

John Riland's Wig

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JOHN RILAND,

AGED 60.

How often have you come across this picture of Rev John Riland (b.1736, d.1822) wearing his "full bottomed wig"? Many times, I should imagine. Yet we should be grateful to have this one picture, as it appears to be the only one we have showing a Sutton Coldfield resident wearing a wig in the 1700s.¹

This seems remarkable, as there were many Sutton personages at that time who were wealthy enough to commission a portrait or arrange for a likeness to be made of themselves portraying their flamboyant coiffeurs!

John Riland was obviously a worthy candidate and his rather sedate wig, devoid of any curls, give a very priestly air to his portrait.

Because the rarest and most expensive of these wigs were white, people put white powder on their own wigs to achieve the same effect. They also used it on their own hair. It intensified the bloneness of very fair hair but made darker hair look grey, the shade depending on the natural hair colour.

Hair powder was made from flour or starch and varied considerably in quality, with the best powders being made from highly refined starch and, although white was the most popular colour, other shades were also used, including brown, grey, orange, pink, red, blue and violet.²

The fashion for wearing wigs or false hair pieces came to this country in the mid 17th century when Charles II introduced it on his return from exile in France. Various designs were worn for over a hundred years and the fashion endured until the end of the 18th century, at which time the government decided it was worth exploiting. William Pitt the younger, needing funds to pay for the war with Napoleon of France, decided to impose a hair powder tax.

Thus, under the *Duty on Hair Powder Act 1795* one was required to obtain a yearly certificate from the local Justice of the Peace costing one guinea and a copy of the list of those who had paid was affixed to the door of the local parish church.³ This seems quite a clever ploy to ensure that no-one evaded the tax as, presumably, you would not turn up at church on Sunday wearing a wig or hairpiece if your name wasn't on the list!

The charge would be levied on the head of the household, also on his wife or lodger. If he had servants, one payment would suffice for a group of them. However, there were many exemptions, for example, a clergyman with an income under £100 per annum (which did not include John Riland, whose income was greater) non-commissioned officers, militia, mariners, officers in the navy below Commander, and many others.

Not surprisingly, this tax hastened the demise of the wig, hairpiece and hair powder, even though the Act was not actually repealed until 1859.

So, as we look at this picture of John Riland (which appears to have been taken in 1796, when he was 60 years of age), it looks as if he was using hair powder. He was certainly paying the tax, as he was recorded on 14th May, 1795 as the owner of a hair powder certificate on the Sutton Coldfield list.⁴ This list was presumably affixed to Holy Trinity Parish Church door.

We shall never know for how long John Riland wore this particular wig, perhaps until he died, in which case he would have recognised the old adage *'in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes'*.

SOURCES:

1. RILAND BEDFORD, Rev WK: *Three Hundred Years of a Family Living* Birmingham, Cornish Brothers, 1889
2. www.RegencyHistory.net: *Hair Powder and Pomatum* (permission granted to use material)
3. www.blogs.ancestry.co.uk/warwickshire occupational and quarter sessions records
4. www.ancestry.co.uk/warwickshire occupational and quarter sessions 1662 - 1866/hair powder certificates

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