# Masculinity, modernity and male baldness, *c.*1880-1939

In 1922, the body of a 46-year-old railway worker from Taunton was found in a river. He had been off work with a heart condition for two months and during this time he had lost almost all his hair. His wife told the inquest that this caused people to look at him, leading him to talk of suicide. The man's heart condition meant an open verdict was returned but this was not a unique case of hair loss being implicated in male suicide.[1] That was not how millions of other British men in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reacted to the experience but such cases do point to the anxieties and worry that baldness could create in sufferers and the attention that the condition could bring. Baldness had consequences.

Yet understanding what those consequences were is not straightforward. Despite the condition's ubiquity, historians have given little attention to baldness. One exception is Anu Korhonen's study of early-modern England. She found that on the occasions when baldness was discussed, it was treated as humorous and inconsequential. She suggests that this allowed men to protect themselves against any suggestion that they were indulging in effeminate vanity. The lack of seriousness accorded to baldness indicates, according to Korhonen, that it did matter to men and that this was rooted in the precariousness of contemporary masculinity. But she also concluded that there was no 'absolute and shared view' of the baldness and reactions to it were 'contingent and idiosyncratic'.[2]

As this article will show, there are clear parallels between baldness in the early modern period and late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Britain. Both public and private comment remained rare but the discussions and depictions of baldness in print and popular culture that do exist show that it was seen as a sign of aging and sometimes as unsightly, ugly or ridiculous, a falling short of male physical perfection. When Mass Observation asked men about the issue in the 1930s, it was clear that most disliked and worried about baldness but to varying degrees of depth. Further evidence of male anxiety around baldness comes from the advertisements for preventatives and cures that littered

[1] *Western Daily Press*, 14 August 1922. For other examples see *Evening Despatch*, 1 December 1941. *Illustrated Police News*, 23 April 1910. *Nottingham Journal*, 3 March 1936.

[2] Anu Korhonen, 'Strange Things Out of Hair: Baldness and Masculinity in Early Modern England', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 41, 2 (2010), 371-91. The only other account of the history of baldness is the US-focussed narrative Kerry Segrave, *Baldness: A Social History* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 1996).

newspapers. Yet baldness was also sometimes said to signify good humour, wisdom, and intelligence. Baldness could even be seen as masculine. Women did not usually go bald, and, for the Victorians in particular, the volume and thickness of hair was central to conceptions of feminine beauty and sexuality.[3] This made a lack of hair a signifier of masculinity in itself.

There was thus competing discourses around baldness and it was an emotional as much as a physical experience. Yet the relationship between the articulation of feeling and actual feeling is always more complex than it can first appear. Both the expressions of acceptance and revulsion of baldness might either downplay or exaggerate the depth of feeling. The relative infrequency of comment might signal an apathy towards the topic or that it was something too uncomfortable to put into words. It is possible that baldness drew from sufferers and onlookers both deep-seated reactions and none at all. Moreover, men's sense of self was never just dependent on one factor and nor did others judge men in such narrow terms. Baldness could thus never be the sole determinant of a man's standing and there was no universal response to it. Few liked baldness but some men were vainer than others. Hair loss probably mattered less to those who felt secure in their jobs, families, and bodies. It certainly mattered most to those who experienced it when they were young and it was unexpected. But it seems to be a rare man who did not care at all about losing his hair.

The competing responses to baldness were rooted in the character of masculinity. The historiography is dominated by the late Victorian and Edwardian periods but there were strong continuities beyond this. Masculinity was always something 'complex, fluid and full of contradictions'.[4] Men were supposed to be tough and resilient but to also control their physicality and not give in to its urges. They were supposed to be paternal, caring and a provider but also not to display excess emotion. They were supposed to be aesthetically pleasing but not overly worry about being so. This meant there were a variety of male ideals, which sometimes seemed at odds with each other.[5] Achieving any of these ideals was not

[3] Galia Ofek, *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

[4] Ben Griffin, 'Hegemonic Masculinity as a Historical Problem', *Gender & History* 30, 2 (2018), pp. 377-400, p. 379.

[5] On athleticism see J. A. Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School: The Emergence and Consolidation of an Educational Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). On emotion see Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011). On competing physical ideas see Joanne Ella Parsons and Ruth Heholt (eds), *The Victorian Male*

straightforward in a modernizing society undergoing significant cultural and economic change. As women's status improved in the nineteenth century, some historians have even claimed there was a crisis in masculinity as men strove to assert their manliness and inherent difference to the other sex.[6] The competing and contradictory demands on men certainly meant masculinity had a psychic fragility. Michael Roper and John Tosh argue that 'masculinity is never fully possessed, but must perpetually be achieved, asserted, and renegotiated.'[7] Yet the anxieties that fed this process, and were amplified by it, can often be invisible in the historical record because to admit to them was to fall short of a male ideal.[8] Baldness was part of this context of masculine fragility and insecurity. Men worried about its actual and potential impact on their dignity, looks and thus their masculinity. Yet articulating this made them vulnerable to being thought of as indulging in the perceived feminine trait of vanity.[9] Nonetheless, their fears left enough of a historical trace for a study of baldness to offer a rare insight into how deep masculine anxieties could run and how they played out in mundane everyday situations.

The instability of masculinity meant that men went to efforts to 'perform' and assert their manhood.[10] Bodies were central to how men produced and 'performed' masculinity to themselves and to the wider world; they could be manipulated, changed, hidden and exposed.[11] The ideal of the rugged athletic male body was a product of this. It was an ideal

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*Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017). On aesthetics see Paul Deslandes, 'The Male Body, Beauty and Aesthetics in Modern British Culture', *History Compass* 8, 10 (2010), pp. 1191-208.

[6] For a discussion of this and masculinity more broadly see John Tosh, 'Masculinities in an Industrializing Society: Britain, 1800–1914', *Journal of British Studies* 44, 2 (2005), pp. 330-342.

[7] Michael Roper and John Tosh, 'Historians and the Politics of Masculinity', in Michael Roper and John Tosh (eds), *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 1-24, pp. 15, 18. Cf. Michael Roper, 'Slipping out of view: subjectivity and emotion in gender history', *History Workshop Journal*, 59 (2005), 57-72, p. 63.

[8] One theme where the historiography does foreground male insecurity is sex. See Lesley A. Hall, *Hidden Anxieties: Male Sexuality, 1900-1950* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).

[9] Christopher Breward, *The Culture of Fashion: A New History of Fashionable Dress* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 176. Caroline Cox, *Good Hair Days: A History of British Hairdressing* (London: Quartet, 1999), p. 29.

[10] Penny Summerfield, 'Concluding Thoughts: Performance, the Self and Women's History', *Women's History Review* 22 (2013), pp. 345-52.

[11] Joanne Begiato, *Manliness in Britain, 1760-1900: Bodies, Emotion and Material Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

concentrated in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras but physical health, strength and beauty remained important concepts in interwar Britain and ones that were increasingly marketed in consumer culture. Throughout the period, hair was another physical performance and measure of masculinity. Alun Withey and others have shown how facial hair had a such role but historians have paid very little attention to how hair on the male head could also be used and interpreted.[12] Sociologist Anthony Synnott has argued that hair 'is perhaps our most powerful symbol of individual and group identity – powerful first because it is physical and therefore extremely personal, and second because, although personal, it is also public rather than private.'[13] Jonathon Shears has argued that hair took on 'formations and expressions of the self' and talks of 'hair consciousness' as people read the hair of others and fashioned and worried about their own. He shows how hair was used 'in the nineteenth century to distinguish between man and woman, youth and age, gentility and coarseness, cleanliness and dirtiness, illness and health'.[14] The empirical evidence behind such assertions is based on women but a study of baldness shows that hair mattered to men too.[15] To lose one's hair was to be restricted in how the body could be employed to perform and to demonstrate a man's character and masculinity. It could affect both a man's standing in the eyes of others and his own sense of self.

