

4. Embodying the history of shoes: footwear and gender in Britain, 1700-1850

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John Gay's satirical poem *Trivia: Or the Art of Walking the Streets of London* (1716: 2-3) described the many hazards that the pedestrian might encounter and how best to avoid them.

It began by advising the reader on appropriate footwear:

Let firm, well-hammer'd Soles protect thy Feet
Thro' freezing Snows, and Rains, and soaking Sleet.
Should the big Laste extend the Shoe too wide,
Each Stone will wrench th' unwary Step aside:
The sudden Turn may stretch the swelling Vein,
Thy cracking joint unhinge, or Ankle sprain;
And when too short the modish Shoes are worn,
You'll judge the Seasons by your shooting Corn.

Well-made shoes protected feet against the elements, as well as other contemporary urban dangers mentioned in the poem such as mud, overflowing gutters and the contents of chamber pots. They were therefore essential apparel for the early-Georgian *flâneur*. As Gay reminds us, however, ill-fitting shoes hold dangers of their own, resulting in injuries, accidents and medical complaints. Other items of clothing impact on the human body but shoes do so in a unique way. Shoes have to bear the body's entire weight and the considerable stresses imposed by walking, while supporting the delicate structure and sensitive skin of the foot. Furthermore, the forces imposed on shoes leave an indelible

impression of their wearer, giving an insight into the shape, size and motions of their bodies. No other garment does this. Footwear therefore has the potential to tell us a great deal about the human body.

This chapter makes a case for an embodied history of shoes, which thinks about shoes as material articles that had a close and reciprocal relationship with past physical bodies, allowing the historian to shed new light on both. To date, histories of gender and the body have had little to say about the history of shoes, and vice versa. Shoe history is a relatively self-contained field, which has traditionally focused on curation and design. Recent historical work on consumption has explored the social and cultural history of shoes, but the focus tends to be on shoes themselves rather than what they tell us about the bodies of their wearers (Riello, 2006; Riello and McNeill, 2006; Semmelhack, 2017). The one historical field that has systematically thought about shoes as objects that relate to bodies is archaeology. For example, studies of footwear remains have demonstrated changing patterns of wear over a long period or across social classes, suggesting differences in the way that people walked (Anderson, 2017; Trujillo-Menderos, 2014). Alternatively, evidence of human bones has allowed archaeologists to speculate about the nature of footwear where no such evidence has survived (Mays, 2005). In general, shoes retrieved from archaeological digs are in poor condition: leather is only preserved in specific conditions, so the evidence tends to be scraps that are heavily decayed and very fragile (Veres, 2005).

This study will instead focus on examples of footwear from museum collections. The condition of these vary, but particular attention has been paid to worn examples as it is these that tell us most about the bodies of their wearers. Because of the significance of damage and wear, curators are more sensitive to it in relation to shoes than to other garments, and tend not to privilege ‘perfect’ examples over worn ones, nor carry out restoration to ‘repair’ them. Because of shoes’ vital practical function, it is important to engage with them as objects in

order to get a sense of their materiality. Studying their shape, weight, texture and flexibility gives an insight into what they would have been like to wear, and examining patterns of wear on the soles, heels and uppers tells us about their wearer. So whereas the current study of material culture encompasses a range of approaches – including the subjective, the emotional and the economic – this study will prioritise the practical physicality of the object itself. As Ulinka Rublack has argued, material articles like shoes need to be studied as ‘real-life objects in use’ (2013: 85).

The particular focus of this study will be footwear from Britain from the early eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. Historians often identify the ‘long’ eighteenth century as a key period of change in gender relations, whereby masculine and feminine roles respectively diverged into ‘separate spheres’ of public life and domesticity (Vickery, 1993). In the Enlightenment, social roles were justified in terms of new understandings of the body and the self (Wahrman, 2004). According to Thomas Laqueur, a flexible ‘one sex’ vision of the body (where men and women shared a common body governed by the four humours) was replaced by a ‘two sex’ body (where men and women had utterly different physiologies that equipped them for separate social roles) (1990: 8). This model has been much debated: for example, Barbara Duden have shown how the language of the humours persisted, in a way that may have had little to do with Galenic medicine (2013: 54). Thinking about shoes in relation to embodied masculinity and femininity therefore offers a critical perspective on some dominant narratives of the period.

