

THE COMPANY OF BARBERS

BY MARGOT MELCON

Throughout history, the practice of having one's hair removed—through cutting, trimming, or shaving—has been a ceremonial event, and the relationship between customer and barber a sacred one. Because hair removal happens with some steady regularity—a shave every day for men, a hair cut every six weeks, a wash and set once a week for the ladies, cut and color at the salon once a month—the customer develops a connection with the person who grooms them, built on trust, consistency, and faith. The position of barber demands respect and reverence as you, the customer, are trusting that barber not only to make you look the way you desire, but also to safely and gently bring sharp objects close to your face, head, and neck.

The word barber comes from the Latin, *barba*, meaning beard. The practice of barbering is an ancient one, as barbers were synonymous with medicine men, able to drive bad spirits away from the body by cutting the hair. Relics of the barber trade, including basins



Sunday Morning, engraved by George Hunt, after a color litho by Theodore Lane (1800–28) (© Guildhall Library, City of London / The Bridgeman Art Library)



Fig. 2.

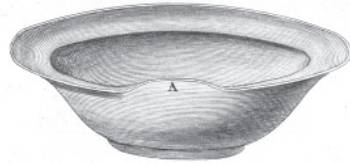


Fig. 1.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.

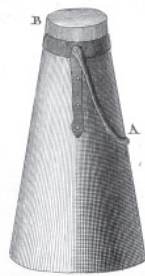


Fig. 5.

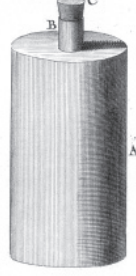


Fig. 6.

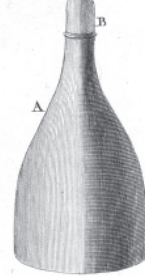


Fig. 8.

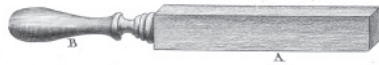


Fig. 7.



Fig. 9.



Fig. 10.



and razors, have been found at sites dating back to the Bronze Age, about 3500 B.C.E. The trade is also mentioned in the Bible: “And thou, son of man, take thee a sharp knife, take thee a barber’s razor and cause it to pass upon thine head and upon thy beard.” (Ezekiel 5:1, King James Version). In ancient Greek and Roman societies, visiting the barber for a trim and style of the hair, beard, and fingernails was as important as the daily visit to the public baths, and barbers’ shops became social centers for news and gossip. These barbers also were employed as surgeons and dentists, practicing tooth extraction, bloodletting, leeching, surgery of wounds, and administration of enemas.

In England through the Middle Ages, the clergy were required to undergo bloodletting at regular intervals and were thought to have become skilled in performing the task, along with minor surgery. When a papal decree in 1215 forbade priests and monks to participate in the shedding of blood, these duties—thought to be beneath medical doctors of the era, whose knowledge was almost entirely theoretical—were passed on to barbers, who had already proven their skill with sharp instruments.

During the 14th and 15th centuries, the Black Death wiped out nearly all scholarly physicians, and barbers became increasingly relied upon for medical procedures. Some traveled from town to town, setting up tents and offering their services. At a time when facilities for washing and bathing were limited for most people, and skin complaints, rashes, and boils were common, the barber could at least create the illusion of cure as the customer left cleaner and refreshed, believing himself to be in better health. In 1540, the Company of Barbers and the Fellowship of Surgeons were united by a royal decree, creating the Company of Barber-Surgeons, a unified trade guild that remained in place for the next two hundred years. The barber-surgeons were sometimes called “doctors of the short robe” to distinguish them from university-trained physicians and surgeons, whose superiority was likely to be only in their knowledge of Latin and their title of “doctor of the long robe.” Many patients preferred the trust and congenial atmosphere of the barbershop to the anti-septic and expensive visit to a surgeon.

The Company of Barber-Surgeons had a monopoly on barbering within the city of London and a surrounding seven-mile radius by 1629. As barbering was a trade, like any other, entry into the guild began with an apprenticeship at the age of 14 for seven years, according to the custom of the city, though few apprentices ever completed their education. The tools of the trade included traditional pivotal scissors, bowls for lathering soap, and a steel straight razor, typically sharpened on a leather strap or pumice stone. For the

other duties a barber executed, including tooth extraction, bloodletting, and leeching, the instruments used were a gruesome collection of pliers, bleeding cups, and tourniquets.

Seventeenth and eighteenth century medical practices were primitive, to say the least, and were based on a rudimentary understanding of the human body. The theories of the ancient Greeks and Romans—Aristotle, Hippocrates, and Galen—were still being taught and used as the guiding principles for treatment. Galen's theory of the four vital humors (blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile) was the basis for nearly all understanding of medicine. If a person was ill, it was assumed that one of their humors was out of balance, and the patient was then treated accordingly.

Bleeding was the most common course of treatment. The theory went that if you removed the patient's blood, the body would be relieved of that overproduced humor and could then function more freely with what was left. Doctors either applied leeches to suck the blood away, or they would engage in bloodletting—slicing small cuts in the flesh to allow blood to drain off into bowls.

To encourage blood flow during a bloodletting procedure, the barber-surgeon commonly gave his patient a pole to hold and squeeze. He also wound a strip of cloth around the arm as a tourniquet, and had another to later apply as a bandage when the procedure was finished. When it was not being used, the pole with the bandage wound around it was hung at the barber-surgeon's door as a sign. Later, for convenience, instead of using the actual pole, an imitation was painted and hung outside of the shop, the red and white stripes symbolizing the blood and bandages used by the barber-surgeon. This was the origin of the modern spiraling barber pole.

For centuries, barbers were left undisturbed in the practice of surgery and dentistry, but as knowledge progressed and surgeries became more complicated, it became evident that they were attempting too much. Patients began to complain that barber-surgeons were making them sick instead of well.

Many barber-surgeons resorted to spectacle and showmanship to cover up their ignorance of medicine and anatomy. These abuses were brought to the attention of the mayor and council of London by the surgeons, who began to forge to the front of the guild. As the practice of medicine advanced, barbers became less and less capable of performing the triple functions of barber-surgeon-dentist. The surgeons were separated from the barbers by an act of parliament, which dissolved the alliance between the barbers and surgeons in June 1745.