

The development of dental practice in a new English seaside resort 1885–1916. Part 2: the next generation

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Key points

Describes a second wave of dentists moving into the growing Edwardian resort of Bexhill-on-Sea.

Illustrates the wide disparity of social upbringing of those entering the profession at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Discusses the historical background to entrepreneurial general dental practice.

Abstract

During the late Victorian and Edwardian period, the local landowner, the 7th Earl De La Warr, instigated the development of the rural Sussex village of Bexhill into the fashionable seaside resort of Bexhill-on-Sea. Famous at the time for the introduction of mixed bathing and the first motor races to be held in the United Kingdom, the resort had a population of around 15,000 people by 1914. The Edwardian period was the highlight of Bexhill-on-Sea's popularity as a resort for the rich and famous. The town became incorporated as a borough in 1902 and the first motor races in the country took place along the promenade. Early in its development, Bexhill-on-Sea had attracted dentists mainly from the nearest town, Hastings. By the turn of the century, however, dentists were being drawn from further afield. Using primary sources such as census records, local directories, newspapers and the dental register and journals, the ebb and flow of general dental practitioners into the glamorous coastal resort is described. The family origins, qualifications and other characteristics of these dentists are discussed.

Introduction

By 1900, Bexhill had been changed from a rural hamlet into the flourishing seaside resort of Bexhill-on-Sea. The local landowner, the 7th Earl De La Warr, had funded the building of a sea wall in the 1880s, allowing the coastal farmland to be suitable for development. The Earl's concept was of a high class resort with large mansions and expensive sea front hotels to attract the rich and famous of the day. However, John Webb, the builder contracted to build the sea wall, was partly paid in the transfer of land. This land was developed rapidly into the town centre with terraced houses and shops, allowing tradesmen and shopkeepers to begin their businesses. Dentists also moved in, initially visiting from nearby Hastings but eventually

three dentists took up residence, as previously described. One, Joseph Miller, settled in the Earl's estate but the other two, William Meads and Morris Dickinson commenced practice in, or closer to, Webb's Egerton Park estate, alongside the chemists, ironmongers and drapers.¹

The Edwardian period

At the turn of the century, Bexhill-on-Sea was in its heyday. Although De La Warr's vision of an estate of large mansions and high class hotels never really took off, Webb's Egerton Park estate grew apace (Fig. 1). It was in these years that the town became a borough in its own right, and motor racing introduced along the East Parade, attracting visits by the rich and famous to the inaugural runs. The central railway station was extended, a second railway station was opened, tramways were developed, another golf course opened and Stanislav Wurm and his Viennese White Band were engaged for concerts at the Kursaal, the seaside concert hall and entertainment venue.² As the resort gained popularity, three younger dentists moved into the town.

Harry Webb Robey (1875–1931)

Born in Staffordshire in 1875 to a general medical practitioner father, he was educated at the District Royal Medical Benevolent College, Epsom. The family had relocated to London and his father is listed there as a surgeon. Harry Webb Robey obtained his LDS RCS (Eng) in 1898. In the 1901 census, Robey is listed as living at home with his parents and as a dental surgeon working of his own account in Wandsworth, London. In 1902, Robey, aged 27, set up practice in 63 Wilton Road, just off from the seafront.

What little that can be discovered about Robey indicates that soon after arrival, he joined the croquet club and that he supported the local parish Christmas tea where 'a number of gramophone records were enjoyed through the kindness of Mr H. Webb Robey who lent his machine'.³ By 1911, Robey is listed living and working in Wilton Road, as single, with a housekeeper and a general domestic servant.

William Edward Meads (1880–1956)

William Edward Meads qualified LDS RCS (Eng) in 1900, aged 20, as one of the youngest ever to do so and entered the dentists' register

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Fig. 1 The sites of the practices of Harry Webb Robey (1) Albert Kildare Shoesmith(2), Albert Tyrrel (3), Cecil Hastings Bradnam (4) and Alexander Deuchars (5)

in the same year. He lived at The Turret, Sea Road, Bexhill, the residence and practice that his father built in 1890s. Both father and son have the same name and consequently identifying who is working, and who is referred to in newspaper reports is difficult. It is assumed that the 'W Meads' who attended as locum tenens to Mr Watson, surgeon dentist of Biarritz, Switzerland in 1902,⁴ is Meads junior. However, we do know that Meads senior moved back to Hastings to practise in 1906.⁵ Meads junior was married during this decade but a date cannot be established. It may be that this event was the catalyst for his parents moving back to Hastings.