This period has also been chosen because the method of manufacture was broadly consistent before the introduction of sewing machines, new materials and new welting techniques in the 1840s. Large-scale mechanisation came late to the shoe industry, which tended to take place in workshops, small factories and private houses. Before mass production drove down costs, shoes were sewn by hand and were very labour intensive. They

were therefore a significant purchase and working people would typically only have owned one or two pairs, in fairly generic styles. Museum shoe collections tend to be skewed in class and gender terms, since it is the finer or more decorative examples that were more likely to have been kept. Men's shoes were typically plainer than women's, and working people wore their shoes until they could no longer be repaired and then discarded them (so their shoes are more likely to be recovered by archaeologists). More women's shoes are therefore preserved in museums than men's, and more elite than plebeian, but by using four major shoe archives, this study has attempted to locate a representative range of footwear across the social classes.¹

As well as using material evidence from museums, this chapter will explore writings from the time about feet and footwear. Some of this writing is medical, often by writers who were keen to establish chiropody² as a respectable medical discipline, and who were anxious to distance themselves from the corn doctors and barbers who were notorious for butchering people's feet: Lewis Durlacher paraded his credentials as 'Surgeon-Chiropodist to Her Majesty the Queen and the Royal Family' (1850: frontispiece). Other writings focus on clothing, but these too were concerned with health and hygiene: a novel and distinctive focus for the eighteenth century. This scientific emphasis might appear neutral, but Peter McNeil

¹ A total of 76 items of footwear (singles and pairs) have been consulted from the Bata Shoe Museum (Toronto), The Museum of Leathercraft (Northampton), the UK's national shoe collection (Northampton Museum and Art Gallery) and the National Army Museum (store at Stevenage).

² Until recently, physicians in Britain who specialised in feet were known as chiropodists. The term podiatrist is more commonly used today, which is more in line with international usage.

and Giorgio Riello argue that it continued the centuries-old debate about the expense and morality of fashion, and that shoes were ‘at the center of such debate’ (2005: 194). Attention is also paid to life writing, in order to get an insight into how people from the time articulated their experience of wearing shoes.

The chapter will begin by thinking about the impact that the body has upon shoes, and the way in which the body is therefore visible in worn footwear. As well as providing historians with concrete, physical evidence of the wearer, this also highlights the very individual relationship that people have with their shoes, something that is perceptible in a range of cultural practices across our period. It is also revealing to think about the requirements that shoes have to fulfil and the materials that they are made from in order to achieve this. The focus will then be reversed, as the chapter thinks about the impact of shoes upon the body. It will explore how the design of shoes affects the experience of wearing them, and the influence that this has upon the wearer’s bodily health, posture and mobility.

The impact of the body on shoes

Shoes commonly bear tell-tale signs of their owner. Look at the insole of any used pair of shoes and you will likely see the outline of a footprint, with indentations marking where the heel, midfoot and toes have exerted repeated pressure on the sole. The term ‘footprint’ is commonly used today to signify the impact of human activity, but in the case of shoes this literal footprint is a record of a human being. In addition to the footprint, wear to the sole and heel provide evidence of how the wearer moved in their shoes, and stretches in the upper record the outline of their foot. Shoes in museum collections rarely come with a provenance, and although it is possible to infer things about the owner from the design of the shoe, patterns of wear are often the only direct record we have of them. For example, we do not know who owned this wellington boot in Northampton Museum (see Figure 4.1): its style

dates from around 1820 and the quality of the materials and workmanship tells us that the owner was well-to-do. By studying the boot, however, we can see that it has stretched in order to mould to the foot. Wellingtons like this were made of supple leather and were bespoke articles, since before the availability of elastic they had to fit exactly, but it was fashionable in this period to wear tight boots in order to give the impression of slender feet. To judge by the stretching – which extends beyond the outline of the sole – and also by the long cut that has been made to the leg in order to get them on and off, this pair were made too small. The owner could afford to wear footwear that fitted, but chose not to in order to achieve a certain appearance. [Figure 4.1 near here]

