

The curious history of the rise and fall of twin beds

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Twin beds—the end of an era in a marriage or a hygienic 'mod-con'?

For the best part of a century, twin beds were not only seen as acceptable

but were actually championed as the sign of a modern and forward-thinking couple.

But what lay behind this innovation? And why did so many married couples ultimately abandon the twin bed?

Lancaster University academic Professor Hilary Hinds offers a fascinating insight into the combination of beliefs and practices that made twin beds an ideal sleeping solution.

"A Cultural History of Twin Beds," funded by the Wellcome Trust, challenges ingrained assumptions about intimacy, sexuality, domesticity and hygiene by tracing the rise and fall of twin beds as a popular sleeping arrangement for married couples between 1870 and 1970.

Professor Hinds, who heads up the English Literature and Creative Writing Department at Lancaster University, studied everything from marriage guidance and medical advice books to furnishing catalogues, novels, films (including the all-time great "Brief Encounter") and newspapers to glean the information.

Her key findings reveal that twin beds:

- Were initially adopted as a health precaution in the late nineteenth century to stop couples passing on germs through exhaled breath.
- Were seen, by the 1920s, as a desirable, modern and fashionable choice, particularly among the middle classes.
- Featured as integral elements of the architectural and design visions of avant-garde Modernists such as Le Corbusier, Peter Behrens and Wells Coates.
- Were (in the early decades of the 20th century) indicative of forward-thinking married couples, balancing nocturnal

'togetherness' with a continuing commitment to separateness and autonomy.

- Never entirely replaced double beds in the households of middle-class couples but, by the 1930s and 1940s, were sufficiently commonplace to be unremarkable.
- Enjoyed a century-long moment of prominence in British society and, as such, are invaluable indicators of social customs and cultural values relating to health, modernity and marriage.

The backlash against twin beds as indicative of a distant or failing marriage partnership intensified in the 1950s and by the late 1960s few [married couples](#) saw them as a desirable choice for the bedroom.

The trigger for the research came while Professor Hinds was researching interwar fiction written by women, when she chanced upon a reference to twin beds.

"I thought I knew what twin beds signified until I came across a comment by the protagonist in one of the novels. She looks across at her sleeping husband, on the far side of their double bed, and thinks 'modern twin beds' would be so much more comfortable and hygienic.

"I was fascinated by the perception that twin beds were seen as 'modern.'" I wanted to know what identified them as fashionable items.

"This then reminded me of a curious clipping in my great-grandmother's scrap book (covering the 1880s to the 1890s) which discussed 'the dangers of bed sharing' and indicating that a weaker person sharing a bed with a stronger one would 'leach the life force' from the stronger person.

"And that was the start of my work in this area."

More information: 'A Cultural History of Twin Beds' is available as

open access through the Bloomsbury Open programme
on www.bloomsburycollections.com

Provided by Lancaster University

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