Meads junior continued to run the boarding house at The Turret and spoke in meetings about temperance and the evils of alcohol, arguing that, as the amount spent on alcohol per year was twice the cost of the Navy and the Army, if every drinker consumed one pint of

alcohol less per day, that saving could pay for the costs of the armed forces instead. Excessive drinking was the largest cause of pauperism, destitution and insanity, he said. He also spoke out about social justice, railing against the unequal distribution of wealth.⁶

Albert Kildare Shoesmith (1876–1954)

Shoesmith (also known as Kildare Albert Shoesmith) described himself as a 'manufacturer of artificial teeth'. Although he was advertising in the newspaper from 1898, he does not appear in the Trades Directory until 1901. In the period up to the Great War, unlike other practitioners of the time, he moves house several times, beginning in Cornwall Road and Wickham Avenue, to the west of the Egerton Park estate, and then moving into The Honies estate, an area north of Bexhill where he lived first in Havelock Road, and then Holliers Hill, then the main road out of Bexhill to the north.

Shoesmith was born in Ireland, the son of an army warrant officer. He married at the age of 18 but his wife died four weeks after the birth of their first child, John Louis. By 1901 he was resident in Bexhill with his young son, his mother and two younger sisters, Lily and Snowdrop. He remarried in 1904 and had two other sons with his second wife. In 1915, he was advertising in a Sussex-wide directory as practising in the inland towns of Battle and Wadhurst as well as Bexhill, in partnership with J. L. Shoesmith, presumably his oldest son.⁷

Shoesmith advertised his services in the local paper, charging from £2 for a set of teeth, two shillings for stoppings and one shilling for extractions. He accompanied the advertisement with a letter from Herr Klink of the Viennese White Band. According to the letter, Shoesmith had extracted a tooth, cleaned it and re-implanted it with great success. Herr Klink was pleased to say that the tooth was 'as

firm and useful to use as though it had never been extracted.⁸ Shoesmith, like Meads senior, did not appear on a dental register until the 1921 Dentist's Act made it illegal to practise without registration.

Around the turn of the century, therefore, it appears that Bexhill had six settled dental practitioners: Meads (snr), Miller and Dickinson, the original settlers to whom were added Meads (jnr), Robey and Shoesmith. The newcomers were all in their twenties and by then the original settlers were now aged between 50 and 60. This suggests a rapid increase in the number of dental practitioners in a town where population growth was slowing. Between 1891 and 1901 the number of residents grew from around 5,500 to 12,500. By 1914, however, the population was only around 15,000. Dental practitioners moving to Bexhill were presumably optimistic that the growth of the previous decade would continue.

Of the three newcomers, all but Shoesmith had acquired the LDS and were on the dentists' register as soon as they qualified. In contrast to the older dentists, the two with qualifications both had medical or dental parentage. In Robey's case, this could be an indication that dentistry was becoming a respectable alternative to medicine as a career, or possibly as a respectable substitute for those who did not make the grade for medical school. In contrast to Meads and Miller in the 1890s, the incoming dentists appear to have taken little part in the politics or development of the town during this time. As the Edwardian decade progressed, other dentists came and went.

George Herbert New (1876–1939)

New was 25 in 1901 and the son of a London surgeon, George W. New. He obtained his LDS in 1899 but did not register until 1905. From 1901 to 1904, New is listed in the trade directory as working at 1 Cantelupe Road, alongside, or as an assistant to, Joseph Miller. He was based in London after he left, married in 1907 and in 1911 was living in Belsize Avenue, Hampstead, London. His address in the dentists' register from 1905 onwards is 245 Knightsbridge, London.

Herbert Cragg Highton (1880–1955)

Highton was born in Lancashire, the son of a colliery lampman, and acquired his LDS in 1903. Although Highton is not mentioned in the local trades directories, the local Bexhill newspaper reports that in July 1906 he has

returned to practise with Miller, after being away for a year studying in the USA where he gained a DDS from the University of Pennsylvania. He is listed as resident in local boarding houses from April to September 1905, as Mr Highton and in the autumn and winter of 1906 as Dr Highton. His registered address until 1908 was in Southport, Lancashire but from 1909 he is registered at 17 Upper Wimpole Street, London.