Baldness also reveals how attitudes to seemingly timeless physical conditions were shaped by evolving social and cultural conditions. All periods witness change, but the speed and sense of change was particularly acute for many Victorians and they had a profound, if ill-defined, sense of living in a modern age. James Vernon sees the creation of a 'society of strangers' and the rise of individualism as consequences of the upheavals of population growth, urbanization and greater physical mobility brought about modernization. He argues that this led to a 'culture of performance that increasingly attended the tasks of crafting and

[12] Alun Withey, *Concerning Beards: Facial Hair, Health and Practice in England, 1650-1900* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

[13] Anthony Synnott, 'Shame and Glory: a Sociology of Hair', *Sociology*, 38, 3 (1987), pp. 381-413.

[14] Jonathon Shears, 'Self and Society: Hair Consciousness in the Age of Empire', in Sarah Heaton (ed.), *A Cultural History of Hair in the Age of Empire* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), pp. 35–52, pp. 37, 51.

[15] For the historiography of hair see *A Bloomsbury Cultural History of Hair, vols, 1-6* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018/19).

projecting the self'.[16] Anxieties around baldness can be understood as partly driven by this but also by the very sense of modernity. Bernhard Rieger and Martin Daunton argue that from the 1870s ideas around modernity diversified and it became a term that was used to describe society in a wide variety of social and cultural contexts.[17] This sense of modernity did not go away as the pace of technological and social change gathered pace in the twentieth century and it continued to shape how people understood and used their bodies. All this is evident in how modernity framed some understandings of baldness. Modernity and the conditions of modern life seemed so pervasive that they were used to explain the causes of baldness. Moreover, because society seemed to be changing so profoundly, there were also assumptions that the frequency of baldness was changing too. Yet modernity should not be regarded as all encompassing. Among the characteristics Daunton and Rieger see in modernity is a fundamental 'shift in authority and prestige' from religion to science.[18] But what baldness shows is that old superstitions and inherently unscientific views of the world remained commonplace in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras and continued into the supposedly more enlightened interwar period. Indeed, some of the scientific images increasingly employed in promised cures of baldness might appear modern on the surface but were actually little more than quackery and deception.

This article is thus the first analysis of how male baldness was viewed by sufferers and wider society in late nineteenth and early-mid twentieth-century Britain. It moves the historiography of hair on from its focus on women. It reaffirms the historiographical view of masculinity as something embodied, precarious, unstable and in flux but adds to it by showing how this was contributed to by a physical condition that affected millions of men and that at all were at risk of. In doing so, it is a rare study of male anxiety outside unique conditions such as war. Much of the historiography of modern masculinity concentrates on the period before 1914 but considering a physical condition shows the strong continuities that existed in the interwar period. Moreover, men's varied different reactions to baldness is evidence of how masculinity differed as much by personality as by class. That might seem self-evident, but it is a point that is not to the fore in any discussion of the subject. Baldness

[16] James Vernon, *Distant Strangers: How Britain became Modern* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2014), p. 49.

[17] Bernhard Rieger and Martin Daunton, 'Introduction' in Martin Daunton & Bernhard Rieger (eds), *Meanings of Modernity: Britain from the Late Victorian Era to World War II* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), pp. 2-3.

[18] Ibid, p. 3.

also shows how masculinity could be framed by ideas of modernity. Historians have asserted how important that concept is for understanding late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Britain but baldness demonstrates both how deep and shallow that the concept could be. Thus, as the article concludes, baldness was about so much more than just losing hair.

**Men and their hair**

Men in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods were concerned with dress, fashion and ways of improving their appearance. Although male sartorial options were far narrower than for women, men still used clothes to signify their status and their individuality.[19] This was as true of the working classes, although their economic circumstances acted as a significant curtailment on what was possible.[20] Hair offered a cheaper way of changing one's appearance than clothes but the convention amongst all classes for wearing hats outside meant it was not a primary outlet for expressions of masculinity and individuality.[21] Instead, more often, it had been facial hair that was used to express oneself. From the 1850s to the 1880s, beards were popular amongst all the classes. They were symbols of traditional manliness and thought to mark men's health, vitality and qualities of character. They also demarcated men from women because only men could grow them. Christopher Oldstone-Moore and Alun Withey have both argued the mid-century popularity of the beard was rooted in a desire to reassert masculinity and male authority amidst the uncertainties and upheavals of industrialization and associated cultural changes.[22] In such circumstances, it is unlikely that losing one's hair undermined many men's masculinity since having a beard not only diverted attention from a bald pate but also confirmed the manliness of its bearer.  Yet, even when beards were

[19] Christopher Breward, *The Hidden Consumer: Masculinities, Fashion and City Life 1860-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1914). Brent Shannon, 'Refashioning Men: Fashion, Masculinity and the Cultivation of the Male Consumer in Britain, 1860-1914', *Victorian Studies* 46, 4 (2004), pp. 597-630.

[20] Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working-Class Culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900-39* (Oxford: Open University Press, 1992), p. 35.  Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum, Salford Life: in the First Quarter of the Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971), pp. 22-3.

[21] Male conformity to hat wearing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is evident in photographs of urban crowds. Peter Andersson, *Silent History: Body Language and Nonverbal Identity, 1860-1914* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018), p. 190.

[22] Christoper Oldstone-Moore, 'The beard movement in Victorian Britain', *Victorian Studies* 48, 1 (2005), pp. 7-34. Withey, *Concerning Beards*

popular, concern about thinning hair could still be described as men's 'weakness'.[23] In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, beards faded from fashion, perhaps influenced by the growth in sports which provided an alternative opportunity to 'perform' masculinity, and by what John Tosh has called a flight from domesticity, where some upper middle-class men rejected the domestic paternalism that beards had symbolized.[24] Or perhaps it was just that the fashion had run its course. Whatever the cause, by 1880, the newly unfashionable status of beards set the stage for a more complex response to hair loss.

Large beards had often been accompanied by hair long enough to show some curl or wave but, by the late nineteenth century, the fashion for men of all classes was to wear their hair short. The facts that heads were sometimes cropped upon admittance to workhouses and that the heads of convicts and 'lunatics' were routinely shaved, however, curtailed how short hair went. Thus at the start of the period, even amongst men who were voluntarily 'clipping' their hair, the fashion was still for a long fringe.[25] In the following decades, short at the back and sides, with more length on top remained the dominant style for all ages. As the interwar years progressed, styles did become more diverse but were still characteristically sleek and neat.[26] However, controlling hair with some form of cream now became very common and, as early as 1920, observers were noting a fashion for young men to 'wear their hair plastered and greased back'.[27] This was a development of the earlier nineteenth-century fashion for barbers to apply shampoos, pomades and lotions to men's hair, which itself might be seen as part of an older fashion for grooming products to aid shaving and beard care.[28] Although not all could afford a trip to the barber, such treatments, like the existence of broader hair fashions, are evidence of how attentive some men were to their hair. Perhaps this is only to be expected when ugliness could be seen as unmanly and depictions of handsome males in

[23] 'Lubrication at the Hairdresser's', *Chamber's Journal,* 11 January 1868, p. 31.

[24] Oldstone-Moore, 'The beard movement', p. 29. John Tosh, 'Home and Away: The Flight from Domesticity in Late-Nineteenth-Century England Revisited', *Gender and History* 27, 3 (2015), pp. 561-75.

[25] 'Fashions in hair', *Daily News*, 9 June 1871.

[26] For comment on male hair styles see *Gloucestershire Echo,* 24 December 1909; *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 27 February 1925; Gilbert A. Foan, *The Art and Craft of Hairdressing* (London: Isaac Pitman, 1931).

[27] *Western Morning News*, 13 October 1920.

[28] Withey, *Concerning Beards*, ch. 11.

fiction often portrayed men as having luxuriant hair.[29] Hair might have been marginalized in studies of embodied masculinity but it did matter and some men took great care and pride in it.

