

Health and Personal Hygiene

As a child, baths were weekly, with a minimum amount of water. It never occurred to me that it was possible to have water that would cover my legs when I was sat down. I think this was a hang-over from the water saving regime of the second world war. As an only child I never had to share a bath or the bath water. Bars of soap were used; there was no liquid soap or shower gel. We did have soaps encased in thin layers of sponge. The sponge might be shaped, mine resembled a turtle. Popular brands of soap were Palmolive and Imperial Leather. Cussons soap was considered luxurious and often given as a present but it was highly scented and made my skin tight so I didn't like it. Later I preferred Shield soap. Small pieces of soap would be soaked to make them soft, then squeezed together, sometimes using a mould, to make a new bar for use in the kitchen. I would use 'Matey' bubble bath, especially attractive because the bottles were decorated to look like a sailor. There were also bath cubes that dissolved in the water leaving an oily scum and what was supposed to be a pleasing aroma. Talcum powder was liberally used. Showers did not come in until the 1970s. We didn't have moisturising regimes. As teenagers, we might use Johnson's baby lotion to try to stop our tans peeling; adults might use Pond's cold cream.

When I was a teenager, I washed my, then waist length, hair in my weekly Friday bath. I usually washed the top of my hair on a Wednesday to keep grease at bay, or sometimes I used dry shampoo. This was a powder that was sprinkled on the hair and was supposed to leave it cleaner when it was brushed out. In fact it always left a talcum powder-like residue; talcum powder might be used as a cheaper alternative to dry shampoo. The other way to disguise greasy hair was to wear a headscarf like a wide hair band, which I did.

Spots were dealt with using Clearasil, an unpleasant smelling paste in a tube but I preferred using TCP. Deodorants were used from puberty, initially 'Mum' stick deodorant and later aerosols. Vaginal deodorants were also used. Underarm and leg hair was removed using cream called VeetO. I think the 'O' was meant to stand for 'odourless' but it was anything but. Sunbathing was a rite of passage and the aim was to be as brown as possible. No one suggested that it was dangerous and sun screens were not used. Some people laid on silver foil or rubbed in coconut oil to improve their tans. I had dark skin and tanned easily, rarely burning, so I was lucky. I wasn't aware of anyone using tanning beds, if they existed then. Tattooing and body piercing, apart from one set of earrings, was unheard of for the general public. Sailors might have tattoos on their arms or chest but nowhere else.

According to my Baby Book, I was toilet trained by July 1958 (aged 2¼), having used 6752 nappies. I know my aim was never very good and I had used a washing up bowl instead of a potty. My dad made me a wooden contraption to put over the toilet so I didn't fall in. He had created this at work and had to bring it home on the back of his motor bike. I have vague recollections of being told that he was stopped by the police, who enquired what it was but I may have mis-remembered this. We had indoor flushing toilets and used soft toilet paper, although often public toilets had hard shiny Jeyes or Izal toilet paper. Menstruation was dealt with by means of a 'Nikini' sanitary belt made from thick smelly plastic, into which thick pads were secured using poppers. In public places these were disposed of in foul-smelling 'Bunny' incinerators. At home I think they were just wrapped and put in the bin as we didn't have an open fire or boiler by then. Tampons became more widely used by teenagers during the 1970s.

Sex education consisted of an evening talk in the last year of primary school for the girls only, in anticipation of which mum explained the

basics. There was a special toilet at primary school for the one or two girls who had started their periods by that time. There was another school sex education talk from a visiting speaker when we were fourteen.

Anonymous questions were invited via a postbox. We spent the morning trying to concoct the most shocking questions. 'O' level biology also included 'reproduction'. By the 1970s, condoms were considered 'old fashioned'. Although we were aware of the existence of sexually transmitted diseases there was no conception that we needed to protect ourselves from these. There was a fear of getting pregnant; girls tended to use coils, caps, or go on the pill.

