

**BRASS PLATE AND BRAZEN IMPUDENCE: DENTAL PRACTICE IN THE  
PROVINCES 1755-1855**

**A. S. Hargreaves**

Christine Hillam, *Brass plate and brazen impudence: Dental practice in the provinces, 1755-1855* (Liverpool University Press, 1991), pp. 352, with illustrations. Liverpool Historical Studies, No. 6. ISBN 0-85323-117-6.

---

In recent years, increasing attention has been directed towards the evolution of the professions such as the church, law and medicine, examining both social and political aspects. In medical historiography, particularly, there has been a fundamental shift away from the earlier concentration on famous names and discoveries, to a determination of the provision and scope of medical services to various communities in answer to prevailing needs and demands. A similar move has been observed in dental historiography, but it is only quite recently that serious attention has been directed towards the years preceding the mid-nineteenth century, when the structure of a formalized profession slowly began to emerge. The gradual change of emphasis from removal to replacement and restoration of teeth did not commence in England until the mid-seventeenth century, predominantly centred around London where both population and much of the country's growing wealth were concentrated, but it was to gain considerable impetus throughout the eighteenth century.

The social developments of the latter half of this century continue to attract the attention of scholars, whether at demographic, political or ideological levels. Christine Hillam has studied the development of dental practices over the years 1755 to 1855 in an attempt to identify some of the prerequisites and nurturing factors, choosing to examine the provinces rather than London, since the spurs and checks in the former should be thrown into sharper relief. To this end she has drawn upon all provincial trade directories published up to 1855, bringing together for the first time material scattered in nearly 900 individual books in 90 libraries, to chart the geographical incidence of resident dentists. This has been supplemented by equally comprehensive searches of provincial newspapers over the same period. So extensive a use

of primary sources has thereby mounted a strong challenge to many commonly held misconceptions about dentists of the period, their position in society and the practice of dentistry then current.

After an introductory note on sources, to discuss their scope and limitations, the first chapter summarizes the practice of dentistry before the eighteenth century, but has of necessity drawn heavily upon secondary sources. Many of these articles are currently being re-examined for their reliability, but this should not undermine the concept of there being many different practisers of the dental art in earlier centuries. The early provincial dentist is investigated in Chapter II, both for his trade origins, his professional education and the problems of empiricism, before attention is turned to careers in dentistry, the extent of family involvement (including dental dynasties), and finally to income, wealth and social standing.

Chapter III, equally generously laden with tables, continues the analysis by concentrating on the spread of dentistry, both in terms of the growth of numbers and of geographical expansion. The choice of location for dental practices is linked with both practice/population ratios and the mobility of provincial dentists, both to and from London -it was a common sales ploy in bills and advertisements to stress continental or London professional experience - and within the provinces. Branch practices, based either on a London practice or elsewhere in the provinces, suggest both expansion of the market and increasing competition in the capital itself.

The following chapter (IV) attempts to explain contemporary clinical treatments to a lay or non-dental readership. It is always very difficult to explain clinical nuances to those unfamiliar with highly selective technical jargon; furthermore, there may sometimes be an added temptation to judge former practices from a vantage-point of late twentieth-century superiority or by applying irrelevant standards. The point is very rightly made here that many dentists still guarded their clinical techniques very jealously, and in this period before dental journals were properly established and dental schools founded, such information about clinical practice and techniques comes predominantly from the relatively few English textbooks available at that time. Whilst the treatment offered by one particular practice in Bath is informative and useful, it should not be taken as a generalization for all provincial practices,

and it is perhaps a pity that the references to dental work discovered in the Ashton-under-Lyme exhumations are reserved only for the text relating to social attitudes. A clinician may experience a degree of frustration if seeking enlightenment over contemporary techniques, but such an exposition was not the author's intent.

Chapter V concludes the textual portion of the book by examining the spurs and constraints on the developing provincial practices, ranging from the need and changing demand for dental treatment, the supply of manpower, the effect of changes in transport, growth in newspapers and advertising, and technical advances, to the limiting factors of cost and social attitude. Notes and references at the end of each chapter are extensive and generally useful. The numerous maps in the original doctoral thesis have wisely been omitted, but the six illustrations serve to enliven the analytical text.

After 148 pages of text and references, the second half of the book is devoted to extensive appendices listing both directories examined, and the names and locations of the 1092 separate individuals identified. It is the latter material which will most excite the dental historian, since firm, detailed evidence of these men (and a few women) has long been required. The bibliography contains some duplication of the directories listed in Appendices 1 and 2; since much of the information in App. 1 is presented again in App. 2.2, the former might thus be regarded as superfluous. The biographical notes in App. 2.4 have been intended only to confirm the identity of individuals listed in 2.1, so are admittedly non-exhaustive; this brevity might perhaps engender frustration in some readers.

Publishing constraints have resulted in the text being prepared on a word processor, before reduction to A5 size. Whilst the need for a smaller type-size is apparent for the 150 or so pages of the appendices, in order to contain such extensive data realistically, the range of type-fonts used is unsettling, even allowing for App. 2.1 having been derived from a computer print-out. The choice of fonts for the main text (in both upright and italic forms) and the inset quotations is unfortunate, since the condensation has badly affected the clarity of some letters, resulting in a smudged effect to the pages; the superscript reference numbers have become particularly difficult to read. The use of the 'bold' facility is over-generous and tends to compound the visual unease. Such criticism of presentation, and the occasional

typographical errors, however, should not be allowed to detract from the considerable value of this publication. There has been a need for so comprehensive a data-base of early dental practitioners, and the analyses should do much to challenge many of the misconceptions held by those outwith the immediate dental field.

This book should be on the shelf of every dental historian, and of all medical and social historians with an interest in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries!

\* \* \*

**A. S. Hargreaves**

**Department of Prosthodontics**

**University of Newcastle upon Tyne**