However, despite the popularity of male grooming, hair remained a secondary source of individual identity, at least in public, because of the convention of hat wearing, something which also prevented baldness from being a source of public embarrassment.[30] Yet hats were removed inside and many men did look for ways to distract from their lack of hair. A few took to wigs but these do not seem to have been very common.[31] A reluctance to don a wig may have been because it would leave men vulnerable to accusations of feminine vanity. Instead, some men looked to disguise their baldness by brushing the remaining hair over it, something especially common if the bald patch was relatively narrow or hair remained in the centre of the forehead. However, the comb-over was a style that attracted occasional derision for being deceptive and vain. In 1895, for example, a joke was repeated across the local press that a man would 'unblushingly' comb his hair over a bald spot but expect 'a fruiterer to put his smallest apples in the top layer of a box'.[32] Such mockery could be avoided by ignoring fashion and growing a beard to detract the gaze from a lack of hair on top. By the 1890s, it was being noted that only middle-aged and old men now wore beards, something probably not unrelated to younger men having more hair.[33] This was not to everyone's taste and one 1890 report even proclaimed it was 'humiliating to observe what a large proportion of bald

[29] Begatio, *Manliness*, p. 53 & ch. 2. This male pride in hair is also evident in contemporary fiction. For example, Daniel Owen (translator: Adam Pearce), *Fireside Tales* (Talybont: Y Lolfa, [1884-5] 2011), p. 81.

[30] Bulky clothes also had the same function of protecting men from scrutiny about their body shape at a time of concern around the health of British males. See Katherine Faulkner, 'The Good Soldier: Gilbert Bayes and the Chivalric Statuette', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 36, 4 (2014), 307-21.

[31] For a contemporary advertisement see Bond & Son's 'Coverings for semi or complete baldness or grey hair'. *Illustrated London News*, 27 April 1889. On the use of wigs see 'How nature's mistakes are put right', *Pearson's Weekly*, 21 October 1893, p.1. On their rarity see 'Concerning wigs', *The Leisure Hour*, 13 May 1871. Thackeray's enduringly popular novel *Vanity Fair* contains a mockery of a wig-wearing Lieutenant-General Sir George Tufto. William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair: A Novel without a Hero* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz), vol. II, p. 33.

[32] *Falkirk Herald*, 6 February 1895. In 1921 the joke was being repeated but this time about potatoes and grocers. *Falkirk Herald*, 13 August 1921.

[33] Susan Walton, 'From Squalid Impropriety to Manly Respectability: The Revival of Beards, Moustaches and Martial Values in the 1850s in England', *Nineteenth-Century Context* 30, 3 (2008), 229-45, p. 242.

ratepayers wear the beard.'[34] A more common tactic employed by balding men throughout the period was just to wear their remaining hair longer than the norm. A 1931 manual on hairdressing said that after cutting the hair of an elderly gentlemen it 'must still be of considerable length'. It also advised on how to cut receding and thinning hair with the object of making it 'appear very much thicker and fuller'.[35]

Detracting from one's baldness was understandable given the negative way baldness was seen throughout the period. In 1898, one journalist claimed that the time when a man first realised he was going bald was a 'moment of sadness'. He attributed this to a realisation of aging and the loss of looks but also 'because there is an inevitable, but quite incomprehensible, tendency to jeer at bald heads even from the days of Elijah and the wicked boys to the present year of grace'.[36] A 1909 article, which claimed that men in the suburbs were carrying their hats because they might cause baldness, said that for those already afflicted the biggest obstacle to going bare headed was the 'City street boy'.[37] A 1918 advertisement for a cures from a Belfast 'hair specialist' professor warned 'No person likes to be called Bald or Grey-headed. It is bad enough to have the feeling that people are passing remarks about you; but if a number of children followed you for this for this purpose you would be inclined to feel violent.'[38] It seems unlikely that it was very common for boys to mock bald men in public but there were repeated claims in the press that baldness was a cause of humour and even derision.[39] In 1887, the *Pall Mall Gazette* caused controversy when it called the Prince of Wales a 'fat little bald man'. One 'disgusted' newspaper letter called these 'coarsest comments' an insult to 'the general feeling of a whole nation'[40] In 1906, a writer in the *Sketch* who claimed he was not bald himself, said he was 'distressed' by the 'absurd increase in prejudice against bald men'.[41] Another writer in 1915 claimed that

[34] *The Star*, 22 May 1890.

[35] Foan, *Art and Craft of Hairdressing*, pp. 97, 100.

[36] Nuttall, G Clarke, 'The Secret of Baldness', *Contemporary Review*, March 1898, pp. 356-361.

[37] *Evening Express & Evening Mail*, 25 September 1909. It noted that men would not go without hats completely because that would seem eccentric.

[38] *Irish Independent*, 18 October 1918. The advertisement was headlined '42 children slain for calling a man bald head' in reference to a supposed event 'some thousands years ago'.

[39] *Northern Echo*, 11 January 1889.

[40] *Globe*, 23 June 1887.

[41] *The Sketch*, 24 October 1906.

bald men had to 'endure a great many jokes from the public'.[42] In 1919, even the medical correspondent of *The Times* called baldness 'a very unsightly and distressing condition'.[43]

One cause of such prejudices, and thus the masculine precarity they fed, may have been how baldness was repeatedly employed in popular culture to exaggerate or convey certain characteristics. As the popular cartoon character Ally Sloper (1867-1916) demonstrated, baldness added to an individual's ridiculousness. Bald men were common enough comic figures in the music hall that bald wigs were available from theatre suppliers.[44] Fat bald men were also employed in fiction and film to signify men who were physically undesirable to the opposite sex.[45] Bald men, usually older, overweight or spindly, were poked fun at in postcards too, with jokes centring on how they resembled babies or all looked alike. Such figures were implicitly a falling short of the Victorian and Edwardian ideal of the strong and muscular man. These ideals intensified in the 1930s when health and fitness became something of a craze fed by the new ideals emanating from Hollywood.[46] However, not everyone approved of the humour and a 25-year-old told Mass Observation in 1939 'Going bald is a tragedy, and the bald man should be pitied and not laughed at.'[47]

Snide or humorous assessments of the condition did not necessarily mean widespread or deep-felt disdain towards baldness. After all, as Michael Roper has warned, there is a danger of assuming discourses are the same as lived experiences.[48] Instead, they are probably exaggerated examples of something that was seen as unattractive but also relatively unserious. Certainly, the general tone of the mocking tended towards the gentle. Typical jokes included portraying bald heads as shining domes, billiard balls or doorknobs. Geoffrey Gorer's 1955 book on English character noted how the most popular humour owed much to insulting and humiliating 'real or supposed physical defects' such as baldness. Yet, it claimed that these jokes did not draw much hurt or humiliation because of the humorous context.[49] It

[42] *Brecon County Times*, 1 April 1915.
[43] 'Why men go bald', *The Times*, 24 April 1919.
[44] *C. H. Fox's Illustrated Catalogue* (London: Chas. H. Fox, 1884), p. 11.
[45] For example, W. Somerset Maugham, *Christmas Holiday* (London: Vintage [1939], 2001), p. 246.
[46] Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Managing the Body: Beauty, Health, and Fitness in Britain, 1880-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
[47] Mass Observation, *Personal Appearance. Part 1: Hands, Face and Hair*. File report A21 (1939), p. 82.
[48] Roper, 'Slipping out of view'.
[49] Geoffrey Gorer, *Exploring English Character* (New York: Criterion, 1955), p. 289.

is impossible, however, to be certain of a lack of hurt since to have reacted angrily would have been to risk appearing vain, weak or even silly. This was partly because much of the humour was faintly ridiculous. In 1894, one newspaper joke had an artistic wife offering to paint a spider on her bald husband's head in order to keep the flies away when he slept.[50] In 1912, the *Daily Mirror* published a cartoon joking about the uses a man's bald head could be put to such as a mirror, space for advertising or somewhere to draw a map.[51] In this context, how hurt someone might be by the humour probably came down to how sensitive they were. Indeed, some of the humour came from people who were bald themselves and perhaps trying to display their stoicism or deflect from and control the negative associations. The interwar comedian Ronald Franka, for example, likened his bald head to an ostrich egg and said he always wore a hat because he hated going around naked.[52] Some even tried to find humour in supposed positive sides to hair loss. In 1939, *The Times* suggested bald men were lucky since they paid no barber bills, bought no hair products, and had easier lives because they did not need to listen the political opinions of barbers, or worry about their hair being out of place or about going bald.[53]

It seems that between the wars, men's anxiety about baldness intensified. Hair became more obviously important as a signifier of male status and individuality thus making baldness a more serious condition. This is not to underplay the extent to which men before 1914 were concerned with their hair (or lack of it) but there were a number of new factors at play that intensified the role of hair as a signifier of self-identity. The toll of war had challenged notions of manly resilience and increased attention on the male body as injuries and disabilities encouraged dialogue around bodily aesthetics and recovery.[54] After 1918, fitness and physical wellbeing were increasingly celebrated and promoted not just for their health and but also their aesthetic benefits, while the emergence of the cinema age offered all classes

[50] *Falkirk Herald*, 26 September 1894.

