determined to finish the race. Alice winces as she lists her injuries: saddle sores, blisters and grazed knees and elbows from falling off her bike. Another low point came when children started throwing rocks at her in rural Ethiopia. "I was cycling downhill when a stone thwacked into my side, and then another one. I was so shocked I didn't know what to do," says Alice. "It happened several times after that, which we all found hard to deal with." Luckily the good moments outweighed the bad. Alice remembers one night in particular when a local politician came to meet them in their camp in Sudan. "He told us he was proud to have

us in his country and that he hoped one day he would see Sudanese women doing the same thing," says Alice. "It felt great to be given that kind of praise and encouragement and seeing how hot and tired we were, he brought two big boxes filled with cold juice and soft drinks." Throughout her journey Alice's teammates provided the support she needed to keep going. "In Sudan I'd been cycling for 11 hours in the heat. When I made it into camp, the last one to get there, everyone cheered," she says. "Someone had put up a tent for me, another gave me soup and a third handed me a glass of cold water. They became my family and the sense of camaraderie was incredible."

FOUR months after they had set off, the tour came to a close in Cape Town. "As we got into the city a whole hoard of skateboarders joined us to cross the finish line. It was like a festival. I was overjoyed and exhausted. I felt honoured to have taken part but felt an overwhelming sadness that my adventure was over." Corks popped and champagne flowed as Alice and her teammates were awarded their medals. "I walked up and bent my head to receive my medal as the applause rippled around me. My heart was close to bursting." As she boarded the plane to come home she was overcome with emotion. "I thought it would be Africa that made the biggest impact on me and it was certainly incredible. "But, more than anything, the memories I made with the other riders and that sense of camaraderie, of fighting spirit, of grit and human determination, left the biggest lasting impression. We arrived as strangers from different backgrounds but left as a family. And that I will never forget."

Alice, who now lives in Marrakech, in Morocco, and works as a writer, has well and truly caught the adventure bug. In 2014 she completed the Marathon des Sables, a six-day 155 mile ultramarathon across the Sahara desert and earlier this year she finished the Trans Atlas Marathon, running 180 miles across the Atlas Mountains. "I am not super fit and I often come last, which can be tough. But I am proof that anyone can do these amazing things. "You should never think, 'I'm too old, I'm too fat, I'm not good enough, I don't have time.' You can do anything if you really put your mind to it."

● To order *Dodging Elephants by Alice Morrison (£6.99)* visit amazon.co.uk

Interview by **HANNAH BRITT**