

INCONVENIENCE

STORIES FROM INSIDE
WATERSHED'S LOOS

ILLUSTRATION
ALEC STEVENS
WORDS JO KIMBER

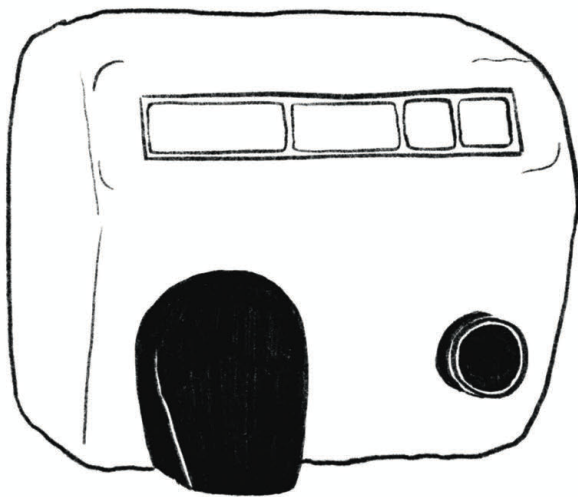
Everything you are about to read is true and I'll start with this: everybody goes to the toilet. This isn't the place to be shy about that; we're going to get into it all, this is a roll your sleeves up, very extra long marigolds up to the elbows kind of situation. I spent a lot of time undercover in the toilets at Watershed, which yes is weird but it was for research and I learned (and smelled) a lot.

There are a lot of noises in toilets: whispers and burps and yes really delicate farts and big performative show offy ones, and sniffles and tears and giggles and plops; the rush of water running competing with the hand dryer, strains followed by moans, followed by deep relieved sighs; the rustle of clothes being pulled down then up; toilet paper endlessly being rolled around a hand or folded neatly into two, ready for the wipe; tampons being ripped out of wrappers or sanitary towels unstuck from knickers; strategic coughs to try and hide exactly what it is that's going on inside.

Toilets for some of us are places of great unease: the fear of being heard, of creating a smell so bad people actually comment on it, out loud, disgusted, or of not having the right bag and so instead having to stuff your knickers with toilet roll so you don't get your period everywhere. Or not having a body that is conducive with the space with low seats that makes the pain worse and adds to an already plethora of discomfort. Or not actually thinking you should be in that space, faced with a toilet that isn't available right now and told in no uncertain terms to just go somewhere else. Personally, I have a deep rooted crippling anxiety of toilets that flush automatically, they always seem ready to go before I am, then I'm stuck with 'damp bum' and no matter how much toilet paper I throw at it, it never feels completely dry.

But I like toilets. I like how awkward they can be and how awkward us humans can be in them. For clarity, toilets are being awkward when they won't flush the gigantic poo you've just deposited. A helpful hint I recently learned about the two flush poo rule, which is a must for public toilets (such tight pipes) where you do a little cheeky flush halfway through and then keep going, therefore not having to violate any toilet brushes or godforbid get a member of staff and tell them what you've done. I like listening to the choir of sounds they and their users make, childish melodies punctuated by the occasional wet fart and streams of pee that hit each toilet bowl at different speeds, like the woodwind and string sections of an orchestra trying to outdo one another.





I love the moment when someone realises they might have finished what they were doing before the person they came in with has finished what they were doing, which is probably (and let's get this out of the way at the beginning) a poo, or a wee, or bog bingo: a very celebrated both. Do you wait for them? Or do you slip out without saying anything? Perhaps they are already outside, wondering where the hell you are? Next time you're in the toilet I implore you to listen out for this: a drama so real, it's better than telly. The best thing is when they speak, a frantic, 'oh my god, Brenda.... are you still in here?' or a bolder, more passive aggressive, 'We're running late. I'm waiting outside'. Note the absence of a name here but don't be deceived, they know who they are. When a reply does come, I can always tell the difference between someone who is still mid-poo and someone who is aimlessly scrolling through twitter without a care in the world #whenelsedoihavetimeforthat

And once you've waded through the noise and social disquiet, I recommend allowing yourself a moment, just one little moment to fully appreciate that the seat you're warming or have warmed or may warm at some point, exists. There really aren't many in Bristol centre. Public toilets are a breather; they are places we seek out that mean we don't have to stay tethered to the safe boundary line of, 'but will we make it home in time'? They are freedom, giving us privacy to do what we gotta do when we're out and about. This zine is a celebration and acknowledgement of that.