[51] *Daily Mirror*, 7 December 1912.

[52] 'Now another item from Ronald Frankau of Radio & Film Fame' (1931) http://www.britishpathe.com/video/ronald-frankau-2

[53] 'Fortune favours the bald', *The Times*, 3 April 1939.

[54] Joanna Bourke *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chocago Press, 1996). Tracy Loughran, 'A Crisis of Masculinity? Re-writing the History of Shellshock and Gender in First World War Britain', *History Compass* 11, 9 (2013), pp. 727–38.

new markers of what attractive and stylish men and women could look like.[55] This all contributed to what James Stark has termed a 'Cult of youth' where men tried to cling to or recapture their youth.[56] Old and young worried about whether they could live up to the male physical ideal. In an expanding consumer culture, a growing number of advertised products promised stronger, cleaner, smarter and more attractive bodies, teeth and hair, thus taking advantage of, and no doubt feeding, the wider cultural concern with physical appearance.[57] A study of advertising in 1935-39 issues of the middle-class magazine *Men Only* found that a third were for products related to male bodies and grooming, such as shaving products, hair lotions and clothes.[58]

The impact of these aesthetic concerns on attitudes to hair was exacerbated by the 1930s retreat in the convention for hat wearing, part of a general relaxation in attitudes towards dress, at least amongst the young.[59] Male hairdressing itself was also trying to create new demands, as the industry modernized its premises and the styles it offered to compensate for the growing number of men who shaved at home rather than at a barbers.[60] Yet magazines still presented the general topic of male fashion in utilitarian and practical terms that ensured

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[55] Zweiniger-Bargielowska *Managing the Body*. Christopher E. Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West: Gender, Civilization and the Body* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), ch. 6. On cinema influencing women's hair see Patricia Malcolmson, *Me and my Hair: A Social History* (Gosport: Chaplin Books, 2012), ch. 4

[56] James F. Stark, *The Cult of Youth: Anti-Ageing in Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[57] Paul R. Deslandes, 'Selling, Consuming and Becoming the Beautiful Man in Britain: The 1930s and 1940s' in Erika Rappaport, Sandra Trudgen Dawson and Mark J. Crowley (eds), *Consuming Behaviours: Identity, Politics and Pleasure in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pp. 53-70. Melanie Tebbutt, *Being Boys: Youth, Leisure and Identity in the Inter-War Years* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2012).

[58] Jill Greenfield, Sean O'Connell, and Chris Reid, 'Fashioning Masculinity: *Men Only*, Consumption and the Development of Marketing in the 1930s', *Twentieth Century British History* 10, 4 (1999), pp. 457–476, pp. 471-2.

[59] Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, ''Healthier and Better Clothes for Me': Men's Dress Reform in Interwar Britain', in Erika Rappaport, Sandra Trudgen Dawson, and Mark J. Crowley (eds), *Consuming Behaviours: Identity, Politics and Pleasure in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pp. 37-51, p. 46. For contemporary noting of hats becoming less common see *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 20 August 1929.

[60] Foan, *Art and Craft of Hairdressing*.

it was not seen as a vain or gullible pursuit.[61] Advertisements themselves took care not to be seen as effeminate. Nuzora, for example, a 1930s hair cream that promised to both keep hair tidy and promote vigorous hair growth, claimed to be 'for men who are men'.[62] Such adverts thus fed into and exacerbated the idea that consumption and caring for one's hair could be masculine.

The disdain and anxiety around baldness was evident in a 1939 Mass Observation investigation where men were asked about their attitudes towards personal appearance. The responses of its working and middle-class volunteers showed that the public narratives around the importance of hair and the fears of hair loss were not simply rhetoric but real feelings, even if they varied in depth and scope. The investigation found that men took pride in and drew fulfilment from fashioning and shaping their appearance since it signified their position in the world and their health. In particular, there was a strong sense that well-groomed hair was socially important and demonstrated self-respect, although respondents also noted that too much attention to appearance was vain and effeminate. It concluded that there was more vanity about hair than other aspects of male appearance and that this was rooted in a desire for social conformity, a pride in the hair itself and a fear of baldness.[63]

Young respondents described going bald as a 'favoured nightmare' or a 'terrifying thought'. A thirty-year-old upholsterer went as far as saying

> I do not care to see bald heads. I can only tolerate them if the owner has a large head, or if his personality will not allow himself to look pitiable. Myself, I should be greatly afraid of going bald, and should be tempted to buy a wig if there was ever need.

A 45-year-old civil servant, who thought that going bald would be a 'major disaster', concluded 'Nothing seems to me to be more obscene than a bald head.'[64] However, there was also stoicism and an acceptance of what was probably inevitable for many. A 24-year-old foreman recorded that his father was bald and he estimated that he would be in a decade. He would be 'sorry' but not 'sufficiently so to take any remedial action'.[65] Another 24-year-old

[61] Greenfield et al, 'Fashioning masculinity', p. 469.

[62] *Birmingham Mail*, 7 March 1939.

[63] Mass Observation, *Personal Appearance*, pp. 65-86. For a more general discussion of the report see Deslandes, 'Selling, Consuming and becoming the Beautiful Man', pp. 61-7.

[64] Mass Observation, *Personal Appearance*, pp. 78, 79.

[65] Mass Observation respondent 1501, response to April 1939 directive on personal appearance.

said he would not like to go bald but it would not be a 'major tragedy'.[66] A few even claimed they would welcome baldness because it would save them money and avoid straggly or untidy hair.[67]

Amongst those actually going bald, there was little evidence of any sense of crisis, although they did dislike the condition. A 45-year-old power-loom tuner recorded that he had been 'a bit disappointed' when his hair started thinning.[68] A 52-year-old locomotive inspector wrote that his bald spot was a 'misfortune'.[69] A 32-year old substation attendant recorded that he could not be bothered to do anything about his receding hair but that it was a 'distasteful thing', owing to the attention it generated.[70] Others recorded that they now wore their hair longer because it was thinning.[71] Overall, in what was a non-scientific survey, 58 percent of men disliked the idea of baldness, with most of the rest being philosophical about it, although some of those still tried to disguise the condition.[72] There was thus no single or even dominant response to baldness and feelings ranged from intense dislike to apparent apathy, although the latter must be caveated by a note of how admitting to vanity was itself seen as unmanly. These variations are a reminder of the individuality of the past and of how the people who inhabited it were 'thinking, feeling selves' rather than a homogenous swathe that can be reduced to easy generalisations.[73]

**The meanings and causes of baldness**

The phlegmatic acceptance of those were bald in middle age probably owed something to how hair loss was generally gradual, giving the sufferer plenty of time to get used to it. It did not hinder people's ability to perform everyday functions and some men might only consider their hair loss when they looked in the mirror. If the hair loss was primarily at the back, it was not even easily visible to the sufferer. Even if it was evident, simply seeing one's appearance

[66] Ibid., respondent 1514.

[67] Ibid., respondents 1447 and 1509.

[68] Mass Observation, *Personal Appearance*, p. 77.

[69] April 1939 directive respondent 1466.

[70] Mass Observation, *Personal Appearance*, p. 82.

[71] April 1939 directive respondents 1522 and 1125.

[72] Mass Observation, *Personal Appearance*, p. 72.

