

The majority of touring and motor caravans in Britain are fitted with Thetford toilets

Potty

training

Having recently returned from a product servicing course, **John Wickersham** advises how best to look after your caravan toilet

WE SHOULD be proud that the comforts of today's domestic sanitary conveniences are attributable to British pioneers such as Joseph Bramah (P Trap, 1778), John Shanks (WC Patent, 1864) and Thomas Crapper (flushing toilet cistern, 1876). Then, nearly 100 years later, the Sargent family of Thetford in Michigan stole our thunder in the complementary field of camping conveniences. Its 'Porta Potti' was launched in 1967.

A fixed version with an externally accessed 'cassette' holding tank was later launched at Earl's Court in November 1987. Thousands of flushes later, this American invention now graces touring and motor caravans worldwide. Although there are rival products, Thetford's toilets are top of the pots.

USER ADVICE

Of all the caravanning appliances I've installed and used, Thetford's toilets have been pleasingly reliable. Routine tasks like

cleaning are straightforward and repairs are seldom needed. Here are a few tips for users of Thetford toilets:

- Harsh, abrasive household products mustn't be used and I found from experience that Thetford Bathroom Cleaner (sometimes labelled Plastic Cleaner) is effective, easy to apply and leaves a good shine
- The opening blade in the bottom of the pan needs periodic attention to ensure it doesn't start sticking to the rubber gasket called the 'lip seal'
- Thetford strongly urges users never to lubricate the lip seal with oil, grease, or Vaseline. Either smear on olive oil or buy a can of Thetford Maintenance Spray for Toilet Seals
- Lubricate the release blade and leave it wide open when parking a caravan for extended spells – especially in winter. It then can't get stuck to the lip seal
- After emptying a cassette, add fresh water and gently swill it around before disposing of it. Some people shake >>



Regular maintenance is required to keep a caravan toilet clean and in good working order



Periodically lubricate the lip seal and closing blade as instructed by Thetford



Flush a cassette gently; never shake it vigorously because the float can get damaged



To empty some models, multiple flushes are needed. The last of the water can be collected like this



The magnet that operates the level gauge or the entire float can easily become detached



To replace this 'O' ring, detach the spout by lifting it when it's just over 180° from stowed position



To replace the 'O' ring on a blade control knob, withdraw it by depressing its lugs from inside



On a new bench-type toilet, the float assembly is mounted on the underside of the hatch itself



The rotating control which activates the opening blade is retained by two projecting lugs



On the new swivel bowl toilet, you can see and reach the float when the hatch is removed



On the underside of this swivel bowl hatch you can see all the blade-opening mechanism

cassettes with great zeal, not realising that this can detach its float mechanism

- During seasonal use, an emptied cassette should be filled with about one litre of fresh water before the addition of a treatment fluid. There's not space here, however, to compare additives
- Thetford recommends emptying flush water prior to journeys because it might leak through maintenance access points. When I explained that this is inconvenient, it was conceded that 2-3 litres of flush should be fine.
- Flush water emptying methods vary on different toilets and motor caravans often draw from the vehicle's fresh water tank for flushing. Some loos have spouts: others need repeated flushing into the cassette instead

SERVICE AND REPAIRS

Since it is Club policy not to encourage DIY repair work, these reports only focus on basic operations. Moreover, with the exception of the latest models, repairs on Thetford cassettes are not easy. Many tasks have to be carried out with a hand inside the container, and rely on touch, component knowledge and manual dexterity. Service specialists learn the techniques by practising on a dummy cut-away top panel complete with fittings. Take my word for it that fitting a new float mechanism is especially difficult whereas replacing 'O' rings is slightly easier.

But not all jobs are difficult. For instance, renewing a lip seal or replacing the 'O' ring on an emptying spout are

carried out without needing to insert your hand right inside the cassette.

Apart from replacing detached floats or their magnet which activates the fill-level indicator, most repairs involve the fitting of new 'O' rings. These prevent water seepage on moving parts, such as the rotating control that actuates the emptying blade.

As shown above, this control knob is held in the cassette by two projecting lugs. When they're depressed the knob can then be withdrawn from the cassette for 'O' ring replacement. However, to effect its removal you have to slide a hand inside the container to depress those two lugs. Dexterous hands are essential. In contrast, removing an emptying spout is a doddle. When the spout is turned to its release point, it can be eased upwards and detached.

NEW-GENERATION FIXED TOILETS

Recognising the difficulty of carrying out repairs like some of those described above, and the unpleasantness of 'hand in loo' operations, designers of the latest Thetford cassettes made radical changes. When these distinctively-coloured models appeared, I wasn't excited by either the wheels nor the telescopic handle. For most users, carrying a full cassette to an emptying point is hardly an imposition. But wait! I'd overlooked the access port on both the new bench type and swivel bowl models. Frankly, this is brilliant.

As the accompanying photographs show, the large circular 'lid' on top is

“The blade in the bottom of the pan needs periodic attention”

released when rotated to a certain position. To remain water-tight it fits tightly, of course, and it might help to use the lip seal's sliding cover in its groove to increase leverage when you're turning the lid. Persistence is then rewarded because its removal yields hitherto unenjoyed access.

Cleaning the inside is now easy, and you can also see and replace a damaged float. This large round lid is also the mounting base for the blade operating mechanism.

The upshot of this is a breakthrough in toilet design. Whether the new models' plastic mouldings are as robust as components on my caravan's bench-style toilet or my motor caravan's C-200 swivel-bowl throne have yet to be established. It's the cassettes' designs that impress me most.

So, whether you like a holding tank with wheels, or a pull-pole that over-zealous tuggers allegedly manage to detach, do be aware that repair work on this newly-designed cassette ought to be less costly. What's more, owners with DIY experience might decide to carry out more repairs themselves. ■