

## GETTING INTO

## scraper

By **Melanie Parker**, Museum Education Officer, British Dental Association

**T**ongue scrapers may seem to be a recent appearance in chemists' shops but they have a very long history. As far back as the Roman era, a tongue scraper was an essential item in a toilet kit. It sat on a chain alongside a toothpick, nail cleaner and earwax scoop. Many countries around the world had a tradition of tongue cleaning and several religions emphasised cleanliness of the tongue as well as the rest of the mouth. Early Buddhist literature says that if this hygiene practice is not observed: 'The mouth becomes evil smelling, the taste-conducting nerves of the tongue are not cleaned and bile, phlegm and food cover the tongue over.' Hindus kept their mouths clean by turning the twig they had been using as a toothbrush into a tongue scraper. Once the 'bristles' were worn, the twig was split and bent into a V and used as one. Muslims, too, cleaned their tongues, using their *miswaks*.

From the late eighteenth century, toothbrushes and other oral hygiene items began to appear in Europe. Tongue scrapers could be bought separately or as part of an ornate oral hygiene set of toothbrush, toothpowder pot, toothpick and scaler.

This shovel-shaped tongue scraper **1** follows the design used by the Romans. The shovel was often beautifully decorated with floral motifs engraved in the silver. Another tongue scraper **2** is halfway between a shovel and another shape called a hoe. Some hoe designs had a serrated edge.

The simplest form of tongue scraper was a strip of gold, silver or tortoiseshell that the user bent between their fingers and thumbs into an arc. Sometimes the shaping was made permanent and handles were added **3**.

People continued to produce new designs of tongue scrapers. In 1892, Joseph King from Yorkshire patented an

'improved' instrument for cleaning the tongue with a piece of thin metal in a loop attached to a handle. He said it should be used every morning when cleaning the teeth. This sounds very similar to the tongue scraper recorded as being designed and used by John Henry Badcock on patients with fractured jaws **4**. The handle is brass and the loop made from a watch spring.

Tongue scrapers of a similar shape, but made from ivory and tortoiseshell, were advertised for sale at the Army and Navy Co-operative Society in London – but at 9 shillings (£37) each they must have had a very limited appeal!

Badcock was a president of the British Dental Association (BDA) from 1925 to 1926. During World War I, he treated jaw injuries at the London General Hospital and then, at the Richmond Military Hospital, German prisoners of war.