[73] Joe Moran, 'Private Lives, Public Histories: The Diary in Twentieth-century Britain', *Journal of British Studies* 54, 1 (2015), pp. 138-162, p. 161.

did not necessarily mean thinking about it and the mirror's reflection was not unexpected. It was perhaps just a brief moment of melancholy or another inevitable sign of the gradual passing of the years, and one that might not even be as disturbing as aching joints or wrinkles on the face. Mass Observation found repeated assertions from younger men who would not mind baldness in middle age, 'as one suffers in company', but who feared it before then because it would undermine youthful looks and lead people to think they were older than they actually were. As they got older, those who were not going bald could feel a certain superiority over those who were. A 60-year-old-chemist with a full head of hair, recorded that he tended to despise bald men 'as lacking in healthy self-control. … Hair seems to be the result of an abundance of physical vitality. If there is little vitality, or if it is wasted or overexpended, the hair may suffer.'[74]

Hair is thus a reminder that the concept of aging and old age are not fixed categories that start at an agreed point. This was particularly true before the 1909 introduction of state pensions demarcated a start to old age. This ambiguity contributed to what Kay Heath argues was a widespread late Victorian anxiety around middle age, with men and women worrying about their bodies degenerating.[75] Beyond 1909, being elderly remained partly defined by appearance and physical wellbeing and losing one's hair meant some men had to grapple with getting older far earlier than others.[76] There may have been class variations in the significance of this. In contrast to Heath's picture of Victorian middle-aged anxiety, John Benson has argued that for the middle class middle age was often associated with 'maturity, stability and wisdom', whereas for working-class it could mean 'incapacity, instability and decline'.[77] This was because most working men's income was related to their ability to physically labour. While hair loss did not mean a loss of physical strength, it might be taken that way by potential employers or just remind a man beginning to lose his hair of an uncertain future ahead. Losing hair, and thus appearing older, might thus have been easier for the middle classes because middle age signified a certain maturity that was useful in the

[74] Mass Observation, *Personal Appearance*, pp. 74, 75, 76, 80.

[75] Kay Heath, *Aging by the Book: The Emergence of Midlife in Victorian Britain* (Albany: State University Of New York Press, 2010).

[76] Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Lessons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[77] Benson, *Prime Time: A History of the Middle Aged in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London: Longman, 1997), p. 15.

workplace and in social contacts. In 1896, one London doctor complained that his hair was 'inconveniently thick', which hindered his practice because ladies were more drawn to bald men who they thought clever. He reckoned for a doctor baldness was worth an additional £500 in income.[78] Whether such claims were true is another matter, but the perception was there.

Benson argues that the meaning of aging for the different classes converged in the twentieth century. Manual jobs still depended on physical strength meaning working-class men still feared getting older. But middle-class men now also feared losing positions to younger men because, for their class, middle age increasingly represented complacency and lack of vigour as much as wisdom and reliability.[79] One interwar middle-class self-help book even claimed middle age brought mental and physical difficulties for men.[80] Men of both classes were also vulnerable to the vanities and anxieties played upon by the growing consumer industry around male grooming. It may thus have been that, as the twentieth century progressed, middle-class men worried about aging and hair loss more than they once had. George Orwell argued that the aging process was one of the 'few authentic class-differences, as opposed to class-distinctions, still existing in England'. He maintained that the working class lost their youthful appearance earlier and often looked ten years older than the middle classes. But they also, he argued, accepted that being young ended with marriage, whereas the middle classes and to some extent the better off workers had recently begun to seek to 'cling to youth at all costs'.[81]

One reason why men of all classes might worry about hair was what women would think of it. If masculinity is a relational concept, then how women regarded baldness was integral to men's feelings about its importance. However, understanding what women thought of bald men is even more difficult than understanding the position of men. Their reactions were played out in private and possibly not even there sometimes ever voiced for fear of upsetting their man. An anatomist argued in 1885 that no one would assert that 'a

[78] *New York Times*, 17 November 1889. 'The pleasures of baldness', *Saturday Review*, 9 November 1889, p. 508. For similar claims on the usefulness of baldness for MPs see *Daily Mail*, 11 April 1907.

[79] Benson, *Prime Time*, pp. 15-16, 64-65, 88.

[80] *Every Woman's Book of Love & Marriage and Family Life* (London: Amalgamated Press, 1937), p. 162.

[81] George Orwell, 'The art of Donald McGill', *Horizon*, September 1941. For men in physically strenuous job aging earlier see Ben Curtis and Steve Thompson, 'This is the Country of Premature Old Men': Aging and Aged Miners in the South Wales Coalfield, c. 1880-1947', *Cultural and Social History* 12, 4 (2015), pp. 587-606.

smooth head' would help a man in his 'matrimonial projects'.[82] Yet, in 1903, the *Dundee Evening Telegraph* claimed that an 'astonishing number' of bald men were married to 'very beautiful' women and they had been prematurely bald when married. It suggested that women did not see baldness as a defect but rather the reverse.[83] Looks were certainly only one way that women chose husbands and probably secondary to social status and compatibility. Moreover, an older husband, who was more likely to be bald, was not always regarded as a bad thing.[84]

This does not mean that women liked their husbands balding. Oral histories from the early twentieth century found that hair was one of the features that women most valued in assessing a man's attractiveness and there is tentative evidence of women disliking baldness from across the period.[85] In the 1892 humorous novel *The Diary of a Nobody*, the middle-aged protagonist records that his wife 'has several times recently called attention to the thinness of my hair at the top of my head, and recommended me to get it seen to'.[86] The protagonist is supposed to be a ridiculous figure and this brief incident was perhaps intended as another example of his pretensions. Yet part of the book's popularity comes from the warmth of the main character and the fact that readers could see something of their lives in him. Similar attitudes could be found at the other end of the period. In 1929, a fraud case revealed than when a salesman knocked at one Worksop address, a woman had patted her husband's bald head and asked what could be done about it. She spent 4s. on what she thought was a branded hair restorer for him but turned out to be soda water mixed with tea.[87] Four years later, a magazine columnist declared that she, like her husband, had 'a horror of baldness' and was dreading the day when she should have to polish his head before taking him to parties.[88] Such jokes, whether in private or public, may not have presented any real

[82] Daniel John Cunningham, *The Hair*, LSE Selected Pamphlets (1885), p. 105.

[83] *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 4 August 1903.

[84] Claire Langhamer, *The English in Love: The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 64. Jennifer Phegley, *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012).

[85] On women's attraction to men's hair see Simon, Szreter and Kate Fisher, *Sex before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England 1918-1963* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 183, 288-289, 311.

[86] George and Weedon Grossmith, *The Diary of a Nobody* (London: Penguin, [1892], 1999), p. 143.

[87] *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 30 August 1929.

[88] Barbara Back, 'Belinda buys British', *Nash's Pall Mall Magazine*, March 1933, p. 61.

threat to men's marital status or prospects but they surely added another potential anxiety to the psychic condition of masculinity.

There were, however, compensations to going bald. Bald men were sometimes thought to be kind, funny, generous, more accepting of life and even happier. Some claimed it brought 'an air of mildness to the features'.[89] There was even claims that bald people did not get consumption.[90] In 1939, a 26-year-old reported:

> Going bald doesn't worry me unduly. … It's more likely to worry my wife. In any case I have observed that baldness appears to increase in direct ratio to one's salary, and also heralds the arrival of an age of wisdom.[91]

In 1926, there were claims that men balding from the front were less likely to cover it up and instead brushed their hair back because it gave the illusion of more brains.[92] Seeking solace in the popular belief that baldness was a sign of wisdom and intelligence was not uncommon and an idea that dated back at least into the early modern period.[93] Moreover, it could also be used to explain the lack of bald women.[94] Since intelligence itself was thought to be a sign of masculinity, the suggestion that baldness was caused by it must have been reassuring to those concerned that they were being effeminate worrying about their hair.[95] Indeed, it might be that many of the ideas about the positive sides to bald men may have been propagated by such men trying to build a more self-affirming picture of their condition. Even anti-baldness products were not above this and one 1907 advertisement reassured sufferers that 'The man or woman who does not require to think much is rarely bald'.[96]

There were Victorian attempts at scientific arguments for a link between intellectual activity and hair loss. In 1886, for example, one German professor claimed that baldness was

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[89] *Scunthorpe Evening Telegraph*, 12 January 1939. *The Star*, 22 May 1890. Mass Observation, *Personal Appearance*, p. 74. Albert Griffin, 'Are bald head advantageous?', *New Statesman & Nation*, 22 December 1934, p. 937.

[90] For example, *Bicester Herald*, 8 September 1905; *Globe*, 9 November 1912; *Bellshill Speaker*, 22 February 1924.

[91] Mass Observation, *Personal Appearance*, p. 73.

[92] *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 10 August 1926.

[93] Korhonen, 'Strange things out of hair', p. 376.

[94] For example, *Northern Echo*, 11 January 1889.

