

The Bexhill dentists

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I've never been to Bexhill-on-Sea... The expression 'a broad church' is sometimes used to describe the *BDJ* since it has the purpose of including a wide variety of content across the expanse of territory that we share as dentistry. For me, an important element of this is history. Without some sense of where we have come from I believe it is more difficult to chart where we might next go. By including such articles I am often taunted on one side by the dental historians for stealing their content and on the other from readers who don't see the relevance. Well, that is probably an editor's lot and I confess myself to be not too cut up about it.

Which is my way around to making comment on the two papers by Paul Hellyer in this, and the previous issue, on the growth of general dental practice in a Sussex seaside town.^{1,2} If ever there were a pair of papers that seemed prime for a specialist subject on the television quiz show *Mastermind* or to potentially be held up as the most obscure dental titles yet published, these may be them. But. But, if you can set aside some time to muse I commend them to you. You see I think they have a lot to teach us not only about social history in a sleepy Victorian town and an emerging Edwardian English beach resort but about some of the characteristics and problems that we identify today amongst ourselves and our colleagues.

Following the early dental settlers in Bexhill, Hellyer sleuth-fully charts not only the dates and places as a true historian should; the details of their practice addresses, the whereabouts of their adverts (interesting that adverts were banned for so many years before being allowed again) but also their personal lives, circumstances and foibles. The dentists chronicled here come from a remarkable variety of family backgrounds. With two possible exceptions '...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.' How recently did we publish a paper reporting on the social profiles of applicants to UK dental schools and their influences on the profession today?

Are the attractions of becoming a professional now as they were over one hundred years ago? One practitioner's premises and possessions up for sale are described thus: 'Superior bedroom, dining and drawing room furniture, fine tuned pianoforte by Kirkman, London, dentist's chair, valuable paintings and engravings, china, glass, curtains, linen, tallboy chest, inlaid cabinets and



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usual household effects. These would seem to indicate the trappings of a comfortable existence, with furnishings of some quality and expense.'

What emerge further are fleeting glimpses of colleagues we might recognise today, and more than a few pointers to the contemporary problems that we discuss still in these pages; stress, finances, the 'business' of dentistry. Each generation believes that it discovers everything for the first time and suffers each difficulty anew. Is it that a certain personality type was (and is still) attracted to dentistry? If so, does this partly explain today's burnout statistics as much as it did then? 'In 1913, Dormer was declared bankrupt, which he stated was caused by continuing ill-health ... 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, been in financial difficulties for some years and had taken loans from money lenders.'

And what of the entrepreneurial impulses? One dentist listed his practice address as being also run as a boarding house. Another, advertised in a Sussex-wide directory as practising in the inland towns of Battle and Wadhurst as well as Bexhill. A third was a property developer as a side line. If any of that doesn't have some ghoulish reverberations then what about the work-life balance? Hobbies included being a marksman with the local Volunteer Rifles, an elected town councillor, helping to found Conservative Associations, demonstrating an interest as a keen fisherman and applying for

a patent for an improvement to the cooling system of motorcycle engines.

Much has changed in the intervening years, for example in stark contrast we now also have women dentists, but in a strange way I wonder, deep down, how much really has altered? While I might never have been to Bexhill-on-Sea I feel now that I understand something deeper about this microcosmic Sussex place.

References

1. Hellyer P. The growth of general dental practice in a developing Sussex seaside resort 1885-1916 - Part 1: the early settlers. *Br Dent J* 2019 **227**: 419-425.
2. Hellyer P. The development of dental practice in a new English seaside resort 1885-1916 - Part 2: the next generation. *Br Dent J* 2019**227**: 519-539.

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