

The straight probe: a dental misnomer

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Key points

Suggests a nomenclature for dental instruments.

Investigates an apparent anomaly in the naming of the straight probe.

Describes the short life of a forgotten Victorian dentist

Most dentists have a ‘thingummybob’ or a ‘whatsit’ in their instrument armamentarium, to which their dental nurse is supposed to be able to lay their hand instantly. Usually dental instruments are logically named to avoid this potential source of confusion. However, some instruments are not, of which the straight probe is one example. The straight probe is not logically named, quite simply because it is not straight. It is bent. This paper investigates the anomaly and suggests that a forgotten hero of the profession is responsible for the development of this indispensable instrument.

Editor's note

This article was published as part of the 2018 BDJ Christmas issue in the spirit and fun of the festive season. Most of the facts and figures used in this paper are either dubious or wholly made-up.

Introduction

The nomenclature of dental instruments usually follows one of three models. They are named either by their shape, their function or after the person who invented them. For instance, a right-angled handpiece implies an instrument which has an operating function at 90 degrees to the shank. An excavator is a spoon like instrument, used to scoop carious dentine from a cavity. A ‘Warwick James’ is named after its inventor. A straight Warwick James elevator has a combination of all three naming strategies, of shape, inventor and function.

Dental probes also follow this model. A sickle probe is a clear description of its shape and function, to detect, by tactile means, deficiencies in a tooth surface or restoration. A periodontal probe, with its blunt end and measurement markings, is used to detect the presence of bleeding from the gingival tissues

and to measure pockets. The Briault probe with its multi-angular tines, is named after a Monsieur Briault, of whom little appears to be known. However, there is a clear anomaly in the name of the straight probe. While ‘probe’ describes its function, it is clearly not a straight instrument. In geometric terms, it would be described as having a handle to which is attached a shank and a sharp tine which is angled at approximately 99 degrees to the shank. It is clearly not straight in the same way that other straight instruments are, such as straight forceps, where the beaks are in a direct line with the handle or a straight handpiece which holds a rotating bur in the same axis as the handpiece itself. Since the straight probe is clearly not straight, then it must be named after its inventor. Who, then, was Straight? Some recent research has found a possible explanation for this misnomer.

Franklin Ignatius Bering Strait

Strait was born in Dover, Kent in around 1846. Census records of 1851 show that he was the son of an ironmonger, Leonard Ignatius Edward. There are no records of his youth but by 1861, Franklin is described as an ‘apprentice to a dentist’. Before the introduction of

formal qualifications for dentists, they learnt their trade at the hands of more experienced practitioners. It would be safe to assume his early duties would be cleaning instruments and some menial door answering duties. However, as his learning progressed his master would teach him the names and functions of the various instruments in use and perhaps some of the skills of the dental mechanic. The name of Strait’s master is unknown but Strait clearly progressed well.

An advertisement in the Dover Times in 1870, when Strait would have been around 24 years old, shows that he had set up his own practice in Chatham Road (Fig. 1). He offers simple ‘stoppings, cleanings and painless extractions’. By 1876 however, he has clearly gained some experience abroad. In an advertisement in the same newspaper (Fig. 2), he describes himself as an experienced practitioner capable of being able to make dentures ‘in the French style’ and ‘so life-like that even your wife or your mistress won’t notice the difference’. Dover being the closest crossing point from England to France, it is clear that from his early days that Strait travelled abroad to learn his trade, rather than to London.

Apart from the two advertisements, until recently little else was known about Strait. He

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appears in a number of local directories at 25 Gibraltar Street until 1878. After that year, he disappears from the printed sources.

However, some recently discovered correspondence throws some further light on his life. Tucked inside a book found in an antiquarian bookseller in Paris were two letters sent to a Monsieur Balabac, and signed by 'votre cher ami et collègue de travail, Franklin Strait' (Fig. 3). In translation, Strait writes:

'My dear Balabac

It was with the greatest of pleasure that I spent last week in the charming company of your daughter. The conversations we had as we walked through your beautiful estate were both memorable and stimulating. I was very sad that you and I had only one day to talk before you were called away but your daughter entertained me wonderfully. I would dearly love to see your daughter and your place of work when I visit again, which I hope to do in the very near future. I was particularly interested in the drawings you had made of the instruments you planned to make to examine the teeth of your horses. My father as you know is an ironmonger and I will discuss the manufacture with him before I return to the lovely company of yourself and your daughter.

