

The English treatment of the head, including teeth. Alan Macfarlane

One of the main sources of infection for human beings is the head. This is one of the reasons that in many societies a great deal of attention is paid to grooming of the head, removing lice, nits and so on. Many different insects and micro-organisms find shelter in dirty hair or dirty teeth.

I do not know of anything in particular to remark about English hair-styles which separate them off dramatically either from the Continent or the rest of the world. It might be suggested that the short hair-style connoted by the term 'round head' associated with ascetic Protestantism, minimized the amount of hair and hence, if it could be dated from the sixteenth century, had some effect. The Italian style of beard and moustaches, with short hair, spread over much of Europe by the later sixteenth century.¹ It was observed in England in the 1590s, or rather a variant with a close cut in the middle and longer at the sides was noted.² Yet in the early seventeenth century, Fynes Moryson still noted 'The contrary vice of wearing long haire being proper to the French, English and Scots, and especially Irish.'³ It would appear that there were a wide variety of styles⁴ and that battles between long and short hair were fought as the fashion swung back and forth. For instance, Aubrey tells an amusing story of opposition to long hair.⁵ It is easy to dismiss all this, as does Braudel, as 'the most frivolous subject.'⁶ But anthropologists have stressed the symbolic importance of hair, and how much political, social and cultural information its style carries.⁷ It could be argued that the Puritan influence meant that, as in Holland, hair was on average shorter than in most of Europe, and that this would make it less of a health danger. Yet no doubt an equally large amount of literary evidence could be assembled to show how dirty most people's hair was. To take just one example, quoted by Thomas, 'A Tudor writer observed that "plaine people in the countrey, as carters, threshers, ditchers, colliers and plowmen, use seldome tymes to washe their handes, as appereth by their filthynges, and as very fewe tymes combe their heads,

¹ Braudel, *Capitalism*, p.241

² Wilson, *Shakespeare*, p.20

³ Moryson, *Itinerary*, 4, p.219

⁴ see Wilson, *Shakespeare's England*, p.164

⁵ Aubrey, *Lives*, p.257 cf also Stubbes, *Anatomy*, p.34ff

⁶ Braudel, *Capitalism*, p.241

⁷cf Leach; cf also Farr, *Pure and Disciplined Body* (xerox)

as it is sene by floxe, neites, grese, fethers, strawe and suche like which hangeth in their heares".⁸

The second aspect is cleaning and brushing. Many of the lice and nits can be removed by a very fine comb applied frequently and with vigour. There was certainly plenty of advice to people that they should comb their hair, at least in the morning.⁹ We also know that good wooden combs were held in great esteem in the seventeenth century.¹⁰ Yet the fact that parents often waited until quite late before having their child's hair cut for the first time, for instance three years in the case of Anne Clifford's child,¹¹ that people wore wigs and so on, does not suggest that hair hygiene was particularly outstanding. Lice in the hair were very common, as Place mentioned. It may not have been until the nineteenth century that people became fully aware of how important the care of hair is.¹²

One final area for attention was the mouth and particularly the teeth, which can retain food which rots and provides a breeding ground for bacteria. Disease of this kind is very widespread. 'Periodontal disease is a widespread chronic disease and remains as the primary reason for the loss of teeth in the adult population throughout the world.'¹³ It is indeed 'one of the most common diseases affecting humankind,¹⁴ causing not only immense suffering in itself, but poisoning the whole body as a bi-product. As microscopes began to reveal the teeming micro-organisms around the teeth, Cooley in the 1860s noted that 'the mucus of the mouth commonly contains those micro-scopic creatures known as infusorial animalcula, and that, when foul, it is crowded with millions of them.'¹⁵ Consequently he warned that 'Bad teeth and defective sets of teeth, owing to the resulting inability to properly masticate the food, are fertile