Footwear therefore has a unique relationship with its owner. Bespoke footwear is directly manufactured for a particular owner, but even shoes that were made in generic sizes gradually mould to the foot through wear and adaptation. Proverbs attest to the common identification of shoes with their wearer. To ‘step into another man’s shoes’, to ‘walk a mile in their shoes’, or to ‘wait for dead men’s shoes’ suggest that shoe and owner are synonymous (Demello, 2009: 251). The ghostly outline of the absent foot has encouraged various cultures to identify the worn shoe with the soul of its original owner. Impromptu monuments of empty shoes can convey loss, and soldiers who looted boots from the fallen on the battlefield would leave their own worn-out pair as a mark of respect (Semmelhack, 2017: 320, 120). The folk practice of concealing shoes within the house in order to protect it against evil spirits suggests that the shoe magically retains the power of its owner (Houlbrook, 2013). As June Swann notes, the shoe is ‘the only garment we wear which retains the shape, the personality, the essence of the wearer’ (1996: 56). Many people resisted buying shoes second hand for this reason, a practice that was often regarded as being unlucky. Contemporaries also highlighted the medical dangers of wearing used shoes, which retained bodily traces of their former owner: Christian Struve warned that a boy contracted scarlet fever ‘by wearing

the boots of a patient labouring under that disease' (1802: 343-4). Writers like this showed little sympathy for working people who had no choice but to wear second hand or cast-offs. In practice, shoes were often acquired used due to their expense (Richmond, 2013: 91).

The structure of the human foot places certain requirements upon shoes. Humans are bipeds, so place the entire weight of their bodies upon their feet. Primates have an opposable big toe, but as human feet are just used for walking, their toes have shortened and have largely lost the ability to grab (Fernandes et al, 2018). Human feet are plantigrade, since humans stand and walk on flat feet rather than upon their toes. Their feet therefore developed an arch, to bear the weight of their bodies and the forces imposed by locomotion. The renowned surgeon Sir Charles Bell eulogised that 'there is nothing more beautiful than the structure of the human foot'. He praised its structure in architectural terms:

The foot has in its structure all the fine appliances you see in a building. In the first place, there is an arch... so that, instead of standing, as might be imagined, on a solid bone, we stand upon an arch composed of a series of bones, which are united by the most curious provision for the elasticity of the foot; hence, if we jump from height directly upon the heel, a severe shock is felt; not so, if we alight upon the ball of the great toe, for there an elasticity is formed in the whole foot, and the weight of the body is thrown upon this arch, and the shock avoided. (Hall, 1847: 96-97)

In total, the foot consists of 26 bones, 33 joints and dozens of ligaments. When stressed in the right way, they can withstand great forces, but the foot is also extremely fragile at certain points and angles. (England football fans may remember how their hopes in the 2006 World Cup hinged on the fourth metatarsal in Wayne Rooney's right foot.) For this reason, shoes should ideally offer a measure of protection and support in their uppers as well as their soles.

Shoes therefore have to fulfil various requirements. These requirements are exacting and often in opposition to one another, so shoe manufacture has historically been a very complex and skilled business. Shoes have to endure great forces and yet also protect a sensitive and vulnerable part of the body. They therefore have to be strong and hardwearing, at the same time as being soft and flexible. Additionally, they have to be waterproof. Gay reminds us that shoes protect us against the elements, and Richard Weekes wrote to his brother in October 1801 to suggest that he ‘wear a flannell waistcoat. gett a pair of Buck boots. directly and wear them. for the wet weather is coming on’ (Ford, 1987: 53). For this reason, shoes have historically been manufactured from leather. With the exception of wooden clogs, all of the examples examined here were leather shoes. Even fine silk brocade shoes for indoor wear were based upon leather, with a layer of fabric on top (see Figure 4.2). [Figure 4.2 near here]

