

# Human history: A socio-cultural examination of handshaking

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19 August 2024

## Penelope J. Corfield, from Royal Holloway, University of London, offers an intriguing exploration of the social and cultural significance of handshaking throughout human history

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All aspects of human life have a history. Really? All of them? Yes, really. All humans live in history and make history as they do so. Yet it's also true that not all aspects of human history are equally easy to study.

Governments, taxes and warfare between them have a significant impact – and leave many records. So they tend to be well-studied. By contrast, other aspects of human life flourish 'under the radar'. Yet readers today who are interested in (say) the history of silence, can find an excellent book on that theme – while another fine study explains the evolutionary role of humanity's 'curious behaviour', such as yawning, laughing and hiccupping.

### How people in the past greeted one another

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Nothing is thus beyond scrutiny. One good research challenge is to discover how people in the past greeted one another on a daily basis. The answers say much about the state of any given society. If people threw themselves to the ground before their rulers – physically abasing themselves before power – then clearly their society was highly unequal, and the rulers did not expect any serious opposition (though it did sometimes happen).

Conversely, if male chieftains habitually greeted one another with a light (non-sensual) kiss on the lips, then they were pledging fraternity and solidarity – not submission. They were not only forging their own network of power brokers but were excluding their male tenants and all their womenfolk, too. That system applied in eleventh- and twelfth-century Iceland, in its 'Commonwealth' era, when the chieftains met to confirm laws and settle disputes in their communal parliament – said to be the world's oldest. What's in a kiss? Plenty.

### What messages were (and are) signalled by handshaking?

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So, turning to a different salutation, what messages were (and are) signalled by handshaking? Here, a case history from Britain is relevant. The two hundred years from the late seventeenth to the late nineteenth centuries witnessed a massive social, urban and industrial transformation. And it's no surprise to find, in parallel, notable adaptations in people's daily salutations.

Evidence for such matters remains patchy, and the standard etiquette books provide little help since they focus upon traditionally 'correct' behaviour. But a picture can be assembled by putting together fragmentary references in letters, diaries, plays, and travellers' accounts.

Old-style greetings did not disappear overnight. Men continued to remove their hats and bow to their social 'superiors', while women held out their skirts and curtsied. Those customs were strongly upheld at the royal court and in gatherings of polite society. Yet, in Britain's increasingly crowded towns, the formality was being reduced. Men removed their hats very briefly or touched the brim with a casual salute. Women, too, began to give little bobs, rather than the deep curtsies as required at court.

## **Differing responses to handshaking**

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A rival and very different form of greeting was becoming socially visible. At first, men and then women, too, began to shake hands when meeting. Not all followed suit. Monarchs then did not shake hands with their 'subjects'. Noblemen were also cautious about acting too familiarly with their 'inferiors'. Some fastidious people complained that handshaking was 'unhygienic'.

But the custom continued to spread inexorably, especially in the growing towns and industrial regions. In a myriad of daily meetings, people could not immediately gauge who was 'superior' to whom. A brisk handshake settled the matter, courteously.

By the way, it should be stressed that handshaking was not invented in Georgian Britain. The custom had a long back history. It was regularly used by diplomats when two royal representatives met, and neither would kowtow to the other. It was also used by two gentlemen before fighting a duel to signal fair play. In both England and Scotland, plebeian men of roughly equal status often shook hands upon first meeting.

## **Who boosted the custom of shaking hands?**

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Two new groups then massively boosted the custom. One was Britain's merchant community. As trade expanded, many traders across Europe and North America were becoming accustomed to shaking hands to confirm a deal. The gesture bridged across potential political, religious, cultural and ethnic divisions. And it slipped easily into use for daily salutations.

The second group of regular hand-shakers came from the radical Protestant sect, known officially as the Society of Friends (founded in 1656). Its members, known unofficially as Quakers, included many tradesmen and artisans. They cultivated a simple lifestyle. They dressed and spoke plainly. And they believed in true human equality: 'We are all one in the eyes of the Lord'. As a result, they refused on principle to bow or curtsy to their social 'betters'. Instead, all Quakers – men and women alike – shook hands. And their steadfast behaviour – which initially caused consternation – helped to familiarise people with the salutation.

Together, then, the combination of quiet plebeian tradition, affluent mercantile custom, and determined Quaker principle, was slowly establishing the handshake as a viable social option. Thus, the sharp-eyed Jane Austen provided an example in her novel *Emma* (1815). One dashing young gentleman, Frank Churchill, salutes a group gathering with his hat. However, when saying farewell to his confidential friend, Emma Woodhouse, he gave her 'a very friendly shake of the hand'.

## Engaging in unspoken social negotiation

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When encountering others, therefore, Britons in this period increasingly engaged in an unspoken social negotiation, as people quickly worked out how best to salute one another. Men could still take off their hats and bow, while women could still curtsy. Or they could look one another in the eye and shake hands. That salutation brought them close together – but not too close – and it expressed mutual goodwill, without being overly fulsome.

British customs were thus becoming less hierarchic and more egalitarian. Of course, people did not become literally equal, whether in wealth or status. Far from it. Yet, when shaking hands, people signalled good fellowship within a shared culture of fair dealing.

## What's in a handshake?

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What's more, as Britons travelled the world, they (with others) boosted handshaking's international spread. Today, the salutation has become a global (though not universal) standard. Let's hope that its use also encourages international good fellowship and fair dealing. What's in a handshake? Optimism.

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