

Dressing table nostalgia!

Join **Jill Thorp** and residents of Bupa's Waterlea and Bethesda facilities for a treasure-filled trip down memory lane.

Dressing tables became popular in the late 17th century, when many were designed especially for male dandies.

In time, dressing tables became even more popular with women as a special space to display their perfumes, treasures, and fripperies.

An amble through antique and secondhand shops reveals the changing styles of dressing tables over generations: the ornate wings, drawers, and mirrors of the Victorian era; the dramatic features of those from the Art Deco period; through to the kidney shapes and simpler, more functional designs of more recent times.

Most of us remember favourite display items from the dressing tables of our parents and grandparents; perhaps these items (and their special memories) still feature on our own dressing tables.

Residents of Bupa's Waterlea and Bethesda facilities recently shared afternoon tea, memories of favourite dressing table heirlooms, and the fascinating stories behind them.

At these get-togethers, a wonderful array of dressing table treasures appeared from residents' rooms, prompting touching and amusing tales of times gone by.

Elegant crystal perfume bottles, a special photo frame, and a paua clothes brush were among the precious items on display.

Most impressive was the collection of brooches: tiny butterflies and large dragonflies with vivid blue wings, diamanté flowers, small cameos, and even a diamond spider, each with a story, each with its supporters and disapprovers as we all chose a favourite.

My personal favourite? An amethyst butterfly which has no monetary value but enormous sentimental importance, given to a young child by her father after she learned to swim.

Various comments could be overheard as we viewed the collection, lost in our own childhood memories.

"I was so curious," recollected one resident of her wish to touch and hold the fascinating items on her grandma's dressing table, "but if I went anywhere near I got a slap!"

Another resident recalled working as a maid as a young girl, and admiring the dressing table showpieces of the lady of the house, which seemed so beautiful and grand to her teenaged eyes.

Fond memories

Mary quietly asked if I'd like to see her dressing table set, a beautiful trio of brush, comb and mirror. Silver and shining, they were almost too pretty to use.

"My husband noticed me admiring these one day in a shop window. I thought the set was beautiful, but never imagined I could possibly own it. The next day he produced the most wonderful surprise. He had gone back to the shop and bought it especially for me." >

PHOTOS: MAXIMIANI SHUTTERSTOCK; SUBBUJIG; ISTOCKPHOTO



Joyce sadly recalled watching all of her dressing table treasures float off down the river after the Christchurch earthquake.

She managed to save one special item, a tatting shuttle used to make the delicate, intricate cloths that protect the polished surfaces of many dressing tables.

One of Mary's perfume bottles still contains scent as old as the bottle (not for the fainthearted), eliciting discussions and memories of favourite smells.

"My favourite is Estee Lauder Beautiful," said Dawn. "My husband used to travel overseas a lot, and every time he returned he brought me a bottle because he knew how much I liked it."

Dawn disappeared, returning with the scent so we could all have a sniff. Another popular perfume is Elizabeth Arden's Red Door.

Isn't it strange how just one whiff of a particular scent can transport us to another time? The perfumes our mothers or grandmothers wore can, in an instant, take us back to our childhood days, carefree and with our whole lives ahead of us.



Jean

An elegant silver brush, comb, mirror, and clothes brush feature on Jean's dressing table, gifts from her husband 67 years ago when he returned from war and they set up house together in Christchurch.

The set is displayed on beautiful embroidered doilies made by Jean's mum.

Jean remembers her mother's own dressing table, a simple piece of furniture with a tilting mirror.

Jean's dressing table has more elaborate winged mirrors.

She says her mum and grandmother weren't ones for makeup and powders.

"Fashion wasn't a high priority."

But they did keep butterfly clips and hairpins on their dressing tables, and Jean often admired her grandmother's embossed trinket box and a gorgeous red jug, which she inherited.



Eileen

Eileen's delicate silver utility holder, made in the early 1800s, is worn as a chain around the waist and holds folding scissors, a button hook for boots, and a rosewater container (which still contains rosewater)!

It is very special, as a friend's grandmother left it to her granddaughter in her Will, and she later left it to Eileen.

Eileen has always treasured the holder and keeps it in a porcelain trinket box from Harrods that sits on her dressing table.

Eileen says her mother's dressing table featured a pink rose-patterned porcelain set that kept her powder, hairpins, and combs tidy. It sat on a marble top, along with candlesticks, a trinket tray, and two round porcelain bowls, one containing a big white

jug for washing, plus dishes for soap, and a toothbrush which sat on a wash stand.

Eileen also remembers a matching pink rose chamber pot, which she turned upside down to stand on so she could get a better view of the bed ... and her new baby sister!

Eileen says her mother used to brush her long hair in front of her dressing table mirror, but later cut it into a 1920s 'shingle style', set off with a cloche hat that was all the rage then.

Eileen also remembers she was not allowed into her parents' room.

"This was considered 'taboo', and we were not allowed to rummage around or touch anything on the dressing table."

Alice

A special orange jug features on Alice's dressing table.