Please pass my respects and thanks to the beautiful Marie-Galante. Tell her I look forward to spending more time in her company on my next visit.

*Your dearest friend and business colleague,
Franklin Strait'*

On the reverse of the letter is a crude drawing of an instrument (Fig. 4) but there is no indication of scale. Whether this is the horse probe mentioned in the letter or an attempt to design a dental instrument for human use is unknown. It would reasonable to assume that the handle was intended to be of bone or ivory and the pointed end was a steel of some sort.

The letter is undated and the identity of Monsieur Balabac and his family is unknown. He appears to be a family man of some substance, with 'a beautiful estate'. He may have been a veterinary practitioner, with his interest in horses, or may have been a landowner with an interest in the care of his own stables.

The book in which the letters were found was inscribed on the flyleaf. The novel, *La Desirade* by a little known English author Clarence Cook, was published in 1877 and is a tale of repressed love between a farm hand, the eponymous La Desiderade and the daughter of the manor house, Mona Minch.

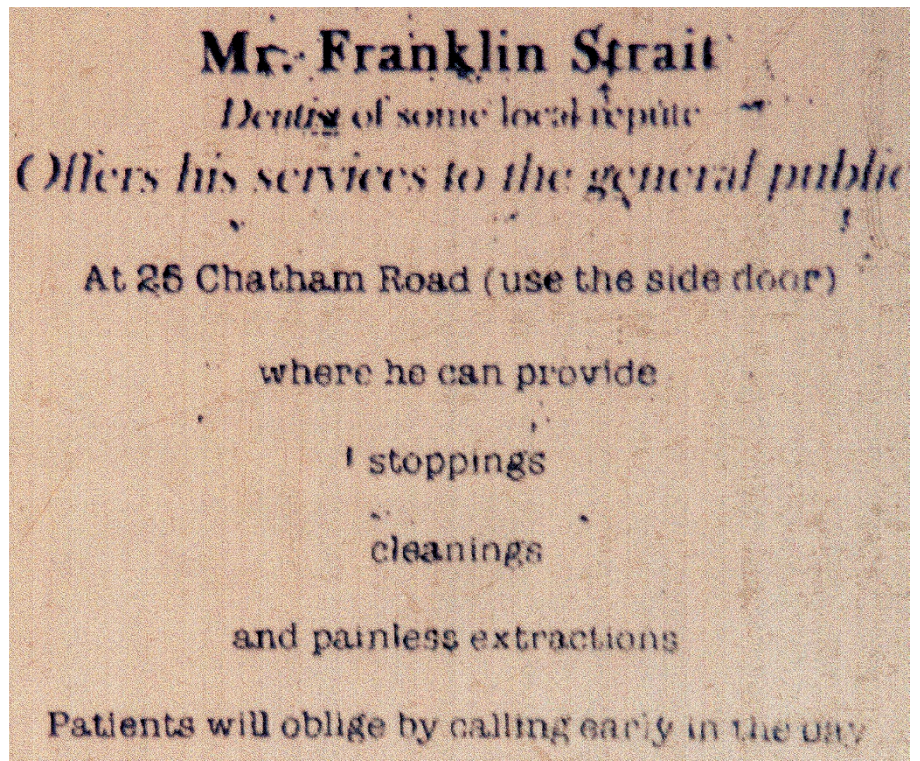


Fig. 1 Strait's advertisement of 1870

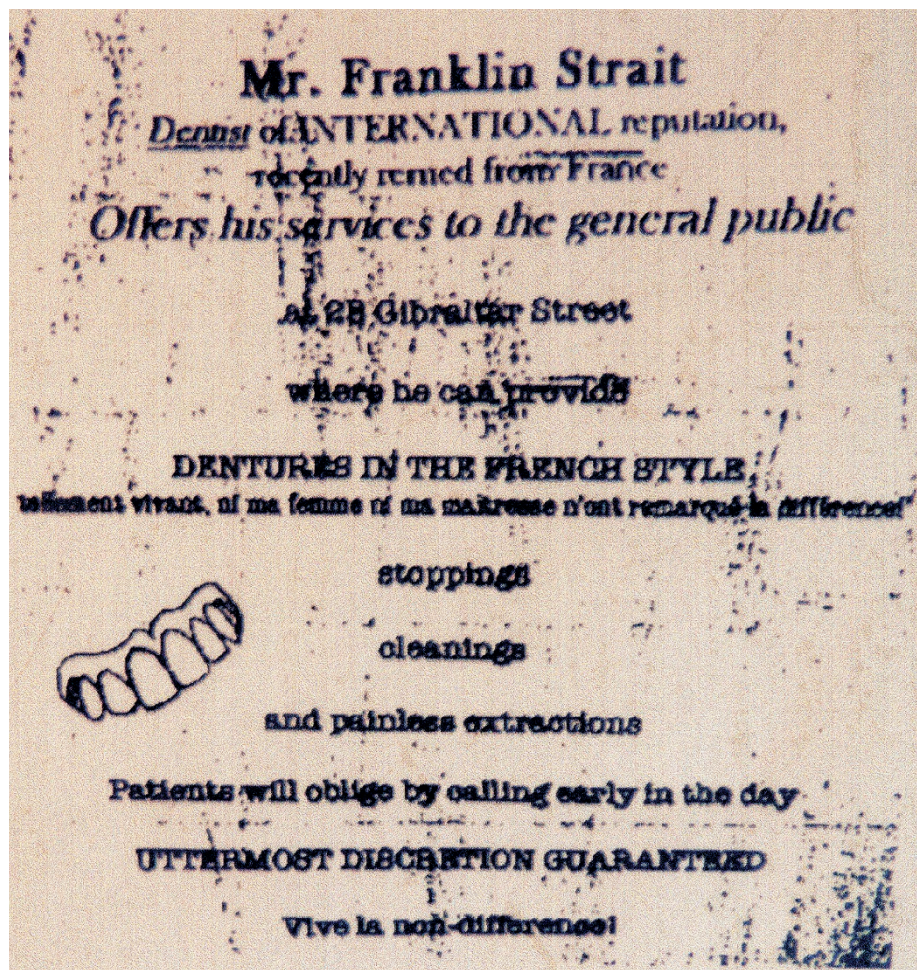


Fig. 2 Strait's advertisement of 1876

Mon cher Balabac
 C'est avec le plus grand plaisir que j'ai passé la semaine dernière dans la charmante compagnie de votre fille. Les conversations que nous avons eues au fil de votre promenade dans votre magnifique domaine ont été à la fois mémorables et stimulantes. J'étais très triste de constater que vous et moi n'avions qu'un jour pour parler avant de