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The Rougier Family: Comb-Making In York

An Insight Report

By Nicola Rogers, with thanks to Dr Sonia O'Connor

In 1983-84, excavations took place at 24 – 30 Tanner Row prior to the building of an extension to the General Accident Insurance Company offices. This investigation was on the former site of the Rougier family's comb-making factory and revealed the remains of a number of Victorian buildings as well as deposits of offcuts and incomplete products discarded by the factory before its closure in 1930. These proved to be from the making of tortoiseshell combs, one of the main – and most expensive – products of the company.



Figure 1: *Off cuts and trimmings*

Although described as ‘tortoiseshell’ in the company’s records and literature, and referred to as such throughout the Victorian comb-making industry, in fact this raw material came from marine turtles – from either the Hawksbill or Green turtle, both of which live in tropical or sub-tropical seas – and so the material would have been imported to Britain across long distances. An account of the company’s operations which was printed following the closure of the factory noted that the main materials used were buffalo horn, white horn and tortoiseshell, the last of these being described as ‘costly’, and the material that took longest to work up from raw material to finished product – about 4 months - owing to the need to manipulate it very carefully and to allow it a long time to dry out before working.

The deposit of working debris from comb-making comprises piles of shell plate fragments, offcuts and trimmings of plates; numerous thin rectangular plates with teeth cut into them probably represent layers from combs which have delaminated during deposition. These plates were all originally of identical sizes with teeth cut to the same gauge, indicating these were being mass produced. A single surviving comb is a fine, short-toothed piece, one end of which appears to have broken off; small perforations have been drilled along the back of the comb, perhaps to enable the fixing of a decorative top to the comb. A hole at one end is probably part of a hinge to allow the comb to be opened and closed into a protective case, possibly of metal.

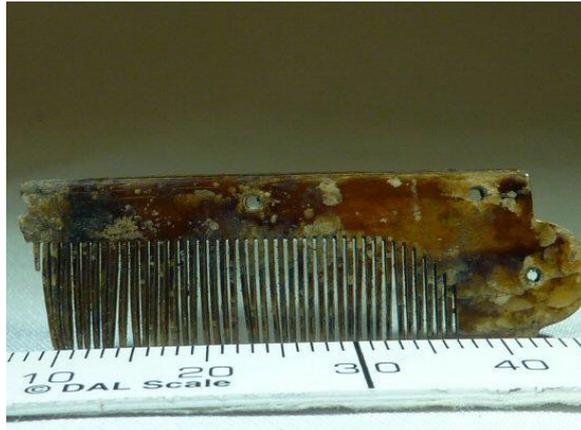


Figure 2: *The incomplete comb*

The surviving comb was clearly for grooming, and used to remove tangles from hair, but the vast majority of the tortoiseshell combs produced by the factory were ornamental combs, which women wore to keep their long hair up on their heads. Unfortunately for the company, changes in popular styles, in particular the fashion for short haircuts such as the 'bob' which developed at the time of the First World War, led to a huge drop in demand, and this was said to have led to the factory's closure in 1930.



Figure 3: *Comb fragments*



Figure 4: *Plate fragments and off cuts*



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