# Twitter Thread by Savn Daniel



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## WHY DO BRITISH LAWYERS STILL WEAR WIGS?

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## - Wigs, when not used to cover syphilis-related hair loss, were a big help for those who had lice.

- Wigs began to catch on in the late 16th century when an increasing number of people in Europe were contracting the STD.

- Long hair was all the rage, and premature balding was a dead giveaway that someone had contracted syphilis.

The drama of a criminal trial has a macabre allure. In America, strangers line up to enter courtrooms as spectators of high-profile proceedings. Those who can't be there in person watch live-streamed versions on televisions and tablets.

And when there's downtime from real-life court battles, many turn instead to pseudo-fictional primetime portrayals.

But when was the last time you saw lawyer or judge wearing a powdered wig?

While this isn't a tradition you'll find in America (excepting historic re-enactments), in England wigs remain an important part of formal courtroom attire for judges and barristers — the term there for lawyers.

Many of the judges and barristers who wear wigs in court say the headpiece — also known as a peruke — brings a sense of formality and solemnity to proceedings.

Lawyers in Hong Kong still wear garb that calls back to their days as a colony.

"In fact, that is the overwhelming point for having them," says Kevin Newton, a Washington, D.C.-based lawyer who studied law at the University of London. Newton adds that barristers' counterparts, known as solicitors, meet with clients

outside the courtroom and are not required to wear wigs.

outside the courtroom and are not required to wear wigs. Like many uniforms, wigs are an emblem of anonymity, an attempt to distance the wearer from personal involvement and a way to visually draw on the supremacy of the law, says Newton.

Wigs are so much a part of British criminal courts that if a barrister doesn't wear a wig, it's seen as an insult to the court.

Barristers must wear a wig slightly frizzed at the crown, with horizontal curls on the sides and back.

In addition, there are two long strips of hair that hang down below the hairline on the neck and sport a looped curl at each end. Different types of lawyers, though, have distinctions in the style of wig.

A judge's wig is similar, but more ornate. It's a full wig, from a slightly frizzed top that transitions into tight horizontal curls that range several inches below the shoulders.

Most wigs are made of white horse hair, but as a wig yellows with age, it takes on a coveted patina that conveys experience. Horse hair may not seem like a particularly precious material, but pair specialty hair with an age-old

craft of styling, sewing and gluing, and the resulting wigs aren't cheap. A judge's full-length wig can cost more than $3,000, while the shorter ones worn by barristers cost more than $500.

Wigs may have fallen out of general men's fashion over the centuries, but when wigs first made their appearance in a courtroom, they were part and parcel of being a well-dressed professional.

In the 17th century, only the elite wore powdered wigs made of horsehair.

Those who couldn't afford the elite garb but wanted to look the part wore wigs made of hair from goats, spooled cotton or human corpses. There was also a steady trade that involved living people who sold their long hair for wigs, though horsehair remained the ideal.

But why did powdered wigs come on the fashion scene in the first place? Why top one's head with an itchy, sweat-inducing mass of artificial curls? Blame it on syphilis.

Historical Hair

Wigs began to catch on in the late 16th century when an increasing number of people in Europe were contracting the STD. Without widespread treatment with antibiotics (Sir Alexander Fleming didn't discover penicillin, the treatment for syphilis, until 1928),

people with syphilis were plagued by rashes, blindness, dementia, open sores and hair loss. The hair loss was particularly problematic in social circles. Long hair was all the rage, and premature balding was a dead giveaway that someone had contracted syphilis.

Wigs, when not used to cover syphilis-related hair loss, were a big help for those who had lice. After all, it was much more difficult to treat and pick through the hair on one's head than it was to sanitize a wig.

When it comes to trend-starters, no one had a bigger

influence on British wigs than Louis XIV of France. During his reign from 1643 to 1715, the Sun King disguised his prematurely balding scalp — historians believe it was caused by syphilis — by wearing a wig. In doing so, he started a trend that was widely followed by the

European upper- and middle-class, including his cousin, Charles II, the King of England (also rumored to have contracted syphilis), who reigned from 1660 to 1685.

Although aristocrats and those who wished to remain in good social standing were quick to adopt the practice of

wearing wigs, English courtrooms were slower to act. In the early 1680s, judicial portraits still showed a natural, no-wig look. By 1685, however, full, shoulder-length wigs had become part of the proper court dress.

A Persistent Legacy

Over time, wigs fell out of fashion with society as a whole. During the reign of England's King George III, from 1760 to 1820, wigs were worn by only a few — namely bishops, coachmen and those in the legal profession.

And bishops were permitted to stop wearing them in the 1830s. But the courts kept wigs for hundreds of years more.

In 2007, though, new dress rules did away with barrister wigs — for the most part.

Wigs were no longer required during family or civil court appearances, or when appearing before the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom.

Wigs, however, remain in use in criminal cases.

In the U.K. and Ireland, judges continued to wear wigs until 2011, when the practice was discontinued. In England, and other former English and British colonies — like Canada, for instance, whose provinces abandoned the wigs throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, or Jamaica

which removed the wigs in 2013 — lawyers and judges now only wear wigs for ceremonies.

The habit persists, though. "It is a little bit odd when you think of it, but I think this phenomenon has a symbolic aspect to it,"

prominent Hong Kong lawyer Johnny Mok told the Financial Times in 2013, "just like the use of the wig and gown in Hong Kong. My feeling is that Hong Kong will probably be one of the very last jurisdictions where wig and gown will continue to be used."

Adherence to tradition's a powerful human trait.

Before the adoption of wigs in the 17th century, British lawyers had a dress code that would seem positively modern. They

were expected to appear in court with short hair and neatly trimmed beards.