vous appeler, mais votre fille m'a divertie à merveille. J'aimerais beaucoup voir votre fille et votre lieu de travail lors de ma prochaine visite, ce que j'espère pouvoir faire très prochainement. Je suis particulièrement intéressé par les dessins que vous avez réalisés des instruments que vous avez projetés de réaliser pour examiner les dents de vos chevaux. Comme vous le savez, mon père est un quincaillier de fer et je discuterai de la fabrication avant de revenir à la charmante compagnie de votre fille et de vous-même. S'il vous plaît, transmettez mes respects et merci à la belle Marie-Gallante. Dites-lui que je compte passer plus de temps en sa compagnie lors de ma prochaine visite.
 Franklin Strait, votre cher ami et collègue de travail

Fig. 3 Strait's letter to Monsieur Balabac

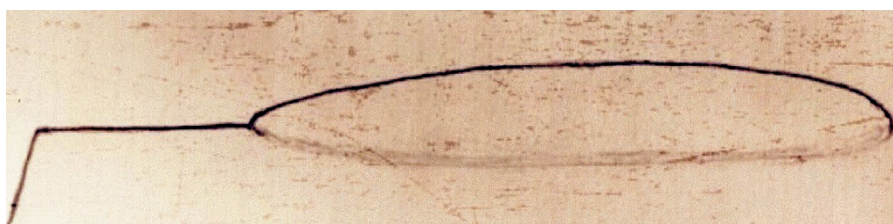


Fig. 4 Strait's hand drawing of the probe

The inscription reads 'My angel of mercy M-G, How long before we do the walk of love, hand in hand? You are so far away. Soon I will be southbound again, with love, F' Again, the inscription is undated but the handwriting is a similar neat style and angulation as that of Strait's letters.

Some tentative conclusions may be made from the inscription. Clearly, Strait was infatuated with Marie-Gallante. The fact

that the book and the inscription are written in English implies that Marie-Gallante was educated in languages. Strait's conversations with Marie-Gallante across the fields of the estate and in the house may also have been in English, yet he wrote to Monsieur Balabac in French. Monsieur Balabac presumably did not speak English and it is possible that Strait wished to keep his feelings for the daughter secret.