Leather is strong, durable, flexible, breathable and waterproof. Before the vulcanisation of rubber in the 1840s, and the later invention of petrochemical plastics, any material article that required these properties was typically made from it. William Nisbet noted that the ‘materials of which the shoe is formed’ are fundamental to its design:

The substance, along with softness and pliancy, should possess the particular quality of excluding moisture. Leather is generally preferred, and by preparing it with a composition of oil, wax and turpentine, till the leather is fully saturated, it becomes impervious to the access of the wet of any kind. Thus by a shoe ... made of a soft, pliable material, rendered impervious to moisture, an easy motion of the whole foot will be permitted. (1801: 32)

Leather has these properties because of its origins in skin. Leather is essentially a by-product of the meat industry and shoe leather tended to be made from cowhide (Riello, 2007). After butchering, the flesh and hair are removed and the leather is soaked, dried and stretched. The tanning process alters the protein structure in the leather, to make it more durable and retard putrefaction. It remains a changing organic material, however, and needs to be ‘fed’ with polish if it is going to retain its flexibility, impermeability and longevity, not to mention its shiny appearance. Eighteenth-century household manuals abounded with recipes for bootblack, and servants spent much of their time polishing shoes: one gentleman lamented that his refused to do it anymore until they got a pay rise, ‘wh. measure we were obliged to come into’ (Ford, 1987: 218). Given the expense of shoes in this period, it was essential that they were maintained so as to last as long as possible. Because they were made from skin, shoes – and other leather articles like breeches and waistcoats – became a kind of second skin to the wearer, raising the question of where the boundaries of the body begin and end (Festa, 2005: 48). Moulding to the body and complementing the function of the wearer’s own skin, the wearing of shoes was fundamentally an embodied experience.

A further characteristic of the wearer’s skin that impacts on the shoe is its tendency to sweat. The combination of moisture, acid and heat darkens the leather, so sweat marks are visible on shoes in museum collections. This provides a lasting physical trace of their wearer and potentially biological material: there is a large forensic literature on how to obtain biological traces from clothing, although this decreases with the age of the object (Sterzik et al, 2018). Alison Fairhurst notes that sweat also damaged the shoe, causing leather to curl at the edges and the glue to degrade (2018: 34). Georgians believed that sweat had a corrosive effect on skin – which of course includes leather – but they were more concerned about its effect on the body than the shoe. A 1797 treatise on healthy clothing noted that ‘there is not a greater and more important emunctory [that is, an organ with an excreting function] in the

whole human system than the feet' and that 'free perspiration from the feet' was essential (Anon., 1797: 15, 17).

Eighteenth-century medicine was still informed by the ancient humoral understanding of the body, which conceived of a fluid economy that needed to be regulated by purging in order to stay healthy. A chiropody treatise of 1785 blamed corns on 'obstructed perspiration' – rather than what we would today identify as a protective layer of hard skin formed in response to the rubbing of the shoe – since trapped sweat becomes 'so acrid and corrosive as to occasion the most painful inflammations' (Low, 1785: 31, 29). As Kevin Siena notes, blockages that caused fluids to stagnate 'provided common explanations for early modern diseases' (2019: 21). Despite the sweat and smell of feet, another writer cautioned against bathing them too frequently, since 'it is apt to attract a greater flow of humours to the spot, and thus increase, perhaps bring on, a morbid perspiration' (Anon., 1818: 208).

For this reason, much medical writing on feet focused on socks, not so much for their ability to prevent blisters, but for the breathability and dryness of their material. Cotton socks, oddly, were universally condemned for their tendency to absorb sweat, 'thus confining the feet in a bath of cold perspirable matter' (Anon., 1818: 214). Furthermore, 'cotton saturated with the sweat of the feet (and cotton can contain more than linen), soon rots'. Instead, wool was recommended. Podiatric writers lauded wool for its ability to prevent 'humidity and smell' (Anon., 1797: 16, 18). Soldiers who had to march long distances were issued with woollen socks, and the many treatises on foot health that appeared during the First World War continued to recommend them (Webb-Johnson, 1916: 28-29). This suggests that a concern with healthy perspiration outlived the humoral body, as we can see in this treatise of 1847:

The pedestrian well knows the difference on a long day's walk, between a cotton or linen stocking and one of wool; he knows that the former soon becomes hard, damp and chilly, with the moisture of the foot, whereas the latter enables him to bear fatigue, defends the foot from the friction of the shoe, secures it from blisters, and in every way ministers to his comfort. (Hall, 1847: 129)

Note how the intrepid pedestrian who could endure a 'long day's walk' was conceived of in the masculine: podiatric writers tended to adopt a masculine universal unless specifically talking about women, assuming that only men would need to wear shoes for a utilitarian purpose.

As well as being strong, flexible and sweaty, feet are also delicate. Whereas walking barefoot hardens the sole, this does not happen when the foot is shod. Shoes therefore create a self-fulfilling prophecy: wearing shoes makes the foot soft and delicate, which in turn means that shoes have to be worn to protect this vulnerable extremity. Writers at the time noted that 'feet are peculiarly exposed to injury from the delicacy of the skin' (Hall, 1847: 103). In particular, this delicacy was described in terms of the nerves. Nisbet noted that feet, like the hands, 'are endowed with much sensibility, by the large share of nerves they visibly possess. In covering them, therefore, particular regard should be had that no interruption take place to these purposes of nature'. Shoes should therefore possess 'pliancy', and allow the wearer to feel what they are coming into contact with (1801: 31). This abundance of nerves also explained the pain caused by ill-fitting footwear and the complaints that resulted from them. Corns led to the 'desiccation of the nervous *fibrialle* of the skin; and the pain they communicate is like that which we experience in walking with gravel or small stones in our shoes' (Low, 1785: 34).

As we have seen, this emphasis on the nervous body coexisted with an older vision of the body, which excreted and rotted. This is important for the history of gender, since the supposed decline of the humoral body is often central to accounts of how gender roles diverged over the course of the eighteenth century. The embodied history of shoes shows how multiple visions of the body existed alongside one another in the eighteenth century, and that these had a practical and physical dimension as well as a theoretical medical one. This approach therefore offers a critical perspective on some of our key narratives of gender change in this period.

The impact of shoes on the body

Shoes are unique among garments in that they support the whole body. As well as affecting the feet and the legs, their role in absorbing shock, bearing weight and enabling mobility impact upon body parts higher up such as the hips, the spine, the shoulders and the neck. Contemporary medical writings emphasised that ill-fitting footwear, and the complaints they caused, were a factor in the body's general health. As Durlacher explained, 'these local complaints, when neglected, injure the general system by preventing the body from obtaining that natural and indispensable exercise, so conducive to health'. He therefore urged that patients seek the 'proper attention' of a professional chiropodist, rather than cutting their feet with 'razors, knives and other unwieldy instruments' (1850: x).

Choice of footwear affects the body's entire posture and gait. A 1792 translation of the German Bernhard Faust's *Catechism on Health* by the Scottish physician James Gregory emphasised the importance of the foot's natural structure for standing and walking:

Q. 108. What is the form of the human foot?

A. At the toes it is broad, the heel small, and the inside of the foot is longer than the outside.

Q. 109. Why does it take this form?

A. That a man may walk and stand with ease and firmness, and move his body freely.

The writer was not just using the masculine universal here: he was specifically describing the way that patrician men were expected to stand and move in this period. The next question concerned the type of shoe that should facilitate this, and the answer was one that has ‘the same form as the foot’ (1797: 35). At the time of writing, this was a pointed remark, since shoes did *not* take the form of the foot, as we will see. Even half a century later, Durlacher bemoaned that choice of footwear was impairing people’s mobility:

Few adults possess that firmness of step and ease of walking which Nature intended, in consequence of the confined and compressed condition in which their feet have been placed, by the unyielding material and bad shape of their shoes; the consequence is, that the natural spring and muscular action of the foot are lost, and they are deprived of the assistance that would be rendered by the action of the toes in progression. (1850: 18-19)

Placing ‘Nature’ in opposition to fashion and the trappings of civilisation was a common trope in these writings. On the one hand, this was characteristic of the Enlightenment; on the other, it expressed anxieties about modernity itself.