In February 1908, an advertisement appears in the Bexhill-on-Sea Observer for 'a smart, intelligent youth, having mechanical and artistic tastes' to apply to Miller and Highton at 1 Cantelupe Road. It seems, therefore, that Highton practised with Miller from April 1905 to at least 1908, with the year out for his doctorate in the USA. It is unclear why, in contrast to New, he is not mentioned in the Trades Directory.

Percy E. Howard (1871–1918)

Howard was born in Aldershot, Hampshire, the son of a grocer. In 1891, at the age of 20, he is listed there as a 'reporter'. In the 1901 census, Howard is listed as a dentist, living at 12 Albert Road, part of the Egerton Park Estate, in his parents' house with two younger sisters and a younger brother. However, Howard is only mentioned as a dentist in the Bexhill Trades Directory at that address from 1907 to 1911. He lists LDS RCS (Eng) as his qualification but he does not appear on the dentists' register in any year before his death at the end of the war. By 1911, he is living as a boarder at 26 Western Road, Bexhill, still single. On his call-up papers, his address is given as 24 Wilton Road, so it may be that after the departure of his parents he lived in different boarding houses.

Albert John Tyrrell (1872–1935)

Tyrrell is entered in the Trades Directory for one year only, in 1901 in Jameson Road. He first registered as a dentist in 1897, having gained LDS RCS (Eng) the same year. In the dental register, he is listed in Clapham, London, until 1902, then in 1903 appears to have settled in Wallington, Surrey. His stay in Bexhill was clearly short-lived. Interestingly, Jameson Road was situated in the De La Warr Estate, within which Miller had been the only dentist working previously. If Tyrrell was working within the De La Warr Estate legitimately, that may indicate that the landowner was willing to drop his standards to allow commercial development on his estate of mansions and high-class hotels. Alternatively,

if Tyrrell had set up there without permission of the landowner Earl, then he may have been given notice to quit. Equally, there may not have been enough work to sustain another practice in the town.

Harris's American Teeth Institute

This name also appears for one year only (1901) in the Trades Directory, situated in St Leonard's Road. No other information could be found about it, but it presumably is the business name of a non-registered dentist or another 'manufacturer of artificial teeth'.

As stated above, Meads (snr) returned to Hastings to practise in 1906. Dickinson died in 1911. Miller, after the return of Herbert Highton to London, continued to practise in Bexhill until 1911. According to his obituary, Miller then moved to Bournemouth. However, his address on the dentists' register is given as 17 Upper Wimpole Street, London, which is the same address to which Highton is registered. It appears therefore that the two had developed a working relationship, which survived their move from Bexhill. Towards the end of the first decade of the century, then, Robey, Meads (jnr) and Shoesmith remained in practice in the town. Howard is something of an enigma, appearing only intermittently in the Trades Directory, apparently having a qualification but not putting his name on the register. Registration was not compulsory but it could be imagined that it would have added some cachet to the practitioner. Possibly, in view of his intermittent entries in the trade directories, Howard had other means of making a living.

In contrast to the first years of development, there was some fluidity of movement within the profession. Some, such as Tyrrell and the American Teeth Institute, moved on within a year. Shoesmith moved house at least four times. While Robey, with medical parentage, was attracted to Bexhill from London, George New, Herbert Highton and Joseph Miller all made the reverse journey, from practising in Bexhill to working in London.

In the final few years before the outbreak of war, a further group of dentists also moved in.

Horace Edmund Marsh (1885–1959)

In 1911, when Joseph Miller moved away, the practice was taken over by Horace Marsh. In 1901, at the age of 16, Marsh is recorded as a dental student living in Dorchester with his widowed mother a 'drapery proprietor', his older brother a 'drapery assistant', and a younger sister, Harriet. No servants are listed.

By 1911, Marsh is unmarried but is the head of the house in Cantelupe Road, living with his mother, his sister Harriet, a cook and a housemaid.

Cecil Hastings Bradnam (1877–1963)

Cecil Hastings Bradnam moved into Trenton Lodge, 16 Eversley Road in 1913. He acquired his LDS in 1909 and had been registered in Hastings and Bedford in 1910 and 1911, respectively.

Bradnam previously lived in Hastings with his parents, where his father was a retired jeweller and pawnbroker. At the same address, his brother-in-law, Arthur Osborne Bell, is also recorded as a dentist. Bell was 15 years older than Bradnam and listed in the dentists' register as having an LDS RCS (Eng) acquired in 1898. He worked in Worples Road, Wimbledon, from 1900. In the census, Bradnam is marked as a worker, but Bell as an employer. Bell was presumably visiting his in-laws on census day.