We hope you enjoy the stories of the people who use the loo at Watershed; a place you'll always be welcome to visit even if the only thing you need to do when you get there is an emergency poo.



Colin works as the Security Guard at Watershed most nights. He'll have held the door open for you and wished you a good evening on your way in and probably on your way out too. He does this for everyone, it's all part of the service. We wanted to know if he had any stories about the toilets at Watershed and we were under no illusions that some of them might not be very nice.

Colin knows most of the homeless folk who frequent the walkway outside of Watershed. He says, 'they have a wee, sometimes a wash and sometimes, something else. The access toilet is left in a right state. Recently, two girls came in all fine and dandy but one of them did a runner, leaving her mate to get a lift to hospital via a blue light taxi; there was evidence they'd done drugs.' Have you seen the yellow box in this toilet? Perhaps you chose to ignore it or that that's an odd thing to be in the accessible toilet next to cinema one. It's a sharps bin by the way, a specially designed box with a lid that is a safe place for people to dispose of needles.

Colin also told us about a man who once fell asleep whilst on the toilet at Watershed. He gave him the tried and tested, 'Time to go fella', but it didn't work so Colin had to give him a poke with a broom handle, gently of course, whilst leaning precariously over the top of the cubicle.

There are other stories and Colin said that sometimes it's more horror than humour. Not that many people would notice because of the cleaners, the front of house staff, the person that orders the loo roll, the one who deals with a blocked urinal by removing a hairball of pubes, everyone who clears up the sick and knocks gently on the cubicle door because they can hear someone crying, the guy who checks each cubicle each night to make sure no-one is left behind. We asked Colin if he ever felt like the gatekeeper of the toilets and, slightly offended, he said, 'no, as public, well that means all, doesn't it.'

SPY GAME

I have an unpredictable stomach and as much as I try to plan around it, it's often not an option and I have to sprint to wherever is nearest when my tummy is uneasy. That is often Watershed.

For a long time I didn't know they were public, so I've always sneaked in, which as you can imagine when you're on the brink of ruining your trousers is no easy feat. I always pause just outside, take a breath and assess the situation, channelling my extensive spy training (I've watched at least two of the Bourne films).

When you get past the box office or security, it's straight up the stairs, take a left and hope a film hasn't just finished, though I do know about the secret toilets on the other side of the bar now. Once I used the side automatic door, thinking I was clever, trying to stay low and avoid eye contact. It was absolutely pointless. At least two members of staff said hello to me and hoped I had a nice day.



BRINGING UP BABY

When my daughter was a baby, I took her to cinebabies, the weekly parent and baby cinema screening at Watershed. After the film had finished, I realised I needed to change her nappy, immediately. We went to the accessible toilet with the fold down baby changing table.

It was at this point I found what can only be described as an 'apoocalypse.' It was awful. My child was literally covered in their own poo and wriggling around quite happily in it. The speedy nappy change turned into an entire outfit and full body wash, I believe there were moments when we both cried.

Other parents had also started knocking on the door, asking if we were ok. We were not ok. I laugh about it now but will never forget, and I often remind my daughter when we visit Watershed, the time she exploded in cinema 3.



DATE MOVIE

Watershed is one of my favourite places in Bristol for a date. Definitely not a first date, unless you skip the cinema because first dates are definitely for sussing out if you want to sit next to someone for two hours in a dark room whilst watching a french film about sex.

Watershed is also the only place where I have gone to the toilet with a first date and done a wee in the cubicle next to them. I don't know what they were doing; I was actively trying not to listen.

Have you ever done a wee before next to someone with whom you were on a date? It's a whole new experience. I think it was perhaps the quietest wee that I've ever done, but I was concentrating so hard on regulating my stream and aim that I couldn't control the very loud fart that just popped out like an encore at the end. My date laughed. We are still together.



QUICK CHANGE

When I worked at Watershed many moons ago, the toilets were our changing room. We would work at Watershed during the day, and then at the end of our shift, go into the toilets to change into our “going out” clothes.

There were always other people doing this too who didn't work at Watershed, especially at the weekend. People who for one reason or another didn't feel like they could do that at home. It was like stars in their eyes, people would enter the cubicle as a boring office worker and come out looking stunning, ready for the night.

Often our “going out” would mean going straight back into the Watershed bar. There would always be a birthday or a leaving do or some loose pretence of a reason to gather together.

Even now, years later, I still think of that time whenever I use the Watershed toilets, and of past colleagues and people I stood next to in those mirrors.