When I was a teenager, many people smoked although I never did; seeing its effects on my grandmother and mother was enough to put anyone off. My mum had also promised me £100 if I didn't smoke before I was sixteen; it didn't occur to me to cheat. We were vaguely aware by this time that it was not good for our health. Many of our parents smoked and it was socially acceptable to do so. It was comparatively easy to acquire illegal drugs where I lived in the early 1970s. Most of the boys I went round with experimented with cannabis (pot), marijuana (grass or weed) or amphetamines (speed) but no-one I knew well progressed to heroin. The girls seemed to steer clear and I was vehemently anti-drugs. I did drink alcohol occasionally from the age of about fourteen and it was easy to purchase this from pubs or off-licenses underage. There was usually cider, beer and wine in boxes at the parties that rotated round the houses of those in our group. Our parents did not seem to have any issues with this; we were fifteen or sixteen at the time. Drinking was only a weekend activity, although we might consume enough to get drunk, combining beer and a variety of spirits.¹ By the time I was twenty I drank only very rarely, partly because I couldn't afford it. When I was first married we made our own wine and beer. Now I drink no more than a couple of times

¹ See under 'Memories of Croydon' for an account of our pub-crawls from Croydon to Shirley.

a year and then only one drink and that I usually regret.

Looking attractive was important and there was an attempt to achieve a desired shape but few children or teenagers were overweight and none of my friends dieted or exercised in order to keep fit. The one or two fat children in each class were sometimes teased. We were weighed and measured at the beginning of each term at high school but I was not aware of anything being done if the results were thought to be unsatisfactory. Some girls were sent for 'remedials' if they were diagnosed with flat feet, poor posture or knock knees. I don't ever remember the 'nit nurse' inspecting us. There was an outbreak of nits in the high school where I worked in the late 1970s and my children frequently brought nits home in the late 1980s and 1990s.

We had regular school medicals. I remember one in my early years of high school. Mum couldn't attend because she was at work. This bothered me not at all but the medical practitioner conducting the medical was shocked to the core. The school dentist visited primary school. I know R* B* always complained that she needed a filling after the school dentist had poked at her teeth. I went to the dentist for check-ups regularly but needed no treatment until I was fifteen, when I had one small filling; this despite a lack of dairy in my diet and my main beverage being carbonated drinks. It was only after I had my first child that I needed numerous fillings.²

Although I had perpetual colds every winter, I rarely visited the doctor and we used few proprietary medicines. This may be a reflection of mum's abhorrence of the medical profession. I had Delrosa syrup as a baby and Haliborange vitamins as a teenager, for a spell when I was very underweight following a virulent outbreak of flu in the spring of 1971. Apart from this I

² See under 'Memories of Aston Clinton' for a description of having my wisdom teeth out.

had no preventative medicines. When I had a cold I used Metholatum on my hankie, or up my nose, to help me breathe, or I sucked 'Tunes' ('Tunes help you breath more easily' went the advertising slogan). Obridges was for coughs and Lucozade was drunk to aid recovery, although I drank this on a regular basis, regardless of my health. Very occasionally I had Junior Disprin for a headache, no adult equivalents were kept in the house and mum never self-medicated or went to the doctor.³ On the rare the occasions that I did have medicine, it was administered in special tiny glasses that had good luck symbols, such as horseshoes and four-leaved clovers, on. Strangely, one of the symbols was the three legs of Man and I was always encouraged to let the legs 'kick' the medicine down. Savlon or Germoline were used on cuts and grazes. My only hospital encounter, as a patient, when I was a child, was when I broke my wrist and ankle. I resisted advice to stay in overnight.⁴

I never had stomach upsets and avoided some of the usual childhood illnesses until adulthood. I did have mumps and German measles and when I was nine, what was diagnosed as glandular fever. Vaccinations and polio sugars were accepted as a matter of course and there seemed to be no resistance to children having these.

We were largely unaware of life-limiting illnesses, especially in children. Those with disabilities were segregated and were still referred to using terms that would not now be considered acceptable. I was more aware than most of those with special needs, as I helped at institutions for disabled children but disability was still regarded as something to be slightly ashamed of in the 1960s and 1970s.

Personally, I was exposed to death a great deal as a child but again this

³ She visited the doctor three times in fifty years, once when she was pregnant, once to get nit lotion for the family as her prescriptions were free and once for shingles. In retrospect she should have gone more often.

⁴ See under 'Memories of Croydon' for the full story.

was a private matter. I very much wanted to attend my father's funeral but at nine, this was seen as unthinkable. Mental illness or depression was never mentioned and apart from the lady up the road who had what I now know to be dementia, I was aware of no one of with any form of mental illness or melancholia. If you felt miserable you 'pulled yourself together' and got on with it. Talking therapies were almost unheard of and if anyone did go for counselling, it would certainly never be spoken of. Serious illness was also not discussed beyond the immediate family and often medical staff would not tell the patient or their family that an illness was considered to be terminal.