

Wheelbarrow Encyclopedia Article

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Wheelbarrow

The wheelbarrow, a single-wheeled vehicle with a pair of handles at the rear, is designed to transport small, heavy loads over short distances. The person operating it can pick up the rear and push the load forward; the wheel takes the place of a second person who might otherwise be required to assist in carrying a heavy or cumbersome load.

Modern wheelbarrows have a pair of legs under the rear to keep the load level when the wheelbarrow is not in motion, but some earlier varieties had four legs, one under each corner of the bed. Wheelbarrows are distinguished from carts, which have two wheels and can be either manually pushed or pulled by hitches, and from wagons, which generally have four wheels and are pulled by hitches. A hitch apparatus does not work on a wheelbarrow since there must be at least three points of support for it to remain upright, and the hitch and wheel would supply only two.

The origins of the wheelbarrow can be traced to the first century A.D. in China. Evidence of them has been found in ancient Chinese tombs. Speculation is that wheelbarrows may have been invented not long after the wheel, probably around 4000 B.C. Europeans did not begin using the wheelbarrow until about 1200 A.D., however. It is thought that the European version was created from verbal descriptions brought over the silk routes of Asia.

The Chinese wheelbarrow had its wheel directly under the load, while the European wheelbarrow had its wheel far out in front of the load. The Chinese wheelbarrow had the advantage of bearing more of the load, but the European version was less prone to tipping over. Some Chinese wheelbarrows had sails mounted in front. Obviously the wind had to be in one's favor for this arrangement to be of help.

Wheelbarrows were an important part of the construction of the great cathedrals of Europe. Today, they continue to be a common feature at construction and excavation sites and are also widely used by gardeners and farmers.