


# Human history: Handshaking horrors explained

---

 [openaccessgovernment.org/article/human-history-handshaking-horrors-explained/184989](https://openaccessgovernment.org/article/human-history-handshaking-horrors-explained/184989)

12 November 2024

## Penelope J. Corfield, from Royal Holloway, University of London, offers an intriguing examination of the perils of shaking hands in human history

---

Shaking hands sends a message of optimism. Strangers can meet and greet on a footing of trust and friendliness. The gesture links two people who need not be equals in worldly status or wealth. But they act as social equals at the moment of mutual salutation. They are using a known social signal within a shared community.

How, then, can things go wrong? The answer is that humans, being humans, can always vary and, at times, abuse the salutation. Horrors do happen.

Such possibilities do not, of course, mean that people should not be ready to deal fairly with their fellow humans. Nonetheless, the fact that greetings can send varied messages does mean that people should remain vigilant. Not every smiling stranger is automatically a friend. Some may be actually indifferent. Others, at times, are outright deceivers.

### Enemies may flatter to deceive

---

Here is an example of betrayal in a time of warfare. The incident was recorded in the fifteenth-century *Chronicles* of Jean Froissart. He was a Low Countries historian who witnessed the chronic warfare between England and France.

Froissart reported that a French warrior was once besieged within his castle by a rival army. Things had reached a stalemate, so the rival generals began to negotiate a local ceasefire. The besieger arrived at the barred castle doors and extended his hand, in the accepted diplomatic gesture to ratify the agreement.

Yet, alas! The perfidious besieger was not to be trusted. The general within opened a small window in the castle door and put his own hand out, 'pour faire jurer sa foi' [to pledge his faith]. And then? The besieger grabbed the hand and threatened to nail it to the castle door – unless the besieged general threw out the castle keys and surrendered. Which he duly did.

In this case, trusting diplomacy was a total mistake. Humans betray and negotiate, especially in the heat of warfare. Therefore, extra caution is required when dealing with avowed enemies.

### Business deals, sealed with a handshake, may fail

---

From the seventeenth century onwards, handshakes to confirm business deals became increasingly common throughout Europe.

They signalled that both individuals – whether from different countries, backgrounds, or religious groups – were pledging in good faith.

Again, it may be asked: what could possibly go wrong? Well, many things! There were (and are) numerous potential slips between making an unwritten deal and seeing it through to completion.

For a start, the two shaking hands might differ in their recollections of what was agreed. A second problem was (and is) that one or other of the two parties might later fail to deliver. They might be defeated by adverse circumstances. Or they might decide – either then or later – to renege on the deal.

Legally, handshake deals (also known as ‘gentlemen’s agreements’) are accepted, in the UK, as potentially valid. Numerous test cases have confirmed that point. But litigants don’t always win.

### **Blue versus Ashley (2017)**

---

Take the law case of Blue versus Ashley in the UK High Court in 2017. Two wealthy businessmen met in a London pub and talked shop. But did Mike Ashley, Director of Sports Direct, make a binding agreement to pay, in certain specific circumstances, a huge bonus to investment banker Jeffrey Blue? Blue certainly thought so. And he went to law, when Ashley refused to pay.

During the case, there was much debate as to whether a London pub was a normal venue for making financial deals. Blue submitted that Mike Ashley was an ‘unorthodox’ man, who often combined the consumption of alcohol with business meetings. Ashley agreed that he did, at times, adopt that practice. But in this case, the judge’s verdict went against Blue.

To validate a ‘handshake deal’, there has to be good evidence that a serious offer was made and accepted for a specific purpose and cost. But in this case, the alleged deal was greeted with copious laughter from those present in the pub. The judge was thus unconvinced.

Because of the difficulty of proof, lawyers today urge that all ‘handshake agreements’ should – at the very least – be made in front of sober witnesses. Ideally, all deals should be recorded and witnessed in writing. Of course, horrors may still ensue. But such precautions make it much easier for aggrieved parties to win compensation.

### **Handshakes are not always harmonious**

---

Social handshakes also lend themselves to variations in performance styles. Usually, those shaking hands look squarely at one another – sometimes gazing deeply into the other person’s eyes.

Therefore, a snotty individual wishing to be marginally rude may look steadily at the ground throughout the process. And someone wishing to be obviously rude may turn their head away and look pointedly in the opposite direction.

Tough guys, furthermore, may turn handshaking into an unofficial contest. To demonstrate their dominance, they squeeze the other's hand with great ferocity. Their victims, taken by surprise, double up in pain, leaving the aggressors to exult in (unworthy) triumph.

That option is not open to everyone, but there are low-key alternatives. One party can extend a totally limp hand, like a soft lettuce leaf. It quickly slips out of the handshake, terminating it abruptly. Bystanders may not even notice, but the excessively limp hand – whether adopted intentionally or unintentionally – has administered a sly snub.

## **Endless permutations**

---

Endless are the permutations that inventive humans devise. There are special handshakes among some American campus fraternities and sororities. And the Freemasons are well known for having their own secret variant. When shaking hands, they signal their status within the Brotherhood, by special positioning of fingers and thumbs.

All this indicates the well-known human qualities of versatility and invention. Hands are shaken in a variety of moods and styles. Hence it's wise to remain vigilant, especially when dealing with known enemies.

But do the occasional horrors mean that people should cease to shake hands? Not at all! The ideals of trust and fair play between fellow humans glow as brightly as ever.

## **Contributor Details**

---

### **Stakeholder Details**

---

- Article Categories
- [Social Sciences](#)
  
- Publication Tags
- [OAG 045 - January 2025](#)
  
- Stakeholder Tags
- [SH - Department of History - Royal Holloway - University of London](#)