

Name: _____

How do you Feel? (1-5)

Hour: _____

“Should Wigs Stay or Go?”

By: Michelle Mason

In the eighteenth century, gentlemen in England and the United States fancied horsehair wigs. For example, George Washington’s portrait on the one-dollar bill shows him wearing a powdered wig. Most American and English men stopped wearing wigs in the early 1800s. A small part of British society, though, is still required to wear those scratchy and itchy horsehair wigs!

A Brief History of the Wig: Its Origination

Wigs were introduced into British high society when Charles II was king (1660-1685). By the 1680s, wigs were generally worn by lawyers when appearing in court. Early wigs were natural in color and style. They soon became larger and more stylized, and by the mid-18th century, many wigs were powdered gray or white. The powdering process included grinding up starches (such as corn, rice, and wheat) and scenting them with such materials as lavender. In that time, the more elaborate the wig, the more fashionable the person wearing it was considered. As with all fads, the wig would soon find its way to the clearance racks. By the 1820s, wigs were falling out of fashion.

But wait! British lawyers and judges are still required by custom and law to wear wigs. This includes a fancy court dress of knee-length trousers (called breeches), tights, and heavy robes.

To Wig, or Not to Wig?

The original reason for the wearing of wigs along with robes is that the costume hid the judges' and lawyers' identities. This gave them protection in public against criminals they may have previously met in court.

Some changes helped to make the wigs less of a burden. For example, by the 1860s, lawyers were sensibly permitted to go wigless during heat waves. This wise practice continues to the present day.

Opinions among lawyers and judges are split. The older and more experienced lawyers and judges tend to favor getting rid of the wigs. Years of rashes and headaches have convinced them that the wig and robe are not needed. The younger lawyers, on the other hand, favor the continued use of the wigs. They tend to be overly impressed with the splendor of the costume.

Politicians Debate the Wig

Within the last decade, Lord Chancellor Irvine, at that time the presiding officer of the House of Lords within the British Parliament, proposed an end to the use of fancy dress in the House of Commons. In an article for the British Broadcasting Corporation, Lord Irvine stated, “I have never found that the quality of justice and the effectiveness of the advocacy depended in the least upon the fancy dress” of the lawyers. Lord Irvine, who is sometimes required to wear the wig thirteen to fourteen hours a day, complained, “The wig weighs an absolute ton. It is very, very uncomfortable....”

Some members of Parliament felt the tradition should continue. They did not seem to consider the discomfort and risk of heat stroke to which lawyers and judges are subjected as important. Peer Lady Young, a member of the House of Lords, said that the traditional court costume is respectful. To do away with the outfit would be the start of a “downward slide.” Seemingly, she meant that the criminals would lose respect for the courts should the judges wear nice suits and reasonable shoes rather than breeches and buckled shoes.

Other members of Parliament were more supportive of Lord Irvine. Jeremy Corbyn stated that preserving the use of “these fairly foolish robes is frankly nonsense, and we should get ourselves into the 20th century before it passes us by.”

And Now?

Pray that common sense will prevail. Pray that British lawyers and judges can take off their wigs and let the clean, cool wind of the 21st century blow through their hair.

.....

Monday: ____

Which quotation supports the author’s claim that wigs have a long history in the British legal system? Explain your reasoning.

Tuesday: ____

Which quotation supports the author’s claim that wigs are uncomfortable? Explain your reasoning.

Wednesday: ____

What caused lawyers and judges in Britain to first begin wearing wigs? Explain your reasoning.

Thursday: ____

What is the main idea of the section “A Brief History of the Wig: Its Origination”? Explain your reasoning.

Friday: ____

Why would a British lawyer or judge want to wear a wig today? Explain your reasoning.