

Inland Waterways News

Portable toilets

Brian J Goggin

The focus on pump-outs and holding-tanks has distracted attention from simpler, cheaper alternatives. Les Bertram of **Leo Eile** wrote to say

Many boats on the inland waterways are not really suitable for fitting [holding-tanks] as the boats are too small. [...] In England the pump-out system [...] works well when they are pumped out once or twice a week. There are problems with them when they are left partly full or full for weeks on end as they will smell, and sediment collects in the bottom of the tank which can be difficult to get rid of. Refilling with water and pumping out several times will keep the tank clear but takes longer than the sixteen minutes or so given on the machines in Ireland. Using the sea toilet with a tank can also cause problems as these toilets use any amount of flushing water and without careful use can soon fill the tank. Special toilets that use very little water to flush can be expensive to buy and to repair. [...]

I've decided to go for a portable toilet, on the grounds that it's much cheaper and easier to install than a holding-tank system. For the moment, I've replaced just one of the sea-toilets: if it works out well, I'll replace the other.

Living with a portable

Here's Les Bertram again:

A portable toilet is mentioned hardly at all in this country but in my experience can be a lot more convenient and cleaner than a pump-out. They solve the problem on boats where there really is not the room to fit a decent size tank, and on boats that are not used all that often. Although it needs to be emptied more often it is often easier to carry the cassette to the disposal unit than try and get the boat alongside a pump-out. For the same reason it can be convenient for the live-aboard. [...] The only place I have seen portable disposal points is on the Shannon-Erne Waterway: they should be in all toilet blocks at least.

Colin Becker, just retired as IWAI President, wrote

Because of the problems with holding tank disposal, we decided to go the [portable toilet] route for the present. It actually works OK if you discipline the crew to use shore facilities whenever possible and you empty it regularly. It's not the most pleasant job but not that much of a chore either. Smells aren't an issue (other than the normal emanations from the users of that department) if you keep the chemicals topped up.

And Mike Kingston of **Galatea** said

They are much cheaper and easier to install than a holding tank system and as so many of the moorings now have shore toilet blocks we find it perfectly grand.

Practicability

Most of these portable toilets are in two parts: the top, which has the seat and contains water for flushing, and the base, which holds the waste. Different models have different sizes of base-

tanks, but most accounts suggest that a tank will serve four people for a weekend or two people for a week, especially if shore facilities are used as much as possible.

It is possible to buy a spare base-tank to allow for longer trips. Users suggest that the unit should not be allowed to get too full, as it may then become too heavy to carry easily. Two half-full tanks may be easier to cope with than one full tank.

At first, the idea of emptying after two days may seem off-putting, but in fact it probably fits well with the way people use their boats. If you've used it for a weekend, will you want to leave either a portable toilet or a holding-tank, wholly or partly full, until your next weekend on the boat? Emptying out a portable tank may even prove to be quicker and easier than pumping out a holding-tank.

A portable can be emptied into a shore toilet, but there are dedicated facilities, including provision for rinsing, in service blocks on the Erne and the Shannon-Erne Waterway and at Portumna Castle. Loos at public and private harbours should include such facilities.

Installation

I had three installation problems. First, I had to remove the old sea-toilet. While the unit itself had been serviced over the years, the bolts holding it to the floor were difficult to undo and it took hours to extract the pipes from their narrow holes and from awkward, confined spaces under the floor.

Second, the two sea-cocks had to be dealt with. Wiring them closed was an obvious first step, but what if they should fail? I took advice, which led me to attach new, clean pipes to the sea-cocks and lead them up the inside of the loo wall, to well above heeled water level (at least 250mm); I sealed their ends with wooden dowels and jubilee clips.

Third, I didn't want the portable toilet careering around the loo when the boat is hit by waves. The units don't have handles or anything that might allow them to be secured to the floor, so I screwed wooden blocks to the floor, with short planks attached, forming a box to keep the unit in place.

Use

Chemicals for portable toilets are available from caravan shops as well as from chandleries. There seem to be two kinds: traditional blue (with formaldehyde) and environmentally-friendly green.

There has been some concern about whether these additives might inhibit the proper operation of the sewage farms or other treatment plants into which the contents of portable toilets eventually flow. One advantage of a separate facility for emptying them is that the effluent could be handled separately. At present the use of portables is so low that there may be "more than enough sewage coming from other sources to keep things going," but I would welcome further information about this. I would also welcome information about the use of yeast tablets as an alternative.

Finally, as Mike Kingston put it

if your family and all their friends use the boat for a week-end make sure they empty it on pain of death by keel hauling.