CAUSE FOR ALARM

This story is about poo and if you haven't got the stomach for it, I'd advise skipping on to the next one. I used to work at Watershed and there was a surprising amount of poo. Nearly every weekend someone would come in and do a poo so enormous, staff would spend the rest of the weekend poking it with the poo stick (real) so that by Sunday it would be broken up enough to flush.

But this is about smells and the hidden toilets at the back of cinema 3 and cinema 1. Toilets that for a long time only staff really knew about. Where they could spend time uninterrupted, alone with their bowels.

Where a member of staff did a poo so powerful that when combined with lynx africa they sprayed to mask the smell it set the fire alarm off. As soon as I entered the toilet to check for fire, I knew what had happened. Over four hundred people had to be evacuated that afternoon and the smell lingered for hours. Even now, years later, the sign is still there, quickly printed out in the front of house office - please, don't spray aerosols.



THE CRYING GAME



I'd had a pretty rubbish and very stressful day and felt quite tearful. My back felt tense as I was holding so much stress there and in my face. I really didn't want to meet my friend in the Watershed cafe. I just wanted to go home and be on my own, locked away in the safety of my bedroom.

I looked in the mirror: looking back was a tired, bloated face, it made me feel so sad. Then I saw the basket of nice coloured tampons and sanitary towels. I considered stealing some, which felt like stealing because I wasn't even on my period. At that moment, I just felt like the universe owed me something. I wanted to take a lilac pad and a pastel lime green tampon, shove them in my bag and just run.

I finally went into the toilet cubicle. I love sitting on the toilet, it really is my favourite place to have a think. I thought there's actually some terrible things happening in this country and in the world right now, but a simple gesture like making someone feel welcome in a toilet and putting out a basket of (not even the cheapest) sanitary products helps; it gives me hope. I had a little cry and left all the tampons and sanitary pads there, for someone who actually needs them.

A QUIET PLACE

Sometimes it is just nice to have a moment to yourself, to lock the cubicle door and to sit down. Quite often, I don't even need the toilet, so I put the loo seat down and lean back, even daring to shut my eyes for a blissful minute.

I think about my husband in the cafe/bar trying to negotiate a bit of quiet with our young energetic incredibly loud children with only chicken goujons and fries as bargaining tools. I don't feel guilty.

People rarely talk in toilets, if they do, they are so embarrassed by the sound of their voice that they rush or whisper so quietly that, well don't even bother trying to hear. It's one of the few places people really try hard not to make noise. We come to Watershed nearly every weekend for lunch and I love it.

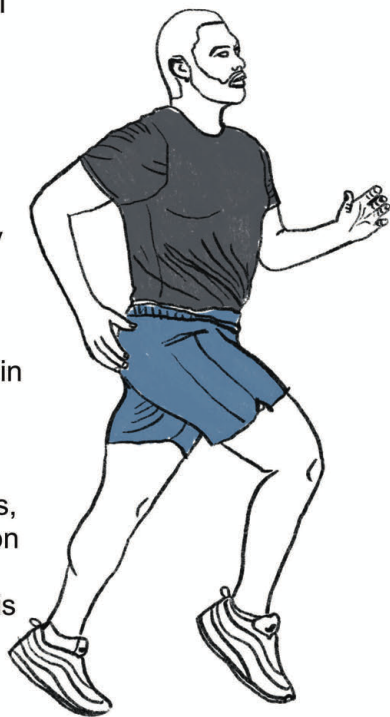


THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG DISTANCE RUNNER

I was on my regular run one evening around the harbourside and started to need the toilet, while still being quite a long way from home. As usual I had very little with me, just my phone, some headphones and I definitely wasn't dressed for the pub.

I weighed up my options, as panic started to set in. I didn't want to do a Paula and had to keep moving, else I'd start to get cold and it was really starting to get dark. I didn't have the app set up on my phone so I could pay with it, so I couldn't even buy something to avoid the awkwardness and potential rejection of asking to use the toilet in one of the many bars on the waterfront.

I decided Watershed was my best option, so I braved it and the staff were welcoming as always, showing me where the toilets were as the location had changed due to the renovations. I'm so glad they are considered public because there really is nowhere else to go in the city centre.

