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Mary Davis's horn: a vanished curiosity

By Arthur MacGregor

The tercentenary researches which sought to demonstrate how much of the Ashmolean's early collections still survive have also served to highlight how much has been lost over the past three hundred years. One item which still attracts occasional queries from the public but which steadfastly refuses to reveal itself is the horn of Mary Davis.

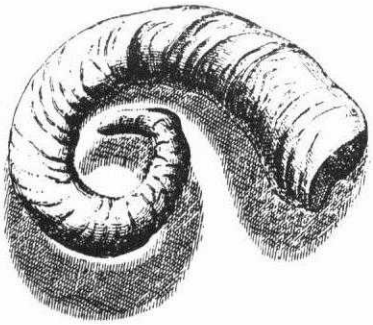
The arrival of this rarity in Oxford is well enough documented. At a meeting on 24 February 1685 of the Philosophical Society of Oxford, a body which met regularly in the Ashmolean under the chairmanship of the first keeper, Dr. Robert Plot, it was recorded that 'A Horne was communicated by Dr. Plot said to be a Horne, which grew behind the Head of a Woman, who was shew'n in London about 14 years since, and is reported to have shed her horne once in 3 years: This was sent by Mr. Ashmole to be laid up in his Repository'. Visitors to the museum later observed the horn on display and gave further information on it. In 1710 Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach recorded that 'It was exactly like a horn, except that it was thinner and browner in colour. It is certainly somewhat of a curiosity, and it appears that men-folk bear their horns in front and such women theirs behind. It was noted on a label that it originated from a Mary Davis of Saughall in Cheshire.' A sketch of the horn executed by von Uffenbach in his diary provides a unique pictorial record of the object itself. John Pointer, in his *Oxoniensis Academia: or the Antiquities and Curiosities of the University of Oxford,* published in 1749, added that the horn was five inches in length. It is mentioned in the Ashmolean's printed catalogue of 1836 and that is the last we hear of it.

Of Mary Davis and her affliction there are other accounts which give some details of her circumstances. Her portrait was painted at least twice in 1668, one version ultimately finding its way to the British Museum and the other to the Ashmolean: an engraving based on the British Museum version gives her age in that year as seventy-four. The Ashmolean portrait (also said to have come from Ashmole) is now lost but seems likely to have formed the original for an engraving published in Ormerod's *History of the County Palatine and City of Chester,* where she is said to have been aged seventy-two at the time of the sitting. The account of the growth and shedding of the horns given in that illustration is expanded in a pamphlet published in 1676 and reproduced by Caulfield in his *Portraits, Memoirs, and Characters of Remarkable Persons.* It takes the form of 'A brief narrative of a strange and wonderful old woman who hath a pair of horns growing upon her head, giving a true account [of] the first occasion of their growth, the time of their continuance, and where she is now to be seen, viz. at the sign of the Swan near Charing Cross': she is said to have been aged seventy-six and her origins are given as the parish of Shotwick in Cheshire.

There, for thirty-five years after the death of her husband, a tenant farmer, she had practised as a mid-wife. A swelling and soreness had affected her head for twenty years before assuming the form of a 'wen, near the bigness of a large hen-egg'; the wen remained stable for five years, 'after which time it was, by a strange operation of nature, changed into horns, which are in shew and substance, much like a ram's horns, solid and wrinkled, but sadly grieving the old woman, especially upon the change of weather. But more accurately to describe its nature and manner of production, may be a subject proper for a college of physicians; and no question but it will be esteemed worthy to employ the ingenious *virtuosi* of the age, who need not their glasses to magnify its wonders.'

'She hath cast her horns three times already: the first time was but a single horn, which grew long, but as slender as an oaten straw. The second was thicker than the former. The two first Mr. Hewson, minister of Shotwick, (to whose wife this rarity was first discovered) obtained of the old woman, his parishioner. They kept not an equal distance of time in falling off, some at three, some at four, and at four years and a half's growth.'

'The third time grew two horns, both of which were beat off by a fall backward. One of them an English lord obtained, and (as is reported) presented it to the French king, for the greatest rarity in nature, and was received with no less admiration. The other (which was the largest) was nine inches long and two inches about. It is much valued for the novelty; a greater than any John Tradeskin can set to view, or the greatest traveller can, with truth, affirm to have seen. Sir Willoughby Aston hath also another horn which dropped from this woman's head, and reserves it as a choice rarity. At this present she hath a pair of horns upon her head, of six months growth; and 'tis not without reason believed, they will, in a short time, be larger than any of the former; for still the latter have exceeded the former in bigness.'



Mary Davis's horn

Other such horns found their way into further collections of 'natural curiosities'. One of the most renowned was in the short-lived museum at Edinburgh University: it was seen there by Ralph Thoresby, the Leeds antiquary, who noted that it was mounted with a silver plate bearing the date 14 May 1671 and a witnessed statement that 'This horn was cut (by Arthur Temple, Chyrurgeon) out of the Head of Elizabeth Love, being three inches above the ear'. Thoresby's own collection included several 'horns' which had grown on the hands and feet of various citizens of Leeds and Bolton. The earliest collected example was probably that owned and exhibited by Sir Walter Cope in his mansion in Kensington, where it was seen in 1599 by Thomas Platter of Basel and noted by him as 'a round horn which had grown on an Englishwoman's forehead'. It seems likely that the unfortunate woman was Welsh rather than English, for an eight-page pamphlet printed in 1588 describes an old lady of Montgomeryshire, Margaret vergh Gryffith, who was then exhibited in London: from the middle of her forehead sprang a horn four inches in length and curling at the tip. A single copy of the pamphlet surviving in the Huntington Library in California includes an illustration of Margaret with her horn, which won her such renown that references to her became commonplace in the contemporary theatre. None of these was very complimentary, frequently bearing innuendoes to the effect that the horn was a judgement on her for cuckolding her husband.

The truth is more prosaic. Margaret vergh Gryffith and Mary Davis, in common with numerous other sufferers, were afflicted with excrescences of the skin known as cutaneous horns. These growths, consisting entirely of concentric layers of keratinized epidermal cells, have a tendency to originate on the sites of sebaceous cysts, warts or scars. Although they bear a superficial resemblance to the sheath of keratin covering animal horns, cutaneous horns are unlike true horns in having no bony core. They are most frequently recorded in elderly women, though they may occur on either sex at any age and they are not uncommon on animals. Pathological abnormalities of this sort were much sought after by collectors of curiosities, for whom the extraordinary always held greater appeal than the everyday. Kidney stones of prodigious size, for example, were widely collected, while lambs and chickens with extra limbs or heads held a universal (if macabre) appeal.

From a historical point of view the disappearance of any part of the Museum's earliest collections is always to be regretted, but it has to be admitted that the loss of some is easier to bear than others. I for one can summon only the mildest regret at being denied the opportunity of first-hand contact with Mary Davis's horn.

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