George Charles (1891–1957)

Charles was born in Lancashire, the son of a schoolmaster who later became a clergyman. As a dental student in 1911, he was living with his parents in Brenchley, Kent. He gained his LDS in 1913 and in 1914 Charles is listed in the local directory and on the dentists' register as working with William Meads at The Turret in Sea Road.

Alexander Deuchars (1869–1937)

Alexander Deuchars was born in Scotland and brought up in Lancashire. By 1911 he was residing at 22 Sea Road, Bexhill, with his wife and two young children. Deuchars was the son of an engine fitter, who appears to have made his way south via Liverpool and Haywards Heath, Sussex, where he married in 1903. In 1911 he is entered in the local trade directory at 22 Sea Road, Bexhill, a property he bought at auction for £800 in 1913. Deuchars was unqualified, not appearing on the dentist's register until after 1921.

While he could afford to purchase a property, it appears he did not own a motor car. In 1911 he is reported as being knocked from his bicycle in Sackville Road, by a Mrs Neven Du Mont while overtaking him in her dog cart. He suffered facial injuries and a broken rib.

Henry Dormer (1867–?)

Henry Dormer is listed in the Trades Directory at 32 Wilton Road in 1913 and 1914. He had previously worked in Hastings, listed in the

census as a dental surgeon in 1901, living with his wife and mother, and being thanked in his role as an assistant at the Buchanan Hospital in that town in 1910. Dormer gained his LDS in 1890 but did not enter the register until 1912. Quite why he delayed is not clear but the registration does coincide with major financial difficulties for him. It is possible that he saw registration as a route to respectability and financial security.

In 1913 he was declared bankrupt, which he stated was caused by the continuing ill-health of himself, his wife and his mother, and also 'commencing in Bexhill without capital'. He had left his previous job as an assistant due to a nervous breakdown but had been unable to 'work up a business sufficiently large to meet his living expenses'. He had been in financial difficulties for some years, even as an assistant earning £6 per week and had taken loans from money lenders. In Bexhill, with rent at £45 per year and living expenses of £100 but gross receipts of £195, he owed £146 with net assets of £5.⁹

Discussion

Origins and age

In contrast to the early dental settlers in the town, a couple of the incoming practitioners were of local origin, Meads junior and Bradnam, but most came from further afield. Deuchars and Shoesmith were born in Scotland and Ireland, respectively. Marsh was previously living in Dorchester, while Highton and Charles both were originally from Lancashire. Robey and New, the sons of medical practitioners, both originated from London. Bexhill-on-Sea's reputation as a fashionable resort may have attracted them from afar. What enticed Miller, the long established practitioner to return to London is unknown, but his two younger assistants had also set up practice there.

Again, in contrast to the early settlers, most of these latecomers were in their twenties and thirties, whereas Miller, Meads senior and Dickinson were all in their forties and fifties on arrival in Bexhill-on-Sea. Two of the late comers, Marsh and Highton, had both studied in the USA, acquiring DDS at the University of Pennsylvania and it is possible that they knew each other through that connection, thus introducing Marsh to Miller's practice in Cantelupe Road.

The wide range of family backgrounds of these dentists is remarkable. With the exception

of Meads junior and possibly Bradnam from his brother-in-law, none appear to have had any dental family history. The influence of the medical profession is apparent in that New and Robey were sons of doctors. The others, where they can be identified, however, are the sons of a grocer, a jeweller, a soldier, a teacher, a draper, an engine fitter and a colliery lampman.

In contrast to the older, original generation of dentists in the town, though, this younger generation did not take on assistants, perhaps because dental education was now focused mainly on that available in dental schools. Shoesmith's 16-year-old son John, however, is listed as a dental mechanic in the 1911 census, at the same address as his father.

Practice

While Charles and Marsh joined existing practices, Marsh presumably with the intention of taking over from Miller, the others, Bradnam, Dormer and Deuchars, appear to have arrived to try to set up new practices. For Dormer, this was a financial disaster, but what made the other two believe that a town of 15,000 people needed two more dental practices, in addition to the existing three, is difficult to understand.

