



Should I put an apostrophe in the following?

*Ladies toilet, Dogs home*

You might. It depends what you mean.

The simple test is:

is the thing for the use of or used for plural entities? (no apostrophe)

or

is it owned by plural entities? (apostrophe, please).

Here are some examples to help:

*There are two house-proud, old biddies living upstairs and the ladies' toilet is kept very clean in case a visitor calls.*

*The old ladies also keep two huge slavering, vicious Rottweilers in the garden and the dogs' home is pretty much wherever they want to sleep.*

Both these cases require the apostrophe because the noun has to show the genitive – particular ladies and particular dogs. The toilet belongs to the ladies and the home belongs to the dogs.

However, in the case of Battersea Dogs Home and most uses of Ladies Toilet, the words *dogs* and *ladies* are being used adjectivally: they are classifiers telling us what sort of home and what sort of toilet. The implication is that the *toilet* is for the use of more than one lady and the *home* houses more than one dog.

Compare these:

*Margate's Airport*

*Margate Airport*

Only the second of these would be used on a sign pointing to it.

We don't write *Margate's Airport*, preferring to use *Margate* as a classifier but if we are talking about it, e.g., in something like

*Margate's airport is very pleasant*

then we could happily use the genitive because we are, so to speak, referring to the ownership of the airport. Notice that *airport* now has no upper-case letter.

We could equally well have:

*Margate Airport is very pleasant*

because we are simply classifying the airport

Unfortunately, the rules set out here are not universally applied so one sees, for example:

*Teacher's book* (which implies that the teacher owns the book rather than that the book is for the use of many teachers).

*Children's Play Area* (which implies that the children own it rather than are allowed to use it).

*Students' Common Room*

And so on.

All of these would be better without the apostrophe and in the case of the first one, as *Teachers Book*.