



Wallies that saved the world

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The number of visitors to the History of Dentistry Research Group website is going up! The average number of hits for January was 7.16 which compares favourably with the just over four hits per day quoted in the last issue of the Newsletter. The website now has links to its site from the MedHist history of medicine internet gateway at <http://medhist.ac.uk> which is run by the Wellcome Library for the History and Understanding of Medicine and also from Cyber Medical College which can be found at <http://www.cybermedicalcollege.com>. These links may help to explain the increased number of visitors.

An online exhibition is currently being displayed on the website of the Royal College of Surgeons of England entitled "Churchill's dentures: the teeth that saved the world." The exhibition is based on a spare set of Winston Churchill's dentures made by the dentist Wilfred Fish and his dental technician Derek Cudlipp which were gifted to the College by Derek Cudlipp. Churchill's dentures were designed to leave a gap between the plate and the roof of his mouth in order to compensate for his natural lisp. As a result of the design there was a great deal of stress on the clasps which held the plate in place. Churchill's Private Secretary always had a spare set at hand in case of emergencies. Long clinical sessions were required to fit or repair each denture as very fine adjustments needed to be made. The prolonged sessions were accompanied by brandy in place of mouthwash and a couple of cigars. Churchill's patience frequently wore thin and on occasion he would flick the denture out – sometimes hitting the opposite wall. The full story, accompanied by an illustration of the dentures can be found at <http://www.rcseng.ac.uk/services/museums/exhibition>.

Churchill was not the only great leader to have problems with dentures. George Washington had a long history of infected and abscessed teeth and by the time he was inaugurated for his first term as president in 1789, he had only one natural tooth remaining and was wearing his first full set of dentures (previously he had had partial dentures which were held in place by hooking them around the remaining teeth). The dentures had a base of hippopotamus ivory carved to fit the gums. The upper denture had ivory teeth and the lower plate human teeth. Four further sets were made for him before he died in 1799 – none of which appear to have been very successful and dental discomfort is said to have caused him to forgo his second inaugural address.

An article detailing Washington's problems with his teeth can be found at <http://americanrevolution.org/dental.html>.

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