Studying texts like these and shoes themselves helps us to understand how people walked in the past. McNeil and Riello argue that attitudes and practices around walking changed over the eighteenth century. The early eighteenth-century city was not easy to move

around and there are few references to urban walking (2005: 178). Patrician men's shoes from this period are either for indoor wear (see Figure 4.2) or for riding: stiff, high heeled boots were ideal for the stirrups but unwieldy for walking (McCormack, 2017). Walking was therefore for plebeians, whereas Gay notes that those who could afford it travelled by horse, carriage or sedan chair (1716: 28-29). Changes to the urban environment over the course of the century, however, made walking a more viable and pleasurable pursuit. The parks, promenades, squares and pavements of the urban renaissance facilitated urban walking. Diaries from the second half of the eighteenth century by the likes of John Wilkes (Eagles, 2014) and James Boswell (Pottle, 1950) record how often they travelled around the metropolis on foot. From the later eighteenth century, men's footwear became more suitable for perambulation. Heels lowered, soles were more flexible, and the leather was thinner and more supple (see Figure 4.3). As well as a different type of shoe, walking on hard pavements required a different type of walk: Durlacher noted that persons from the country noted that 'they suffer more from corns when in the town, owing probably to the flat surface of the pavement causing an equal degree of pressure, to which they had not previously been accustomed' (1850: 13). [Figure 4.3 near here]

Walking was not universally accessible, however. The increasing normativity of walking among late-Georgian men – facilitated by new styles of footwear such as the wellington boot – highlighted the many people in contemporary society who were not able to walk easily for reasons of disability, illness or age. As the chiropodist D. Low blithely noted:

The blessing of being able to *walk* is seldom much regarded but by those to whom, from whatever cause, that blessing has been denied. By the most trifling accident to the feet... we may be forced to forgo this noble exercise; and exercise which is of all others the most productive of pleasure to man, and of which the neglect cannot but

prove essentially injurious to his bodily health, as well as to the animal spirits, which regulate all his functions. (1785: ix)

The writer evokes a noble and vigorous image of the masculine body. The bodily ideal of the late-Georgian man was tall, with shapely and strong legs, and of erect but easy posture. The ‘accomplishments’ of the polite man including dancing, riding and fencing – activities that required a strong but supple body (McCormack, 2011). If men’s shoes were becoming more suitable for these muscular activities, women’s shoes were going in the opposite direction. By the close of the eighteenth century, shoes for respectable women were light and flimsy, signalling their suitability for domestic roles. If, as Karen Harvey argues, citizenship was becoming ‘embodied’ in this period, then shoes serve only to highlight how citizenship was being assigned along gendered lines (2015: 821).

Low continued that the causes of foot complaints that impede walking were clear: ‘the use, or rather abuse, of shoes’ (1785: x). The rest of this chapter will therefore focus upon the ways in which contemporary writers critiqued the design of shoes, in terms of their negative impact upon the body. Much of this concern focused on children, since their growing bodies were particularly susceptible to becoming malformed by inappropriate footwear. Philippe Ariès (1962) famously argued that, over the course of the early modern period, children ceased to be regarded as little adults and childhood came to be seen as a special life stage. This particularly applied to their dress: writers since Locke emphasised that children should wear loose clothing, to ‘Let Nature have scope to fashion the Body as she thinks best’ (1693: 10). Faust argued that young children should be dressed in a loose frock and that their shoes should be formed to the shape of their feet. They should not wear heels, since they ‘cause the back tendon to shrink and impede the free and easy motions of the body in walking and running’. He continued:

When children are suffered to walk much, and are bare-footed, they acquire an easy and steady pace. Little children ought not to wear shoes before the eighteenth month; if they do, the soles must be thin and soft, that they may learn to walk easily and well. Boots ought not be worn by children. (1797: 37)

