

What could it be? An Eighteenth-Century Wig-Curler

What could it be? Recent digging outside the Morris Garages on the college side brought to light a mysterious object, plucked from a trench by the Head Gardener, Paul Roper. It is about a finger's length, broadening towards its ends, obviously man-made, and when rung on the teeth giving the report of ceramic, perhaps pipeclay.

What could it be? The Garden Fellow Robin Lane Fox was not sure, but he and Paul Roper could see that the spindle bore a stamp at both ends, with the initials 'W B' surmounted by a coronet. It was handed over to me, and a very few minutes discoursing with the all-knowing internet revealed that it was a wig-curler, as commonly used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.



Wig-curlers of this kind are illustrated in one of the plates to accompany the article on wig-making in Denis Diderot's famous *Encyclopédie*, where three examples can be seen in the upper right-hand corner of the engraving opposite.

How did they work? One method was to wrap the curlers in newspaper, wind lengths of new wig-hair around them, boil the curlers and hair twists, remove them and place them between protective papers, and then bake them in a pie. When cooled and separated, the twists of hair would be firmly curled, and could be sewn into wigs. This process suggests an association of our piece with a wig-maker, rather than just a wig-wearer.

What was this object doing in the ground between the City Wall and the Sacher Building? My first thought was that it had been dropped there by an occupant of one of the buildings that used to stand in that place before the famous Morris Garage was built there in 1909–10 by the architects Tollitt and Lee for William Morris and his landlord, Merton College. But when the object came to the attention of our Cox Fellow, Katie McKeogh, she remarked that she had seen a collection of identical objects on display in Magdalen College, having been excavated there a few

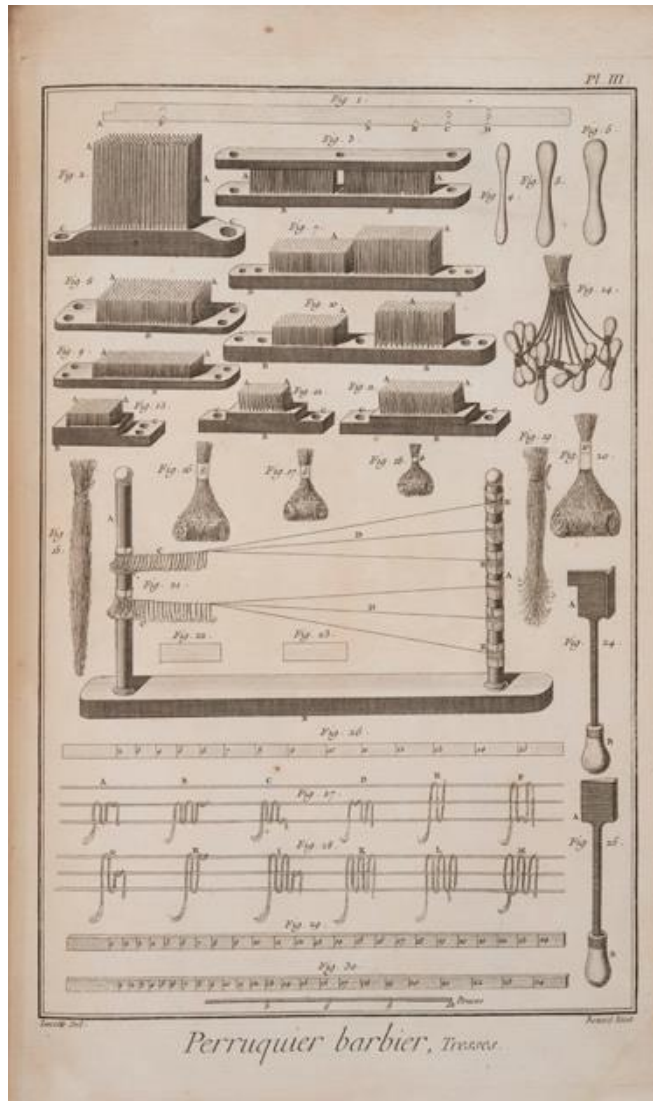


Image reproduced from: 'MIT Libraries Exhibits: Wigmaking'¹

¹ <<https://libraries.mit.edu/exhibits/diderots-encyclopedia-exhibit-preview/wigmaking/>> (Accessed: 12 July 2021).

years ago when works were being carried out to build their new library at the junction of Longwall Street and the High.

Enquiries at Magdalen soon revealed the full picture. Excavations there carried out by Oxford Archaeology as a preliminary to the library extension works uncovered a cache of no fewer than 3,573 wig-curlers, bearing the maker's stamps WB, WA, and AI, the WB ones bearing either a coronet or two dots above the initials; our is of the former type. Now Magdalen's records show that a barber called John Broughton in the late eighteenth century leased from the college the location where the wig-curlers and other objects were found. The WB stamp in its variations has been traced by the compiler of this section of the Oxford Archaeology report, Rebecca Allen, to a London manufacturer in business from around the 1740s. This stamp accounts for the majority of the Magdalen wig-curlers, the coronet type being the most common, and it seems beyond reasonable doubt, then, that our curler strayed from the Magdalen side to the New College side of Longwall Street, perhaps in the mid- to late eighteenth century. Indeed, photographs of examples of 'WB'-stamped curlers of several different sizes can be found fairly easily on the internet, retrieved from many different locations.

So the puzzle is solved—albeit Magdalen has over 3,500 wig-curling memorials of past hair fashions, whereas we rejoice, so far, in just the one.

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