

Interpreting wigs in British portraits. An examination of the influence of fashion, politics and war on the styling of British wigs and hair from the mid-seventeenth to the early-nineteenth centuries.

By Felicite Gillham (felicite@gillywigs.co.uk)

Notes from Felicite's presentation delivered at the *Dress & Textile Specialists* and *Understanding British Portraits* joint seminar 'Portraits and Textiles' on 17 January 2012 at Norwich Castle Museum.

Although we are discussing English wigs, there is really no difference between the fashionable styles which were imitated throughout Europe and indeed the Colonies at that time.

With the death of Cromwell came the end of Puritan abstemiousness. When Charles II returned to London in 1660 from his exile to the French Court, he brought with him the French fashion of wig wearing.

Wigs in the West were originally made on a caul collected from a recent birth. Today we use a net base, but the term 'caul net' is still used for the foundation material. There are no wigs existing that were made on a caul. I assume because the caul would have rotted away. Hair does not rot, but the wig would have just fallen to pieces.

Wigs of the best quality were made of real human hair as they are today. Hair has always been expensive and apart from the cost, there is a mystique about it. People believed that the soul of the donor remained with the hair and they feared that a wig might have been made from the hair of a harlot, a murderer or other unsavoury person. Because of this, the provenance of hair is very important. Hair is collected mainly in markets in the more remote parts of Europe, or from nunneries where the nuns sell the hair of postulants. Hair merchants will 'set up' in a market and girls go to have their hair cut off in full view of the public.

The quality and colour of hair changes as one moves across the world. Scandinavian hair is traditionally pale blond, French Hair, red or light brown, German hair yellow blond, Italian and Spanish hair darkest brown.

Indian hair is a completely different quality that we normally think of as black but in Northern India there are many with light or red hair and Indian hair grows to be the longest in the world. Further East, Asian hair is known to be straight and black.

Cadaver hair is and always has been, seriously frowned upon. This was a problem during the great plague of 1665. People were desperately worried that wigs were being made from the hair of those who had died of the plague. And indeed it is documented that coffins were raided and relatives offered money for the hair of the newly deceased. Men were in a difficult position, for hygienic reasons they shaved their heads, but needed to wear a wig for every other reason. Many men went without wigs at this time.

Contrary to popular belief nits and lice do not live in wigs. Nits need a scalp to feed upon.

Wigs were worn for many reasons but mainly by men and mainly for reasons of vanity either because they were losing their hair or as a sign of wealth, and position.

Wigs that came into fashion when Charles II regained the throne were of natural colours and tolerably natural looking but they became larger and larger. These wigs were known as 'Full Bottom wigs' from the French 'allonger peruke' - to lengthen.

A man's social status could be deduced from the style of his wig. The larger and more elaborate the wig, the grander the man. This caused wig styles to get really out of hand. By 1673 wigs could reach down as far as the hips, the hair on top of the head built up into 'horns' and were very heavy indeed. Men gave up wearing hats because a hat simply would not fit on top of a wig. Hats were then carried under the left arm. This is frequently to be seen in portraiture.

Full Bottom wigs were not worn in the everyday home situation. They were worn only in public or on formal occasions. In the home a cap was worn, called a morning cap or night cap, or perhaps a smaller wig.

The hairlines of these large wigs were always 'round', never following the natural hairline. Although not always the case, they are normally pictured being worn fairly far back from the face. A centre break was also the norm. Initially both ladders (the long side pieces) were worn forward then it was considered fashionable to have one ladder forward, normally over the left shoulder. The Full Bottom style was at its peak in 1700.

By 1680 the wig was regarded as a symbol of knowledge, power, status and dignity. The legal wigs of today have not changed much in 350 years. They are really part of a uniform indicating authority and power. Until 1965 a Judge had the power to take life. A Judge's wig has a small hole in the centre of the crown that is there specifically to allow the wisdom of the Almighty to enter and advise him. The black cap that a Judge used to put on when pronouncing a death sentence was there to cover this small hole in his wig, presumably as a precaution in case the Almighty disagreed with his decision.

In the early 1700's wigs became shorter, they were nearly always grey in colour or powdered. White hair was considered flattering but white hair was very hard to find and very expensive, so powdering was the alternative. In the earliest years of the century, wigs with queues were not considered fashionable and were worn mostly for travelling, however, eventually the neater style of wig tied at the nape that was easier to wear became the most usual.