Shoesmith, in extending his place of practice to Battle and Wadhurst, two inland towns, both situated on the railway line from Bexhill West to Tunbridge Wells, would perhaps indicate a drop in demand in Bexhill itself. A work pattern similar to that told by a Middlesbrough dentist, Tom Brown, would seem likely at this time. Doing mainly extractions and denture work, Brown would 'set out on foot for the railway station, carrying heavy bags containing impression materials... trays and instruments and the denture work he had prepared since the previous visit'. After working in rented rooms in a chemist or a hotel, he would return home in the evening to cast impressions.¹⁰

The resident dentists in Bexhill-on-Sea presumably had similar patterns of clinical work being mainly extractions and dentures. Some did their own laboratory work but certainly Meads had his own dental mechanic. In discussing his appeal against his call-up for wartime service, Meads states that his mechanic had already volunteered. It seems possible therefore that dentists were doing less of their own laboratory work towards the end of the Edwardian period, with the role of 'dental mechanic' becoming increasingly recognised as a separate occupation.

Table 1 Households of resident dentists 1911 census data (The National Archives, ref. RG14/4771)

Head of household	Spouse	Children	Others	Servants
William Meads	0	0	0	Cook Housemaid
Harry Webb Robey	0	0	0	Housekeeper General servant
Howard Marsh	0	0	Mother Sister Visitor	Cook Housemaid
Henry Dormer	Beatrice Dormer	0	Mother Sister-in-law	
Alexander Deuchars	Minnie Deuchars	2		General servant
Albert Kildare Shoesmith	Annie Shoesmith	3	0	General servant (age 13)

Finance

There are some indications of the incomes of the dentists resident in Bexhill during this period, showing that dentistry was not a route to great wealth but possibly allowed a comfortable living. Table 1 shows the households of the resident dentists according to the 1911 census. Dormer, unsurprisingly, had no servants but the other qualified dentists, Meads, Marsh and Robey, each had a cook or housekeeper and a general servant. Robey was unmarried, with two servants. Meads, on the other hand, was still operating The Turret as a boarding house, but no boarders were listed on census day. His wife was also away. The unqualified, Deuchars and Shoesmith, had only a general servant, Shoesmith's being a 13-year-old girl. It is possible that this difference in servants per household, unrelated to the numbers of children present, indicates the beginning of increased financial reward for those with a dental qualification, as opposed to those who learnt their trade as apprentices.

Conclusion

As the country went to war in 1914, many of the local dentists joined the armed services. Marsh joined the Royal Field Artillery, Charles left at the outbreak of war to join the Royal Air Force, Bradnam served in the Royal Army

Medical Corps and Howard was called up to the Sportsman's Battalion.

In 1916, however, conscription was introduced for all men between the ages of 18 and 41.¹¹ Both Meads and Robey appealed and were granted exemption. In his appeal Meads stated that he was only one of two dentists left in the town and he stated that 'the amount of dental work in Bexhill was considerable'. He was also the appointed dentist to the local army encampment.¹² 2e stated that there was a shortage of dentists in the country and that consequently it was unlikely more would move in. He was granted exemption from call-up, provided those circumstances did not change. Robey, then aged 40, was also granted exemption on the grounds that he was the financial sole support for his own widowed mother, as well as for the mother of his enlisted dental mechanic. Call-up would mean the entire loss of his business, he said and he was granted exemption on the same terms as Meads.

From a dental point of view then, Bexhill had almost come full circle, from the few early visiting dentists from Hastings, through the Edwardian decade of glitz and glamour and multiple resident practitioners, and finally reduced to two dentists (who were not coping with demand for treatment) by the exigencies of wartime.

Today, 1 Cantelupe Road still functions as a dental practice but the other addresses mentioned are no longer in use by dentists. Currently, the other six practices in the town centre are still within the boundaries of Webb's original Egerton Park Estate, based in converted domestic or retail premises. Despite the introduction of the National Health Service in 1948 and the recent rise of corporate ownership of practices, the majority of dental care in Bexhill-on-Sea continues to be provided by individual practitioners with sufficient entrepreneurial enterprise and financial resources to risk their own capital to set up in business. Today, in general practice, the potential for difficulties, as faced by Henry Dormer and Alexander Deuchars, of accident, potential ill-health and bankruptcy, play out against the hope for the business and professional stability of the likes of William Meads and Harry Webb Robey. The essential part played by individual entrepreneurs in the provision of dental care in the UK should not be underestimated by those planning the future of dental care in the UK.

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