Infants should therefore go barefoot, or wear shoes that were sufficiently soft that they would not malform their delicate growing feet (Struve, 1802; Underwood, 1805). Surviving examples of children's shoes largely bear out these principles. A box of children's shoes in the Museum of Leathercraft dating from the early nineteenth century are of fine manufacture, indicating their elite origins (see Figure 4.4). The leather is notably soft, with supple soles and soft fabric linings. Although the lefts and rights were made the same, the soft leather easily stretched to the shape of the foot. In terms of style, they are strikingly similar to women's shoes of the time. As with petticoats, girls never left them, whereas the transition to masculine youth was often marked by the ceremonial presentation of a first pair of boots (Semmelhack, 2017: 95). [Figure 4.4 near here]

Footwear writers had several objections to contemporary footwear, in terms of the injurious effect it had on the body. Often it simply did not fit. Few could afford bespoke footwear and those who could not had to make do. Margo Demello notes that, for much of European history, 'most people were accustomed to wearing shoes that did not really fit their feet' (2007: 283). In the military, shoes for privates were produced in bulk in a range of sizes: this was the origin of standard sizing, and thence the mass ready-to-wear market, where the consumer had no contact with the producer (Riello, 2006: 212). Prior to this, however, if one wanted shoes to fit well then they had to be made to measure. J. Sparkes Hall bemoaned that shoemakers use 'some old misshapen pieces of wood, that perhaps did service to their fathers

and grandfathers,' instead of using proper lasts. He urged that everyone 'who wishes to be comfortably fitted, should have a pair of lasts made expressly for his own use' – something that would have been accessible only to the wealthy (1850: 108, 104). Easy mobility in shoes was therefore the preserve of those who could afford footwear that fitted, suggesting that different classes moved differently.

We can get an insight into the bespoke relationship in the correspondence of Hampton Weekes, a surgeon at St Thomas's Hospital. His correspondence with his family in Sussex reveals an intense interest in dressing well and making a good appearance in London society. In October 1801 he was particularly concerned with acquiring a good pair of boots. He repeatedly asked his father to arrange for the local shoemaker, John Randell, to make him a pair of 'buck boots' and, not being there in person, specified them at great length in his letters: 'If you were to desire him to make me a pair, stiff in the Leg & pretty high up, long in ye. foot with seams on each side of the Leg instead of behind'. A subsequent letter included a sketch of the style he desired: his ability to describe what he wanted in visual and anatomical terms possibly owed something to his occupation. He continued, 'Now for buck boots, crimping at the instep is quite out of fassion, neither do they have any tongues at the instep quite plain, & stiff Legd, tell Randles to make them round toed & rather long in the Foot than my last Shoes for they were too short'. A week later he urges, 'be pleased to send them soon, for I have walked to day almost upon my Toes it being so very dirty'. Alas, his father replied on 18 November: 'Randles has declind making your buck boots says he dont know how therefore wish you to get a strong pair in London tell them they must be stout and the Soal good' (Ford, 1987: 55, 61, 74, 77). Getting shoes in the size, style and fit that you wanted was therefore a lengthy and complex business, involving detailed knowledge of the product and its vocabulary, and a two-way relationship with the producer.

As well as being the wrong size, footwear writers complained that shoes were the wrong shape. Virtually all shoes produced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were straight lasted. Shoe historians are undecided about the reason for this: Swann suggests that the manufacturing process for heeled shoes lent itself to straight lasts with squared toes, and that this continued until shoes with lower heels became fashionable at the end of the eighteenth century (1986, 32). Others argue that they were simply quicker to produce (Wilson, 1969: 186), or were a conscious fashion choice (Anderson, 2017: 178). Either way, straight lasting exercised medical writers on feet and footwear throughout the eighteenth century and beyond. Several treatises included images of a human foot superimposed on a straight lasted sole, protruding beyond its edges in order to demonstrate the lack of fit (Gregory, 1797: plate 2). Shoes should have ‘the true shape of the foot, which at the toes is broad, the heel small, and the length of the inside is greater than the outside. They should be made from two lasts, as the shape of the feet indicates.’ Only by wearing these ‘natural shaped shoes’ would foot complaints such as corns be cured (Anon., 1797: 19-20). In the meantime, most people continued to wear straights, and soldiers were ordered to swap their shoes daily to prevent them wearing unevenly, so they would last longer (Cuthbertson, 1768: 135). This was contrary to the medical advice, which urged people never to do this (Nisbet, 1801: 32). After about 1790, shoes were increasingly lasted to the right and left feet, but this did not necessarily mean that they fitted better. In this period it was fashionable for men and women alike to have the appearance of small feet so shoes were commonly worn too small. As we have seen, this is visible in stretching and damage in shoes in museum collections. This was accompanied by a shift from wide to pointed toes. ‘Square toes’ became an insult to suggest that somebody was old-fashioned (Anon., 1818: 96).

