

## Toothbrushes!

**By Roy Fletcher**

It seems that the Chinese were the first to invent the toothbrush, although the more you research it the more diverse dates you find. The earliest appears to be from the Tang Dynasty (619-907 AD) and was probably made with hog bristle. Apparently, the hogs living in Siberia and Northern China had particularly coarse hairs because of the harsh climate. The bristles were inserted into tiny holes in a handle made of bone or bamboo.

It seems that Europeans hadn't yet caught up with this invention because they used a rag rubbed in salt or soot. I am sure that teeth cleaned using soot were a sight to behold!

This seems to have been the norm until one enterprising entrepreneur named William Addis is credited with inventing the modern toothbrush in 1780.

It appears that Mr Addis found himself in Newgate Prison charged with starting a riot. With little to occupy his mind, and having a foul tasting mouth, he saw a broom and thought that a smaller version would be good for cleaning his teeth. He somehow made holes in a piece of wood and after obtaining bristles from a helpful jailer the toothbrush was with us.

Upon his release he manufactured toothbrushes in London using horsehair and bone. His invention proved a success – however, given the alternative of rag and soot, one can see why.

By 1914 Addis were supplying troops with toothbrushes and the practice of cleaning teeth became more common. In 1920 the production was moved to Hertford; their toothbrushes at that time were available for 1 shilling (5p). The company continued to grow and the name of Wisdom toothbrushes and Addis houseware are names many of you will be familiar with today.

Over time, celluloid replaced bone and animal bristles were replaced by nylon. Nylon first appeared in the US in 1938. Development of the idea has continued, so today we have the electric toothbrush.

In the Museum in Bishop's Stortford we have a display case from a local chemist that shows "How our English Toothbrushes are made". This of course poses the question: did the rest of Britain do it differently!



The case shows 12 stages of development from raw bone, through trimming and machining to shape, followed by polishing and drilling, then pulling the bristles through and cementing the back to hold the bristles in place. Finally, we have the finished brush and an example of the packed brush in a carton.

Clearly it was designed to show how much work goes into making a toothbrush. Selling points were "Each bristle knot drawn carefully by handicraft not punched by machine" and "Toothbrushes that last are hand drawn". What happened to the company marketing their toothbrushes – The British Hygienic Prophylactic Company – is unknown. Hopefully, they renamed themselves to something slightly more catchy!

**Researched and written by Roy Fletcher.**

Roy has been a volunteer at the museum for six years, spending his time cataloguing the museum's collection. Roy has an interest in the local history, particularly the last 200 years.