[95] On links between masculinity and intelligence see Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West*, pp. 144-7.

[96] *Daily Mail*, 12 May 1907.

'caused by the excess of cerebral energy, which forces the skull through and causes it to grow above the hair'.[97] Such beliefs led to claims that baldness was more common amongst the professions. A hat fitter argued in 1891 that in his experience 40 to 50 percent of doctors, bankers, and politicians beyond the age of forty were bald, whereas only 2.5 percent of average working men were.[98] In 1887, British newspapers ran an article entitled 'Consolation for the bald' which reported a study in Boston that claimed that 40 to 50 percent of men at churches and opera were bald, whereas at prize fights only 12 to 20 percent were. It also pointed out how Julius Caesar, Shakespeare, Socrates, and other great men had been bald. The New York doctor, whose work was the focus of the article, claimed that hair was a 'remnant of pristine animality' and likely to be shed with further evolution. He maintained that 'The balder the man is the more advanced his stage of evolution.'[99] Others also thought hair loss was an ongoing evolutionary trend and predicted a fashion for wigs in coming generations and a hairless race in the next century.[100]

Such arguments occasionally became entangled with ideas of race. In 1901, the *London Journal* claimed baldness was known as a 'disease of civilisation' because it was never found in aboriginal tribes.[101] Yet racial thinking around hair was contradictory. Withey has noted that the manliness of beards could be employed as evidence of European superiority over beardless races but that beards could also be thought to show the barbarism and lack of control of non-Europeans.[102] Henry Frith's *How to Read Character* (1891) was aware of such contradictions. After noting that hair, whether on the face or head, was 'a sign of bodily strength and energy', he raised how this fitted with the 'white and, comparatively, hairless races having dominion in the world' and white people destroying the 'strong, wild, hairy races'. His answer was 'The hairless men are the intellectual ones: their mental and bodily strength are both considerable; and finesse and diplomacy, intellect and general mental

[97] 'Intellect and Hair', *London Reader*, 19 June 1886, p. 180.

[98] Letter to *Daily Telegraph*, 11 August 1891.

[99] *Manchester Courier & Lancashire General Advertiser*, 16 July 1887.

[100] 'Are we becoming Hairless?' *London Journal*, 14 August 1909.

[101] 'The Toilet Table', *London Journal*, 16 February 1901, p. 138.

[102] Withey, *Concerning Beards*, p. 78.

superiority obtain for them a footing; business results, and the weaker ones in intellect become the servants. Brain dominates matter in the bald, or smooth-faced, man.'[103]

The perceived connections between baldness, thinking and evolution led to links being made between hair loss and the condition of modern Britain. Throughout the Victorian and Edwardian periods, there was a sense that baldness might even be becoming more common because of growing stresses and 'the increased mental pursuits of the age'.[104] In 1888, one writer claimed that baldness was now more common because people were healthier and living longer, and he even thought this had taken away some of the stigma sufferers felt since people were used to seeing middle-aged bald men.[105] A year later, *The Times* went as far as reporting that men suffered from baldness when women did not because he was the bread winner, 'his anxieties, struggles, and disappointment are both many and severe'. It concluded that baldness was one of nature's warnings against 'the irregular and excessive activity maintained in this restless age'.[106] The 'stress and strain' of the First World War, as well as the large numbers who had worn heavy helmets during military service, also led to occasional claims that baldness was on the rise. Indeed, one newspaper claimed in 1919 that men told by their barber that they were getting thin on top now replied, 'half-petulant, half-proud', that it was caused by a tin hat and that every man in his company had had a bald spot after three months.[107] The sense that 'the multiple worries of the age' were making baldness more common continued into the interwar years. They are another marker of how, in both the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, technological and social changes created anxieties, a disenchantment with modernity, and fears of physical degeneration.[108] These anxieties also contributed to the sheer range of explanations of baldness that circulated,

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[103] Henry Frith, *How to Read Character in Features, Forms & Faces: A Guide to the General Outlines of Physiognomy* (London: Ward Lock, 1891), p. 14.

[104] 'Baldness', *London Reader*, 21 November 1863, pp. 62-63.

[105] *Globe*, 10 October 1888.

[106] 'Baldness', *The Times*, 9 January 1889. For examples of Edwardian assertions that baldness was becoming more common see *Dundee Courier*, 10 March 1913 and *London Daily News*, 12 September 1906.

[107] 'Why men go Bald', *The Times*, 24 April 1919. *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 20 October 1919. *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 28 July 1919. *Daily Mail*, 28 July 1919.

[108] *Hendon & Finchley Times*, 28 July 1933. On disenchantment with modernity see Michael Saler, ''Clap if you believe in Sherlock Holmes': Mass culture and the Re-enchantment of Modernity, c. 1890-c.1940', *Historical Journal* 46, 3 (2003), pp. 599-622. On fears that civilization was causing physical degeneration amongst men see Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West*, ch. 6.

especially before the First World War. Some - such as dandruff, a lack of or too much washing, cutting the hair short, or having a large beard (because people were only able to grow a certain amount of hair) - were clearly superstitious.[109] But others - such as celibacy, marriage, bachelorhood, gas light, motoring, indigestion, and the cold and damp – must have been rooted in wider concerns about public health, technology, and gender relations in modern society.[110]

One recurrent alleged culprit throughout the period was the hat. This seemed common sense given how widespread hat wearing was and because the part of hair not covered rarely fell out. But why exactly hats might cause baldness was open to debate. Throughout the period the argument was sometimes that tight hats compressed the blood supply to the head.[111] Tight hats were also put forward to support claims that baldness was less common amongst 'the cap-wearing working classes'.[112] Ventilation was regarded as another problem of hats and a few even put discreet holes in their hats to avoid the 'the serious misfortune' of baldness.[113] One claim was that each time a man lifted his hat 'his head experiences a sudden change of temperature' and this 'constant heating and cooling' of the head cause the hair to fall out in the long term. The given evidence for this was the alleged rarity of baldness amongst women, who did not raise their hats, and soldiers who saluted instead.[114] Before the First World War, science did not discount hat theories, not least because they were not always very clean. However, the limited scientific investigations into baldness focussed on

[109] On beards as a cause of baldness: 'Pleasures of Baldness', *Saturday Review*, 9 November 1889 & *And Stray Leaves from the Diary of an Indian Officer* (London, 1865), p. 28.

[110] For examples of the diversity of popular beliefs around causes: 'A bald notion', *Fun*, 9 October 1900, p. 119. *London Reader*, 11 October 1902. *London Journal*, 14 June 1902 and 14 August 1909. *Bellshill Speaker*, 22 February 1924. 'Treatment of Baldness', *Bow Bells*, 6 December 1889), p. 550. 'The Cure of Premature baldness' *Liverpool Mercury*, 5 April 1890. *South Wales Daily News*, 17 August 1900. *Punch*, 11 May 1910. *Daily Mail*, 17 December 1928.

[111] Cunningham, 'The Hair' (1885), p. 106. 'Why Men go Bald', *The Times*, 24 April 1919. For evidence of this idea being in circulation as late the 1930s see *Derbyshire Times and Chesterfield Herald*, 12 August 1933.

[112] *Lincolnshire Echo*, 18 December 1925.

[113]*The London Journal*, 18 October 1873. 'Major', *Clothes and the Man: Hints on the Wearing and Caring of Clothes* (London: Grant Richards, 1900), p. 174. In 1853 there had even been 'ventilating hat' that was supposed to avoid baldness. See the advertisement for the Prince Leopold Patent Ventilating Hat in *Glasgow Sentinel*, 22 October 1853.

[114] *West Bridgford Advertiser*, 18 December 1915.

seborrhea, a 'microorganism disease' generally thought to be contracted by infected brushes and scissors at barber shops.[115] This explanation was rooted in the Victorian discovery of microbes but it also found favour because of the wider reputation barbers had for bad hygiene. Women were not thought to be affected because their longer hair meant the scalp came into less contact with the cutting equipment.[116]

Yet how widespread any specific beliefs about baldness were is difficult to ascertain. Some explanations, like heading footballs, only appear in the historical record once but others were repeated across sources and decades.[117] Like much medical belief, baldness was a topic surrounded by superstition and rumour. Ideas were repeated and speculated upon and it might be that even those articulating the explanations were not convinced of their validity. Perhaps what is most significant is how it was a condition that was debated and discussed. People clearly cared enough about baldness to speculate and pontificate about it.

