

A historical insight into dental practice

By Malcolm Bishop

The BDA Museum recently had the good fortune to acquire what shows every sign of being a working sketch (Fig. 1) by Thomas Rowlandson for his print, published in 1823, of a dental operator, which he entitled 'Toothache – or Torment and Torture' (Fig. 2).

The two main characters in the drama stay largely unchanged. Here there are two main enigmatic features – why, when the upper forceps in each case seem to be those on offer, is the operator exploring with his finger the lower teeth, and behind the closed lips of his patient?

The second point for query is technical, and adds if anything to the value of the drawing. When a picture is transferred to a plate for printing it is usually reversed (as happens with the Dighton/Davison prints mentioned below) and this preliminary drawing is oriented



Fig. 1 The Rowlandson sketch. c.1822



Fig. 2 Thomas Rowlandson. 'The Tooth Ache, or, Torment & Torture'. 1823.

in the same way as the published print. This reinforces the view that Rowlandson prepared the printing plate himself, using the sketch as his inspiration as he places the characters firmly in an environment, which, although rural, is clearly the premises of the operator, with a clean water filter in the background, and a suitable operating chair.

In the published print, the dark-skinned character in the working drawing, grotesque, and of uncertain age, is modified to be a cheerful looking young Englishman. There would have been no problem with Rowlandson introducing such a dark-skinned figure in an urban setting either as the lady's companion or servant – and an upcoming exhibition at Kensington Palace will show how prevalent such as he would have been in Georgian households up to and including the Royal Household. Alternatively, that he could have been the assistant to the operator if the setting is his premises rather than the domiciliary visits exemplified in the prints published a little earlier, either in 1784 by Robert Dighton published as 'The London Dentist' (Fig. 3) or in 1811 in a somewhat crude copy by W. Davison of Alnwick which he called 'The Town Tooth Drawer' (Fig. 4) – where in each case the dark-skinned assistant looks as positively gleeful at his role as does the assistant/attendant in Rowlandson's print. It is not improbable that Rowlandson made the first sketch from observation, and that the change of the characteristics of the assistant or companion is a response to deciding on a rural rather than urban setting for the published print.

The introduction of an onlooker leaning over the half-door, a figure also present in the Davison 'Country Tooth-Drawer' (Fig. 5), guides the viewer to seeing the scene as, albeit rather cruel, comedy, where the preliminary sketch both makes for very uncomfortable viewing 200 years later, and not particularly saleable at the time.

Had Rowlandson seen the Davison or Dighton prints we do not know, and the many similarities could be coincidental. Nevertheless, ►►



Fig. 3 Robert Dighton. 'The London Dentist'. c.1784

◀ for the BDA to have this remarkable insight into dental practice and into the mind of the artist is rather wonderful.

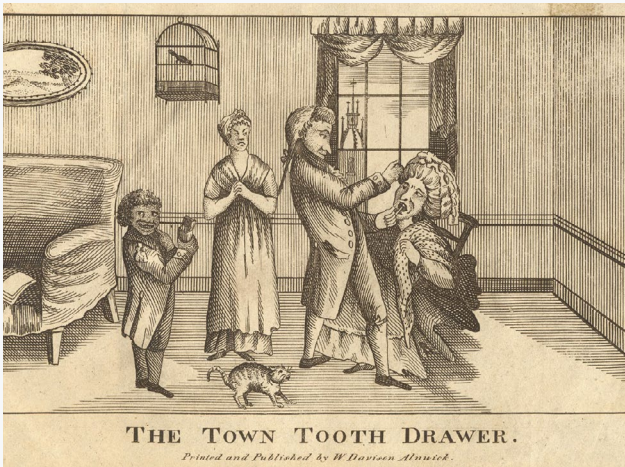


Fig. 4 W. Davison of Alnwick. 'The Town Tooth Drawer'



Fig. 5 W. Davison of Alnwick. 'The Country Tooth Drawer'

MBE for Dr Olurotimi Adesanya

Dr Olurotimi Adesanya was awarded MBE in the King's New Year Honours list, in recognition for his services to oral health.

In a letter from the British Dental Association (BDA) congratulating Dr Adesanya MBE, Chief Executive Martin Woodrow wrote:

'Your services to Oral Health are widely respected, particularly in your role representing the African and Caribbean Dental Association [ACDA]. We as your colleagues are heartened to see that your work to improve oral health awareness and excellence in primary dental care has been recognised in such a public and high-profile way with the award of MBE.'

Dr Adesanya, who practises in Gillingham, Kent, will be writing about the ACDA, its mission and objectives in an upcoming Upfront section of the *BDJ*.

<https://acda-uk.org/>



Calling all King's graduates from 1983



Did you graduate BDS from King's College London in 1983?

Eddie Crouch, Chair of the British Dental Association's (BDA's) Principal Executive Committee (PEC), hopes to get as many as possible of the class of 83 graduates from Denmark Hill 1983 together at the King's Alumni Dinner being held on Friday 1 March 2024 at the Hilton Tower Bridge Hotel.

The photos included with this news story were taken when the undergraduates arrived at the Strand for their pre-clinical year.

The Staff and Alumni Drinks Reception and Straumann Annual Dental Dinner promises to be an exciting evening with an excellent meal, prize giving, raffle and entertainment. Reunion groups who qualified 10, 20, 25 and 30 years ago may also be in attendance. The dress code is optional Black Tie, with guests and partners warmly welcomed to attend.

To find out more and to book a place, visit <https://estore.kcl.ac.uk/conferences-and-events/academic-faculties/faculty-of-dentistry-oral-craniofacial-sciences/dental-alumni-weekend-2024>.

If you are unable to attend but would like to join a WhatsApp group that will organise future get togethers, email eddie.crouch@bda.org.