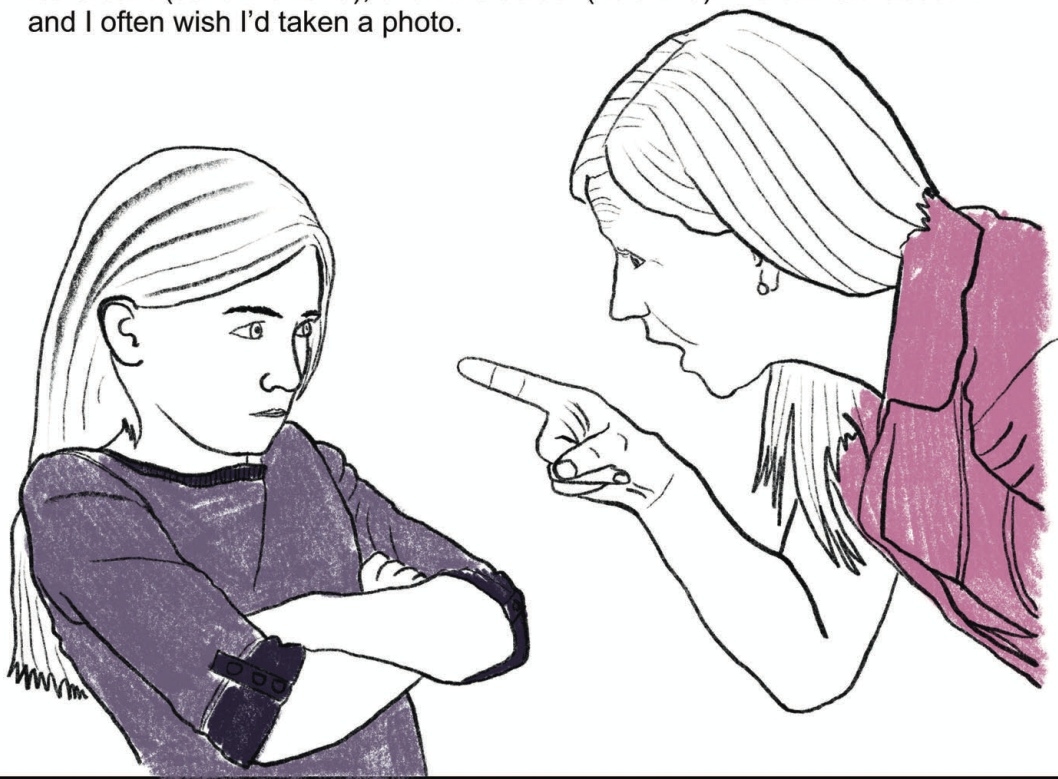


The PARENT TRAP!

The toilets at Watershed have been both a place of sanctuary and great trauma, usually at the same time. I remember vividly working on a freelance job too soon after I'd had my second baby and I had to go to the loo to express my breast milk by hand. My boobs were so sore and painful, I cried the whole time. I still shudder and feel queasy every time I go near that cubicle and if there's a queue, even if I'm desperate, I'll wait until another cubicle is free.

But now my kids are older I know they can always hold it until we get to Watershed, even if we're not actually going to Watershed. It's our marker as a family, although we haven't always fully made it to the top foyer.

Once when I was swinging one child over the toilet by his armpits in complete panic mode, the other did a poo right on the floor, it looked exactly like a 99 ice-cream (sans the flake), even the colour (he's fine). We still talk about it and I often wish I'd taken a photo.



THE HURT LOCKER

I have IBS and as a younger woman, it's often awkward and embarrassing to suddenly, very definitely, **NEED** the loo. There usually isn't a lot of time and it's a, this really needs to happen in the next couple of minutes kind of situation.

When I've been at Watershed, I've never felt judged, questioned, or made to feel unwelcome, especially when I've had to make a run for it and go for what my friends call, some dedicated toilet time.

The worst is when you don't have enough time to check if there is toilet paper or not but if you knock, a gentle little tap on the cubicle next door, before you even have to ask a hand usually appears with a big generous wad of loo roll, enough to see you and the next person through.