**Curing baldness**

In 1890, a letter to a household magazine asked if there were any real remedies to prevent greying and hair loss. The anonymous writer concluded 'So many young people are now troubled with grey hair or loss of hair, and so many quack remedies are offered to the public, that I shall be glad of some reliable information.' The response claimed there was not the 'slightest doubt' that this was 'mainly due to the excessive brain work now imposed upon children'. It recommended washing the head at least once a week with super-fatted soap and cold or cooled water. If the head then showed 'extreme dryness', and thus nutritive want, it should be rubbed with lanoline and lard.[118] Rubbing something on the scalp was the most commonly suggested Victorian and Edwardian prevention but how many men actually followed through and regularly plastered their hair with rum, brandy, eggs or other substances is a different matter and these practices provided another reason to laugh at the afflicted [119] Such suggestions became less frequent as the period progressed and superstitions

[115] L. Wickham, 'The Microbial Origin of Baldness: Sabouraud's Researches into the Relations between Seborrhoea, Alopecia Areata, and Baldness', *British Medical Journal* 1.1895 (1897), pp. 1028-30. Henry Waldo, 'The Causes and Treatment of Baldness', *Bristol Medico-Chirurgical Journal* 23, 88 (1905), pp. 107-13.

[116] Cox, *Good Hair Days*, p. 76.

[117] 'Soccer and baldness', *Evening Express & Evening Mail*, 9 November 1907.

[118] 'Household queries', *The Leisure Hour*, September 1890, pp. 791-2.

[119] For example: 'Health, Beauty, and the Toilet', *Bow Bells*, 7 August 1891, p. 130. Waldo, 'Causes and Treatment of Baldness'. For humour on this see *Daily Mirror*, 13 January 1914.

faded but, as late as 1939, Mass Observation revealed a man who put paraffin on his hair.[120] Similarly, the actual take up for the electrical hair brush, massage, ultra violet and heat contraptions on sale was probably not widespread but they were still on sale in the 1930s.[121] Some certainly had simpler solutions. A 35-year-old research chemist told Mass Observation that his own balding meant he washed his hair with cold water three or four times a week and with hot water just two or three times a month. He also wore no hat and occasionally used a little olive oil to keep his hair in place or to massage his scalp.[122]

Far more used the many tonics, pomades and creams whose advertisements littered the press and that could be bought at chemists, hairdressers or via mail order. They were never very cheap but nor were they were expensive. In the 1890s, the cheapest bottle of popular brand Harlene was a shilling, the equivalent of sixty economy cigarettes. By 1935, the cheapest bottle was just 7½d.[123] Such prices may not have been affordable for those unemployed or in and out of work but they were certainly within the reach of a growing proportion of men. The products drew upon an older male tradition of using creams or grease to control hair, but many were also sold on the promise of having some sort of medical properties that could restore hair. They were part of a wider Victorian and Edwardian market of mass produced 'patent medicines' for all sorts of minor ailments from gout and biliousness, to more general health boosts such as blood purification and body strengthening.[124] But such products for hair were widely advertised beyond the war too. Indeed, their ubiquity across the period suggests how widespread concern about baldness was. These hair restorers were used at home but hairdressers would also apply them for a small extra charge when shaving or cutting a customer's hair.[125] Indeed, barbers were renown for telling customers they were 'getting a little thin on top'.[126] In this environment, openly discussing hair loss, and admitting to wanting to do something about it, did not undermine

[120] Mass Observation respondent 1108, response to April1 1939 directive on personal appearance.

[121] See the advertisement from I. Calvete Ltd for such contraptions in *Hairdressers' Weekly Journal*, 31 May 1930, p. 1829. For Dr Scott's Electrical Hairbrushes that promised to cure neuralgia, biliousness and headaches, as well as stopping greyness, dandruff and hair loss, see *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 6 January 1883. For a discussion of such items and the use of electricity for rejuvenation see, Stark, *Cult of Youth*, ch.4.

[122] Mass Observation, *Personal Appearance*, p. 83.

[123] See the advertisement in *John Bull*, 30 November 1935, p. 48.

[124] Loeb, 'Doctors and patent medicines', p. 409.

[125] For a legal dispute in Rhyl over these charges see *Evening Express and Evening Mail*, 11 April 1908.

[126] William J. Makin, 'Adventure Begins at Forty', *Men Only*, February 1936, p. 9.

male pride because it was within a closed space that cultivated an atmosphere of masculinity.[127] Yet some of the pre-1914 products were gender unspecific or aimed at both men and women suggesting that males were not afraid of using products also used by females. Indeed, this was common enough that it may be that women using a product could actually be a selling point to men since it might be assumed that women worried more about long, luxuriant hair and knew how to bring it about. The demarcations of gender were never straightforward.

Occasionally the adverts played to people's vanities and fears, warning readers of the dangers of being ousted by a younger man or pointing out how 'precious' hair 'full of life and 'snap'' was.[128] But more often they assumed readers were already concerned about hair loss and concentrated on convincing people that the product would work. Statements from satisfied customers were the most common route. Most were from unknown names but occasionally there were testimonies from people with a public profile, including foreign royals.[129] Testimonials mattered because throughout the period some of the claims were simply outlandish. One of the best-known products was Harlene. It was advertised as the 'World-renown remedy for baldness' but also claimed in 1890s advertisements to cure weak eyelashes, make the hair soft and luxuriant, remove dandruff, keep the scalp clean and invigorate children's hair.[130] The more enlightened interwar years did not much change the claims and in 1937 it was still being advertised as banishing baldness, dandruff, dull, thin, lifeless and grey hair.[131] A 1926 advertisement for Kotalko went further. It included a photograph of a man with a full head of wavy hair and a letter that claimed before using the product he was 'quite bald and my head was as shiny as could be'.[132] It was a common joke that barbers took advantage of gullible customers and made rash promises but the *Hairdressers' Weekly Journal* maintained in 1930 that this was not the case because modern hairdressers knew from 'bitter experience that these articles are too likely to prove

[127] Jessica Clark, 'Grooming Men: The Material World of the Nineteenth-century Barbershop', in Hannah Greig, Jane Hamlett, Leonie Hannan (eds), *Gender and Material Culture in Britain Since 1600* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), pp. 104-19. Cox, *Good Hair Days*, p. 29.

[128] Advertisements for Edwards Harlene in *Daily Mirror*, 2 January 1913 & 18 March 1915.

[129] Hairline advertisement in *Illustrated London News*, 23 April 1904.

[130] See the example in *Westmorland Gazette*, 27 August 1898.

[131] See the example in *John Bull*, 23 October 1937.

[132] *Sunday Post*, 17 October 1926.

unsatisfactory' and would lead to customers going elsewhere. Instead, it put the sales down to customers continually asking for them because their hopes had been aroused by advertisements for 'infallible methods of restoring hair based on new and wonderful scientific discoveries'.[133]


Figure 1: Advertisement from *Illustrated London News*, 3 April 1897 (Author's own collection)

One 1926 observer noted that the fact that these concoctions sold was proof that bald men were not more intellectual.[134] Edwardian research by the British Medical Association found that the contents of the apparently miraculous products were rather mundane. Advertisements for Tatcho claimed without its use hair loss was inevitable but that it would 'bring back the hair of youth, make a new being of you, and give you a new grip upon life.' It required a few drops to be sprinkled on the head each morning and the hair brushed thoroughly afterwards. Analysis showed it was more 90 percent water but also contained

[133] H. Stanley Redgrove, 'On Hair Tonics – part 1', *Hairdressers' Weekly Journal*, 5 July 1930, p. 2257.