More interestingly, perhaps, is that the book and the letters have survived together for many years. How they came to be in the bookshop is unknown but either to Marie-Gallante or, more likely, her father, the book, the inscription and the letters must have been of enough significance to be preserved together. We do not know, of course, whether Marie-Gallante ever received the book.

The second letter, of which only a fragment is readable and is consequently sadly curtailed, suggests a development in the manufacture of an instrument but a sad end to his friendship with Marie-Gallante.

'Balabac

The instrument is being made. I see a great future for myself the Strait probe in dentistry.

I was saddened to hear of Marie-Gallante's betrothal to your groom and'

It is to be noted that he no longer includes a personal salutation to Balabac when addressing him in this letter. Their relationship had perhaps become strained, no longer brothers in arms, either due to a breakdown in their business relationship, or more likely, his disappointment at the betrothal of Marie-Gallante. If Strait was beginning to see himself as a man of the world, with riches from his probe and his dental practice before him, the loss of his beloved to someone as lowly as a groom may have been a severe psychological setback to him.

Nothing else is known of Strait. His advertisements do not appear in the local press after 1878 and he is not recorded in the 1879 register of dentists.

Discussion

What then can we conclude about Strait and his probe? From his humble upbringing in his father's smithy, Strait progressed to become a dental apprentice in the same town. He was clearly ambitious and by his mid-twenties, at the latest, he had his own practice. He was presumably self-educated and by then also fluent in French. The closeness of Dover to the continent would have allowed him contact with travellers from France. Maybe he even had patients from abroad, such as sailors from the ferries. As he developed his practice, railway travel to London was already well established but he apparently chose to build links to France rather than the capital. His advertisement highlighting the French style of his dentures clearly indicates this.

His business developed as he changed addresses at some time between 1874 and 1876. Chatham Road was also the address of his father's smithy and he presumably felt confident enough to move on and set up in his own premises in Gibraltar Street. Neither address still exists but maps of the time indicate that they were both near the harbour and have apparently been demolished to make way for a multi-storey car park.

His connections with France clearly brought him into contact with Monsieur Balabac, maybe through a common interest in horses and blacksmithing. Certainly the interest of Monsieur Balabac in equine dentistry, the nature of Strait's upbringing in a smithy and his dental career was a fortuitous coincidence. This coincidence also brought Strait into the meeting with Marie-Gallante and led to an ensuing infatuation. We can only surmise what might have extinguished the light at the end of that tunnel of love. Perhaps Monsieur Balabac became increasingly frustrated with English conversations from which he was excluded and he put a stop to the relationship? Perhaps their affair was consummated in the stables, she became pregnant and out of shame her

father forced her to marry the groom? Perhaps she found Strait too focused on his business and became bored with him? Certainly, there is no evidence that Strait ever married and up to the point he met Marie-Gallante, he appears to have been wedded to his business and career.

Strait appears to have been an accomplished businessman with an enquiring mind. His fluency at the French language for someone from his background would have been unusual for the times. His handwriting is mechanistically neat and ordered and it could be imagined that his clinical work would have been equally tidy and precise.

Given that there are no further advertisements for his practice after 1878, it seems likely that Strait died around this time but there is no record of his death. Some clues may possibly be found in the denouement of *La Desirade*, the novel which Strait inscribed for Marie-Gallante. In the novel, the farm hand, the eponymous 'La' (a shortened form of Langeland), having failed to pluck up the courage to woo Mona Minch, attempts suicide by jumping into the duck pond. Sadly, for him, he discovers that he floats. La is last seen clambering up the brambled banks of the pond and

walking, scratched and sodden, into the sunset, away from his beloved. It could be surmised that Strait too sailed off into the wild west, ending his life, destitute and heartbroken, in distant Jamaica or Martinique. Alternatively, he may have found his own watery death, and assuming he wasn't a single-handed sailor, jumped off the Calais ferry into the English Channel, a Strait of Dover ending his own life appropriately, in the Strait of Dover.

His probe, of course, lives on as his lasting memorial. One can only assume that his father did make some prototypes and passed them on to a London dental manufacturer who saw the potential of it. From then, the probe became the popular, ubiquitous instrument that it is today. It is entirely possible that the manufacturer changed the name because Strait had previously snubbed the London dental establishment with his preference for the 'French style'. Alternatively, a junior clerk may have made a cataloguing error to record the instrument as the straight probe. Whichever the cause, the name of Franklin Ignatius Bering Strait has been wiped from dental history either by the harsh world of dental politics or the cruel stroke of a bureaucratic pen.