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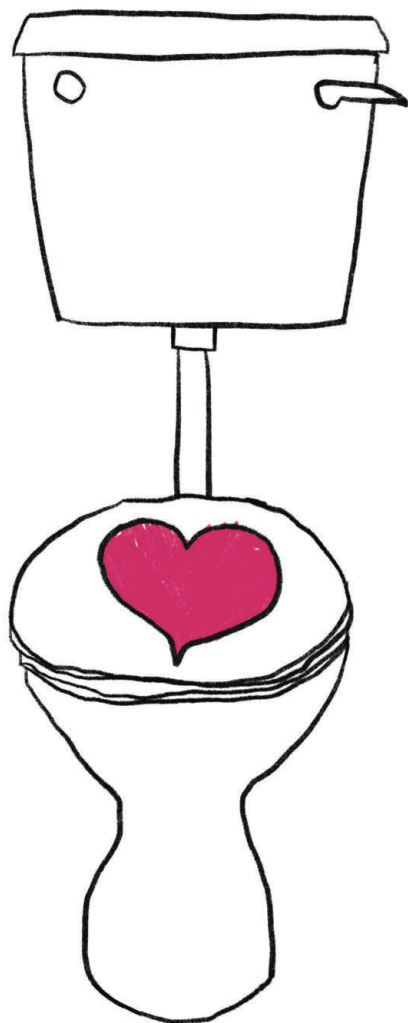
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FAVOURITE

I have a favourite toilet at the Watershed, top foyer, ladies, first cubicle. I've tried and I can't go anywhere else in the building. My friend says you should never go in the first cubicle of a public toilet, it's known as the desperate toilet, covered in pee dribbles, skid marks and shame.

I don't care. It's always been the cubicle for me and I've been relentlessly loyal for over twelve years, ever since I stumbled through the Watershed doors after a boozy night out, in need of relief. We've been best friends ever since. I also think because everyone thinks that about the first cubicle, it's actually the second one you've got to avoid.

I even 'popped' in to say goodbye before the renovations. I'm neurodiverse and get attached to things. They feel very safe to me. I know it sounds silly but I've always been like this. My mum says when I was a kid I'd only ever go to the toilet at home, so this is definitely progress.

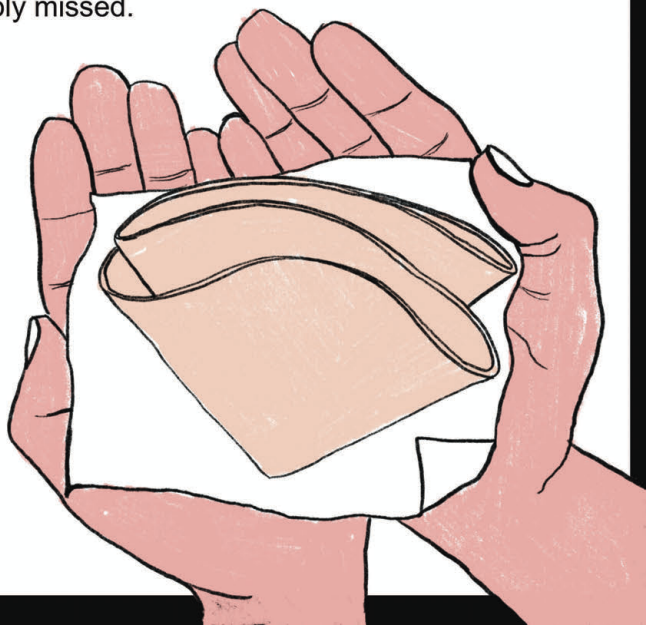


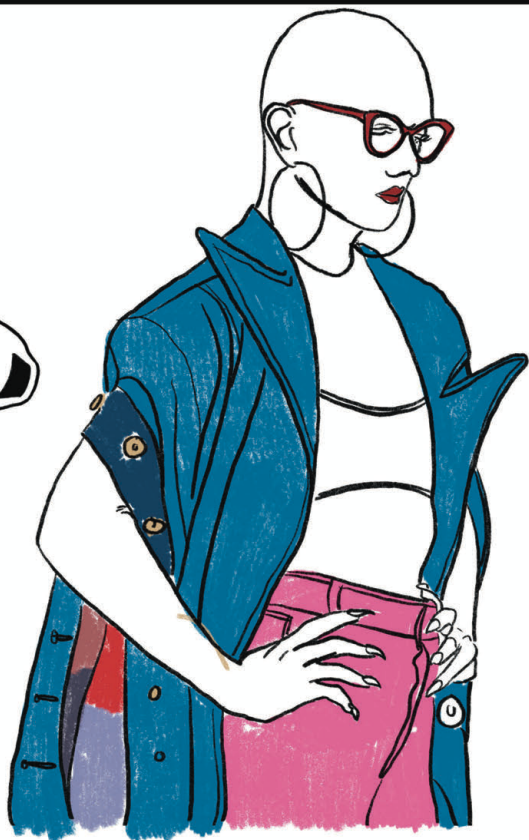
FRANK

Frank was proper Bristol, someone said he'd worked on the docks before they'd done up the Harbourside. I don't know if that's true. I don't know how long he'd been coming in but we always worried when he didn't.