[134] *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 10 August 1926.

borax, glycerin, quinine, formaldehyde, colouring, perfume and alcohol. The BMA felt that simply publishing the ingredients was comment enough on the likelihood of it and other cures working.[135]

Patent medicines were not regulated, although their exaggerated claims could be subject to prosecutions for fraud. There was some concern in government circles and in 1936 one MP described cures for baldness as the 'most lying' of all medical adverts.[136] Yet, even as a backlash against patent medicines grew in the late nineteenth century, the medical press was still willing to accept advertising from purveyors of such goods and doctors were willing to recommend them, write testimonials and even take out shares in their manufacturers.[137] Thus people's willingness to try such remedies cannot simply be dismissed as gullibility. In 1930 one doctor spoke to the Guild of Hairdressers at Hove, arguing that medical knowledge of baldness had 'been hopelessly obscured by a mass of traditional opinion, superstition and quackery'. Yet even though he dismissed the idea that it was linked to intelligence, he still claimed baldness was more common in towns than the country and amongst those who worked with their heads rather than their hands.[138] The longevity of spurious beliefs about baldness is less surprising when other areas of physiological knowledge are considered. For example, well into the 1960s it was necessary for health bodies to disseminate information on how water was not a threat to menstruating women and thus it was safe for them to bathe or wash their hair.[139]

Between the wars, the more outlandish ideas, especially around any relationship between baldness and personality traits, lost some of their currency. Instead, a more scientific approach emerged in the advertising. Indeed, the cures can be seen as signs of modernity in themselves with their seemingly medical claims of problems with the roots, cells and the nourishment of hair. This reflected a wider trend in advertising anti-aging products but it was

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[135] British Medical Association, *More Secret Remedies: What They Cost and What They Contain* (London: BMA, 1912), pp. 222-23.

[136] *House of Commons Debates*, 27 March 1936, vol. 310 c1567. For a general investigation see *Report from the Select Committee on Patent Medicines* (London: HMSO, 1914).

[137] Lori Loeb, 'Doctors and Patent Medicines in Modern Britain: Professionalism and Consumerism', *Albion* 33, 3 (2001), pp. 404-25.

[138] *Nottingham Evening Post*, 2 October 1930.

[139] Julie-Marie Strange, 'The Assault on Ignorance: Teaching Menstrual Etiquette in England, c.1920s to 1960s', *Social History of Medicine* 14, 2 (2001), 257-65.

particularly pronounced when it came to hair.[140] In 1902, a College of Diseases of the Hair had been set up. This became the Institute of Trichologists and aimed to promote knowledge, research and instruction around the 'science of hair culture' and hair and scalp diseases, including baldness.[141] They were not large in number but trichologists' advertisements asserted the scientific base of their work and how methods of even a decade ago were now out of date. Their credibility was also enhanced by how they stressed that conventional total baldness could not be cured.[142] Such developments were a clear response to the quackery but they also influenced more conventional hair tonics. Products were advertised from laboratory addresses, with testimonies from professors, pictures of scientists looking through a microscope, drawings of hair roots and claims of the 'most amazing piece of research'.[143] Yet the claims often remained outlandish signalling how modernity and quackery could elide. 'Baldness and other hair troubles – whatever your age – can be overcome by scientific treatment' declared one 'Noted Consulting Hair Specialist' in a 1938 advert.[144] A 1936 advertisement for a hair specialist maintained dandruff could choke hair follicles imprisoning healthy hair beneath the scalp.[145] A 1932 product even claimed to be based on a scientific discovery of how to take extracts from purified human hair and put them into a stable solution that stimulated hair forming tissues into vigorous activity.[146] This kind of language could be found in other anti-aging products for skin care and diet, and their ubiquity perhaps helps explain why their claims could seem credible. But such adverts also probably reinforced people's anxieties about aging. For example, in a 1936 edition of *Men Only*, a 'modern miracle' cure for hair regrowth was published alongside one for a corset with the heading 'Fat Men are Laughed At', while overleaf was an unspecified product that promised to make men taller and stated 'inches put you miles ahead'.[147] Anxieties around baldness did not happen in isolation.

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[140] On the wider trends see Stark, *Cult of Youth*.

[141] Memorandum of Association of the Institute of Trichologiosts (incorporated), 1925, Companies House.

[142] *Edinburgh Evening News*, 26 October 1933.

[143] Adverts for Silverkin in *Picture Post*, 19 November 1938, *The People*, 12 March 1939 and an unnamed product from The Laboratories in *Picture Post* 26 November 1938.

[144] *Picture Post*, 29 October 1938.

[145] 'Baldness and other Hair Troubles,' *Daily Express*, 26 September 1936.

[146] *Daily Mirror*, 26 December 1932.

[147] *Men Only*, August 1936, pp. 147, 149. For other products see Stark, *Cult of Aging*.

The tonics that claimed to prevent baldness were made more palatable by the interwar fashion for creams that styled hair. Sixty-eight percent of respondents to the 1939 Mass Observation survey used some kind of preparation on their hair.[148] Some anti-balding products specifically advertised themselves as something that could simply replace an 'ordinary dressing'.[149] Their widespread use thus confirms Stark's argument that rejuvenatory ideas and practices were assimilated into and embedded within everyday life.[150] Yet it may also be that few users really believed the tonics would actually protect their hair. Karl Bell has argued that Victorian and Edwardian stories of magic could be told and employed with them being wholly believed and it may be that something similar was also true of the tales of causes and cures of baldness.[151] A 20-year-old student who used a tonic that promised to prevent greyness and baldness recorded 'I have not much faith in these claims, but find that it keeps my hair in place as any other hair oil'. Mass Observation did find limited belief that with proper care baldness was avoidable but more common seems to have been a hopeful sense that there was little to lose and much to gain. A 22-year-old clerk, who used an oil concoction twice a week, concluded 'I suppose like most males I am deluding myself into the believing that something with a fancy name, costing a fancy price, in an equally fancy bottle, can stop the threat of baldness.'[152] Such was the precarity of many masculinities.

## Conclusion

The anxieties around baldness seem to owe more to men's internal anxieties rather than any widespread or deep-seated hostility to the condition. In 1904, there were press reports that a bald man had asked for permission to keep his hat on in a Croydon court. The judge told him this was 'silly vanity' and it was nothing to be ashamed of.[153] Baldness may not have been anything to be ashamed of but, throughout a long period of cultural and social change, it consistently affected men's sense of dignity and masculinity and they feared they were losing more than just their hair. It limited their ability to use their hair as a way of self-fashioning

[148] Mass Observation, *Personal Appearance*, p. 84.

[149] *Thanet Advertiser*, 22 May 1945.

[150] Stark, *Cult of Youth*, p. 206.

[151] Karl Bell, *The Magical Imagination: Magic and Modernity in Urban England 1780-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012), p. 255.

[152] Mass Observation, *Personal Appearance*, pp. 81, 83.

[153] *Evening Express and Evening Mail*, 13 July 1904.

their appearance. It made them the target of jokes, however trivial, marked the fact they were getting older, perhaps prematurely, undermined their looks and perhaps made them less attractive to women. There was the consolation that bald men were often thought to be more intelligent and sometimes funnier and good natured. Bald men might even be thought of as more modern and civilized. But, as understandings became slightly more rational between the wars, this compensation lost ground too. Indeed, as some of the old folklore around baldness faded and the cynicism around the cures grew, many men seem to have become more concerned with the issue. The glamour of Hollywood, a keep-fit culture, growing advertising of male-grooming products, and the fading of hat wearing from fashion all intensified interwar anxieties around baldness. There was thus no let-up in the market for remedies and many young men clearly dreaded losing their hair, even if once it happened they discovered the reality was less alarming than they feared. Not everyone felt this way, and men's feelings about their hair were something individual that owed much to personality and circumstance. It probably mattered least for those preoccupied with putting food on the table but given that baldness could, rightly or wrongly, symbolize an aging body the labouring poor too might have good reason to worry about hair loss.

Baldness thus reminds us that masculinity is not just something discursive, but something felt and lived and thus as varied as men themselves. Baldness reveals masculinity's inconsistent, fluctuating, psychic, and precarious elements. Yet it was not a challenge to male power because hair was merely one component of how men saw themselves and others judged them. Nor did vanity about one's hair subvert any wider norms about masculinity. Hair might give a man a veneer of youth, vigour and attractiveness but men were always judged more by what they did and how they behaved than how they looked and this remained one of the most fundamental differences between men and women. But that did not stop at least some men worrying about their hair loss and putting some effort into disguising and preventing it. Men may have often regarded vanity as a feminine weakness but they too were vulnerable to its allures and anxieties.