⁸Thomas, Cleanliness, 77

⁹ Bulleyn, Government, p.xxxiiiff; Wilson, Shakespeare's England, p.292

¹⁰ Quennell, Everyday ii, p.106

¹¹ Diary, p.72

¹²see e.g. Cooley, Toilet, 230ff

¹³Kiple (ed), Diseases, 924

¹⁴idem

¹⁵Cooley, Toilet, 335

causes of dyspepsia or indigestion, heartburn, diarrhoea, worms, and the like.¹⁶ Although this was a little over-dramatic, as Lane-Claypon noted 'teeth which are neglected and allowed to remain in a dirty condition will affect the whole body.'¹⁷ She elaborates on this. 'Many serious conditions are caused by the presence in the mouth of decaying teeth. The gums may become infected, and pus may be poured out continually in small amounts. This is swallowed and causes disturbance in the stomach.'¹⁸

When we turn to the case of England, the evidence is mixed. There is some material which shows that English teeth were in reasonable condition during these centuries. Dubos reports that research has been done on '...the vaults of a church in Hythe, England, covering the period between 1250 and 1650. Whereas teeth were sound through that period, marked deterioration of dental structures became evident in the population of the sea-port at the beginning of the nineteenth century, presumably when food habits began to change.'¹⁹ If it does turn out to be the case that teeth were relatively sound until the late eighteenth century, several reasons might be suggested to account for the fact. The diet, with a good deal of meat and milk products, may have been more than adequate in calcium. Until the late eighteenth century, the consumption of sugar was relatively low, even though sugar first appeared in the sixteenth century and may have had serious effects on the teeth of the Dutch in the seventeenth century.²⁰

Dentistry may have begun to flourish as teeth deteriorated, but dentists had also existed earlier. We are told, for example, that 'Towards the end of the fifteenth century, one Matthew Flint, dentist, received from Richard III, a grant of sixpence per day on condition of his drawing the teeth of the poor of London gratuitously.'²¹ There does seem to have been an awareness of the need to keep teeth clean. Sixteenth-century doctors gave advice on brushing of teeth,²² though brushes may not have spread to all the population until very late - in a mid-nineteenth century village they were still using rags or soot to

¹⁶Cooley, Toilet, 334-5

¹⁷Lane-Claypon, Hygiene, 218

¹⁸Lane-Claypon, Hygiene, 218

¹⁹Dubos, Adapting, 150

²⁰Shama, Embarrassment, 165

²¹Cooley, Toilet, 320

²²Cogan, Haven, 65, for medieval antecedents see Furnivall, Meals, 226; Nulleyn, Government, p.xxxiii

clean teeth.²³ Cooley believed that 'It is no exaggeration to say that, taking the whole community, there are few, very few, who clean their teeth, or even wash their mouths, once a day. With the masses, the operation, if performed at all, is confined to the Sabbath-day or to holidays.'²⁴ On the other hand he also cites the case of the ancient Welsh who kept their teeth 'perfectly white by frequently rubbing them with a stick of green hazel and a woollen cloth.'²⁵ Yet tooth brushes are explicitly mentioned, for instance, in the seventeenth century Verney papers, when a letter to Sir Ralph Verney in Paris asked him to enquire for 'the little brushes for making clean of the teeth, most covered with sylver and some few with gold and sylver twiste, together with some petits bronetts (boxes) to put them in.'²⁶ What was used for 'toothpaste' I do not know. In the mid-nineteenth century, Cooley was advocating charcoal: 'Recently burnt charcoal, in very fine powder, is another popular and excellent tooth-powder which, without injuring the enamel, is sufficiently gritty to clean the teeth and remove the tartar from them, and possesses the advantage of also removing the offensive odour arising from rotten teeth, and from decomposing organic matter.'²⁷

Before assessing the general level of English cleanliness, it is worth placing it not merely in the perspective of some of its European neighbours and more recent developments, but also in comparison to what happened in Japan.

²³Thompson, *Lark Rise*, 128

²⁴Cooley, *Toilet*, 333

²⁵Cooley, *Toilet*, 319

²⁶Quennell, *Everyday*, ii, 106

²⁷Cooley, *Toilet*, 331