As well as being attractive and a curiosity, the jug is special because it gets passed down only to family members whose first name is Alice.

The jug has been in the family for five generations, arriving in New Zealand in 1784 with Alice's great-great grandmother. Made by Royal Bayreuth-Bavaria, the little orange jug once sat on

a gorgeous wing-mirrored dressing table owned by Alice's grandmother, along with the usual brushes, combs, and powders.

It sat next to a vivid green scent bottle that Alice hoped would someday be hers. She was allowed to 'look but not touch', and remembers her grandmother sitting in front of her dressing table mirror putting her beautiful auburn hair up into a severe bun, which she secured into position with an ornate hair comb.

Alice's mum had a short 'bob' hairstyle, adorned with fancy clips that were later kept on that same dressing table next to the little orange jug!



And now, those perfumes worn by our residents are forming memories deep within the little ones who come to visit us here, to perhaps be brought forth in a reminiscence session such as this 80 years from now!

Special tea sets

Our dressing table reminiscence get-togethers were followed by afternoon tea with fine china tea cups and saucers.

We had been lent the most special of tea sets, collected over generations, each cup with a matching saucer and plate, every one different, all featuring exquisitely delicate painting in pastels and gold.

"I had a child's china tea set and loved it," one resident recalled.

Others told of holding tea parties for their dolls and teddy bears, elaborate affairs no doubt, enhanced with a bit of home baking from mother, and the dolls all dressed up in their best outfits. It seems those childhood tea sets got a lot more use than those that were really intended for tea!

"I had a beautiful fine china tea set, but it was so delicate I hardly ever used it, I was so scared of breaking it," said another resident.

I wonder how many other beautiful china sets were left to gather dust for fear of damaging them? Then out came cups and saucers and other china pieces, hidden away in corners of bedrooms and now proudly displayed for us all to see and share, such as Ruth's set, given to her when she was six.

I wonder how many of today's six year olds would manage to look after something so fragile without so much as a chip or a crack?

Ruth acquired the duo when the Queen visited New Zealand.

She also cherishes a figurine of a butcher, a special gift from her grandfather's fine china shop many years ago.

Then, once again, the treasures were carefully stowed, the dressing table items returned to their special positions, the perfumes put away, and all that remained was memories of times past ... happy memories of long lives lived to the full. >

Stories and photos were supplied by residents at Bethesda in Christchurch and Waterlea in Blenheim. Staff from Bethesda and Waterlea set up and completed the reminiscing sessions.



Dot

Dot has a very special jewellery box that her grandmother left to Dot's father on her death.

Dot was born six months later in February 1913.

This jewellery box is 100 years old!

Dot was given the box when she was 17, in 1930.

It sits on her dressing table with a beautiful vase and two old-fashioned statues of a lady and a gentleman.

Dot was not allowed to play with or touch anything on her mother's own dressing table.

"You can look, but you may not touch!"

Dot can't remember her grandmother's dressing table, and Dot's mother didn't wear hair pieces or pins, so these weren't a feature on her dressing table.

"She wore her hair in a very practical style," says Dot.

Dressing table recollections and heirlooms *past and present ...*

"Dressing tables offer a private place to sit and take your time when pampering yourself from hair to nails."

"I wonder where it is now?"

A crucifix taken to war by an uncle in World War I, and then to World War II by her husband ... "there and back twice!"

"Choosing a treasure from my mother-in-law's china cabinet in the 1930s."

Hummel figurines hand painted by German nuns.

A china set of three dogs from a loving son 65 years ago ("only the middle dog is left").

Men's dressing tables often feature books, hairbrushes, photos, and manicure sets.

A necklace designed by a resident's husband, who was a Captain in the Otago Regiment (Army), inscribed "To Joyce From Tom, 26 March 1940".

Elaborate perfume bottles with tubes and droppers, used to dab on perfume.

A glass vanity tray for perfume bottles, brushes, and cosmetics.

"Little girls should be seen and not heard."

Smells of violets + Lily of the Valley + Yardley soaps and perfumes.

While a Sergeant Major during World War II, serving in Egypt, a Bupa resident scaled the fence and bought an ivory container from hawkers, which featured on his dressing table after the war.

A 1946 ballerina jewellery box.

"We had to sell our treasured possessions because of the recession."

"Back then, if you wanted to enter someone's bedroom you had to knock on the door, and have an adult with you!"

Gloves and a hat stand for long hat pins to go through long hair. "My grandmother said never leave the pin in your hat, dear."

"My children never took much notice, but now that they are getting older themselves, they are very interested in the stories about special items on my dressing table, and have 'dibs' on their favourites."

"These are more than possessions, they are memories of special people and special times."

An ornate gold locket containing photos of loved ones, inherited from grandma.

"Dried flowers from my bridal bouquet, which I hang from my dressing table mirror."

A teacup and saucer, the last of a set, still used when the mood strikes.

An empty cigar box from the 1950s filled with photos, matchbooks, drink coasters from holidays, and cards kept from special occasions.

"My long cigarette holder which was the height of fashion when I was young. We all smoked back then!" 

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