

Notes & queries

Guardian 27.05.09

A brief history of shaving

When did people start shaving, and what did they use before metal razors were introduced? When did soap start to be used for shaving?

● Women only started shaving with metal razors in large numbers during the 20th century. However, women have removed hair from their bodies for millennia. The cotton method, using thread wrapped around the fingers in a form of cat's cradle, has been used to pluck facial hairs from Asian women for centuries. And sugaring, using a paste made of heated sugar, water and lemon, has been practised for even longer among Arabic women to remove all body hair.

Men have been shaving for much longer. Four thousand years ago, the richer ancient Egyptians were using copper and then bronze razors to remove facial and head hair. They hated long hair and saw it as a sign of dirtiness and neglect. Neither copper nor bronze razors make effective blades though, so pumice stone and other scraping devices were used to finish off the job.

There is not much written about daily life and ablutions before the Egyptians, so it lies in the hands of archaeologists and even anthropologists to discover and divine what objects were used for shaving. Early man on all the continents resorted to the basic elements: chips of flint and sharpened horn could be used to saw off and cut facial hair.

Native South Americans would gash a block of obsidian volcanic glass producing slivers of stone



Just the job... Johnny Depp as Sweeney Todd

that are sharper than a modern razor. However, these flakes blunt very easily and three or four would be needed for a full shave. Bivalve shells, such as mussels would be used by those who only needed to pluck out the occasional hair.

I'm not an expert on what qualifies as "soap", but if it's the substance made of vegetable oils then this is apparently an invention by Muslim chemists in the 8th century, so one assumes it would have been used while shaving around that time.

Dominique Joyeux (researcher of In Search of the Perfect Shave), Sutton, Surrey

● Surely a better question is: "Why did people start shaving?"
Chris Parkins, Stanmore, Middx

A black friar in Lincoln green?

In the new BBC series Robin Hood, why is Friar Tuck a black churchman, able to speak Latin and English? Surely it is anachronistic and distorts history?

● The outlaw Robin Hood has always been a figure about whom countless stories have been written based upon a virtually

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