There were many, many styles of wig but a popular style had rolls at the sides and a queue at the back tied at the nape of the neck with a bow. Sometimes the queue was a mass of curls and referred to as a tye wig. Another style was named after the Earl of Cadogan in which the hair hanging at the back was folded up and tied securely. Another was the Ramillies wig, named after the battle where the English defeated the French in 1706. This had a long braided queue at the back. Another popular style was the knotted wig where the bottoms of the front ladders were formed into a knot.

Both wigs and hair were powdered, initially with wheat flour, but powder did not stay on the hair, therefore the wig was first covered with grease, beef dripping, lard, or pomatum and the powder then blown or dusted over all with a 'powder puff' or bellows. A freshly powdered wig was becoming and striking, but had to be maintained and re-powdered during an evening. Hence the 'Powder Rooms' we find in older hotels. In a large house powdering would have been done by a valet in a room designated as a powder closet. Otherwise wigs would have been sent back to the wigmaker or barber and redressed and freshly powdered once a week.

Wig making was so important to the economy that in 1762 the export of hair was forbidden. And at this time there was a fashion for men to wear the queue in a large bag tied with a bow at the nape of the neck. This protected the jacket and kept the hair neat. It became the accepted fashion until the end of the century. At this time some men

would dress their hair to look like a wig and perhaps add rolls of false hair at the sides with a queue at the back, then powder the resulting style.

Up to 1770 women's hairstyles were raising in height, but between 1780 and 1790 they reached bizarre proportions that were said to have been started by Marie Antoinette. She may or may not have started the fashion but she certainly did have her hair built up to amazing proportions and this triggered the fashion in the UK as well. The Duchess of Devonshire was known to favour these extreme styles that reached three feet in height and then had Ostrich feathers, ribbons and other decoration added.

It is frequently thought that the huge styles of the late 1770's and 1780's were wigs and maybe some were, but on the whole the coiffure was achieved by starting with the woman's own hair and adding a cage made of wicker, stuffed with horse hair and greased wool that was securely fixed to the head. The woman's hair was pulled up over the cage and then hairpieces added. The whole plastered with paste, beef dripping or other fats to keep the hair in place and then powdered. It would take many hours to achieve this and the style could stay in place for up to 3 months! These styles were known as 'A Head,' hence we have the saying 'to get a head'. This term was originally used to refer to hairdressing not advancement.

Travelling became very difficult for ladies with high hairstyles. We are told that the seats in carriages were removed and the ladies required to crouch on the floor. At this time one of the doorways of St. Pauls was raised to accommodate the fashion and it is to be noted that many stately homes have very high doorways, possibly raised at this time.

Ladies demonstrated their political loyalties by adding all kinds of decoration to their hairdos. One sported a model sea battle complete with a model of a frigate in full sail with cannons and flags. Another was 'the battle of Bunker Hill' where the British defeated the Americans. There are reports of small bottles of water put into the hair so that fresh flowers could be added along with all manner of vegetables, fruits, feathers and baskets of flowers.

Heavy perfumes were used to counter the rancid smell and it is documented that mice were frequent visitors at night. In order to distract other unwelcome visitors to the confection, a 'flea trap' would be placed in the coiffure. This, a small ivory phial with holes into which was placed cotton wool soaked in honey and blood. (I have one of these).

There was a serious problem when wheat flour was still being used for powdering after the harvest had failed and bread was short. Thereafter any number of products were used to make wig powder, apart from wheat flour, ground up bones and starch to French chalk and even ground up pearls.

From 1790 women's hair styles reduced in size and although they still added rolls and hair pieces, the whole effect was more normal mass of curls.

When the French Revolution started, wig wearing was frowned upon as it was considered a sign of decadence. Some women had their hair cut very short and many men wore their own hair.

In 1795 we were at war with the French and the Tory government of the day decided to levy a tax on wig powdering in order to help fund the war effort. One guinea a year was charged for the certificate to allow powdering. This certificate had to be obtained from the local JP. The men who paid up were called 'guinea pigs'. Whigs tended to decline to pay the tax. Tories however paid up, and it is said, even powdered their horses to make a point. In the first year this tax raised £210,136.00 but receipts began to fall and by

1801 it was correct for a gentleman to wear his own hair cut short. However Footmen in great houses were expected to wear wigs until 1900.

Otherwise at the beginning of the C19th only clergymen, doctors and lawyers remained faithful to a fashion that had been universal for a century and a half.