Frank and his friend would sit in the cafe and share a pot of tea, at least three mornings a week. The way to know if Frank liked you was if he bought you a slice of meat. He'd deliver each slice carefully wrapped in tissue paper, sliding them across the box office individually. Even the vegetarians couldn't say no, not to Frank. I don't think anyone ever ate the meat or maybe someone took it home for their dog. I like to think it didn't go to waste.

It was clear Frank was getting sick. He'd spend a lot of time in the toilets at Watershed, sometimes accidentally pulling out his catheter, bloodied piss spraying everywhere. But someone would always be there to help him; someone would always clean it up. When he died, we had a whip round and sent his wife flowers, writing in the card that both he and his meat slices were quite frankly already terribly missed.





Watershed's toilets are the reward at the end of Bristol's Pride march, people draped in rainbow-covered everything pile in, desperate for a wee after some rare daytime drinking.

A friend told me it was the first time they'd ever seen an inclusive loo. They are non-binary and posted about it on instagram. This was years ago.

Another friend told me once they got stuck outside the gents and ladies, too afraid to pick. A member of staff discreetly let them know about the all gender option slightly further up. It wasn't awkward; it was one of the most positive toilet experiences they'd ever had.

Someone told a friend of a friend that years ago the toilets were a good place for cruising.

My friend said it's where they got changed before they went out because they didn't want their parents to know that they wore dresses. It was great because someone always offered to help them with their makeup or lend a lipstick or just confirm, 'you know what? Your absolutely beautiful hun.'

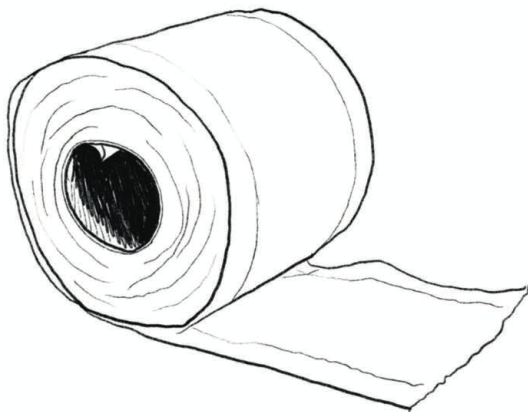
End credits

Why does no one ever go to the loo in a film? If films are a reflection of society and the world then everyone must be incredibly dehydrated and constipated. Except we're not; we're pooping and peeing everywhere, people are pooping and peeing right now, for all we know you are and I hope you feel seen.

Maybe you just finished watching a film at Watershed and you managed to hold it in for the whole film and now you're having one of the most glorious wees of your life. I think we should campaign for a button in the new toilets that when you press it, the landing on time trumpet jingle at the end of a Ryanair flight plays, but it sounds a lot more queer and French. I like to think that people would clap. Not everyone has the pelvic muscles to make that - it really deserves applause.

I like how people don't go to the toilet in films, it's the ultimate escapism because reality is very different. It's an interruption, an inconvenience, this constant human need to have to keep going to the toilet. It's boring and disgusting and funny and loud and painful and political and full of ritual and a bunch of other things. But don't you just love that friend you see right after who whispers like an accomplice, 'number one or number two?' And if it's number two, there's always a nod of admiration, especially as you get older.

To most, Watershed is a cinema but to some it is just and will only ever be a place they come into to use the toilet and that's absolutely ok. And now there are new toilets to enjoy, ones with carefully considered design, posh heavy wooden doors, colours that pop, sinks at kid height! Sinks in the cubicle, grab bars for those who need them. They're beautiful and ready to be used and we're only asking one thing of you, please, don't forget to flush.



Inconvenience - Stories from inside Watershed's loos has been produced by Alec Stevens and Jo Kimber. Alec and Jo first met at Watershed where they both worked in the front of house team. They embraced a shared love of zines and queer history and began making and creating together. The first zine they ever made with one another, was about toilets.

Thank you to everyone for all your support and patience whilst waiting for the new toilets in the top foyer to be built and a special big THANK YOU to all of you who donated to our fundraising campaign - if anyone would like to support our continuing journey to become one of the most inclusive, welcoming spaces in Bristol you can still do so here:

<https://wshd.to/toilets>

This Zine has been commissioned by Watershed to celebrate the importance of the provision of accessible, safe public toilets.

WATERSHED

November 2022



We'll leave you with a joke -

Did you hear about the film constipated? *It never came out.*