

## Using Your Head

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It's obviously time to ask for **the facilities**, the **lavatory** (or the abbreviated **lav**)—an old nineteenth-century word from the Latin *lavatorium*, “a place for washing.” Hoping to disguise your mission, you might request **the place where you cough** (c. 1920). Speaking more directly, the **shithouse** (19thC), the **can** (c. 1900), or the **head**. Why the **head**, when “tail” is more appropriate? It could be from the manner with which many relate to authority—a political statement of sorts. Or, as is more likely, from the location of the ship's **facilities**—in the “bulkhead.”

When all is said and done, most Americans need room to do it. Today's favorites include **wash-rooms** (c. 1878), **bath-rooms** (c. 1850s), from a time when the necessary fixtures joined the bath, and **powder-rooms**.<sup>1</sup> **The little girl's room** (c. 1940s) is still with us today, though its counterpart, **the little boy's room**, is seldom referred to. Dual-room names continue to dominate the landscape of restaurants nationwide: **His 'n' Hers**, **Gents and Ladies**, **Gulls and Buoys**, **Lads and Lassies**, and **Braves and Squaws** (Ugh!).

Many prefer the **restroom**. But if you asked for it in England, your hosts would likely point out the cloak-room or show you to the bedroom. Perhaps you thought yourself couth by not asking for the **toilet** (c. 1820s–30s), or one of its mutant off-spring the **toidy** or **toy-toy** (20thC), but the **toilet** still works fine there among the working-class. The **toilet** derives from the French **toilette**, the diminutive of **toile**, the cloth once covering the table on which sat one's preparations, making it all very acceptable.

### *Drop Everything*

The British middle-class, however, prefers the **loo** (early 20thC), though its origins remain somewhat of a mystery. Some think it derives from the cry “*Gardez l'eau!*” “Mind the water!”—a warning to look out below, supposedly from the days before modern plumbing when emptying chamber pots from upper-story buildings was a

*Stand clear, it's shorter than you think.*

*Ladies will please remove their hats during the performance.*

—*Wit and Wisdom from the W.C.*