The fashion for tight, short, pointed shoes was blamed for a wide range of foot complaints in the early nineteenth century, including corns, calluses, blisters and bunions.

Samuel Cooper noted that corns ‘are usually owing to wearing tight shoes, and consequently women and genteel persons are more frequently afflicted than the lower classes’ (1815: 145). Bunions or ‘onions’ were so called because of the spherical swelling on the joint of the great toe. They were blamed on ‘the wearing of shoes too short, and with a narrow sole, so that the feet are subjected to an undue degree of pressure’ (Durlacher, 1850: 65). In modern terms, hallux valgus is caused by a misalignment of the first metatarsal and the proximal phalanx, by forcing the big toe inwards (Trujillo-Menderos, 2014: 590). Paleopathologists have reported high prevalences of hallux valgus in premodern populations who wore pointed, high-heeled footwear, and that it is also an outcome of female footwear today (Mafart, 2007: 166-70).

Footwear in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries came in for so much criticism that writers repeatedly evoked the value of going barefoot. As well as being recommended for children, walking barefoot was lauded for its naturalness, in contrast with the unnaturalness of wearing restrictive footwear. Some writings take an ethnographic turn at this point, lauding the noble savage ‘who never wear[s] shoes’, who has much greater mobility and can use their toes to perform ‘delicate operations’ (Anon. 1797: 18-19). These sources exhibit a tension between admiring this ability and curiosity at the different bodies of other races. Edward Swaysland suggested that the ‘Hindoo shoemaker’ does not himself wear shoes, so he can use his feet as ‘auxiliary hands’ to assist his labours (1905: 14). As one chiropodist argued:

Without shoes, the most delicate feet, far from being injured by fatigue, would be more and more hardened and invigorated by it; and for the truth of this remark, let us turn our eyes to various countries yet uncivilised, in which the *luxury* of wearing a SHOE is still unknown, and in which is likewise still unknown the *pain* which results from a CORN.

Here we see not just a critique of shoes but of modern civilisation in general, where the ‘tyrant FASHION’ requires Britons to wear shoes that are uncomfortable and emasculating (Low, 1785: xi). Arguably, this particularly applies to men, since Christopher Forth argues that modern masculinity revolves around a fundamental tension: as men become ‘civilised’ they become detached from the conditions of struggle that constitute authentically ‘masculine’ habits and practices (2008: 4-5). Luxury was often accused of corrupting the body politic in the eighteenth century by rendering men weak and effeminate, and sapping their native qualities of independence and public spirit (Carter, 1997). Shoes help us to understand how this process could be seen as directly corrupting the *physical* body, by impairing men’s mobility, hardness and physical health.

Shoes therefore give us a fundamental insight into gender and the ways in which it was embodied in the Georgian period. Bodies impacted on footwear, providing a lasting record of that body that is unsurpassed by any other physical source, bar human remains themselves. And as we have seen, footwear impacted on bodies, affecting its posture and mobility, and causing a range of ailments. Writings from the time reveal an intense interest in the close relationship between shoes and bodies. Whereas some of this writing is blandly practical, it is also evident that there were important political agendas in the background: to create chiropody as a respectable medical profession; to justify the roles of the sexes and their relative position in society; and to grapple with the contradictions of consumerism and western modernity. Shoes therefore supported not only the physical body, but a whole host of contemporary ideologies.

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