

# Stories of crowning glories

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**From mohawks to mullets, braids to bobs and afros to undercuts, the hairstyles adorning the heads of Margate locals are wonderfully diverse. Whether we love our hair or hate it, tend to our tresses at one of the town's 30-plus salons, by commuting to London, or by wielding our own clippers, the relationship with our hair can be summed up in one phrase: "It's complicated"**

After three months of lopsided lockdown fringes and hiding root regrowth behind headscarves, it's not just the art of hairdressing we're appreciating but its social aspect, too. A stylist's role is so much more than cutting and colouring, says Roxy Attard, co-founder of Sister Joan. You're both a quasi-therapist and an almost-friend. For clients who don't see many people, such as Marion Rendle, a full-time carer to her elderly mother Ruth Want, "that personal contact is really important. We don't just chat about the weather, we have a laugh and we really 'get' each other."

Those close bonds mean post-lockdown reunions have been emotional. "Some of my clients had been through tough times," recalls Sally Rowlands, owner and lead stylist of Stirling. "[The hair appointment] made a big difference to them. Knowing that what you're doing is making someone's life better, even in a small way, is a really nice feeling."

Sporting a glorious candyfloss-coloured mane and matching moustache, no one knows the transformative power of a good hairdo like Lennie, one half of local punk duo Pink Suits. Having spent his early twenties miserably conforming to a short back and sides, he embraced long locks after moving to Margate, and now entrusts his cut and colour to Sister Joan. Whether it's pale pastel or a bright bubblegum

shade, he says pink perfectly reflects his band's gender-subversive ethos, while on a personal level: "It's a very obvious and visible way of saying: this is how I'm going to look, and I'm not shy about it."

Luxurious products and a silky blow-dry are a "hugely enjoyable" part of the experience for Lennie. But ultimately a hair appointment is more than a pampering session. "Hair is so strongly linked to identity, and you feel that when you come out of the salon," he says. "It's not just refreshing, you genuinely feel more 'you'." Marion agrees: "Normally, I have dark brown hair, and it doesn't suit me at all. So when I bleach it, even though it's completely 'unnatural', it somehow looks more natural." That sense of self-confidence colours other people's perceptions, too. "I don't know whether I seem more open and approachable [when I'm blonde], but people are noticeably more friendly," she says. "[Pink hair] makes people happy; they often have a little giggle. I've never had any negative comments," adds Lennie.

With hair so closely bound up with identity, losing your locks can feel like being erased - particularly for women. Just ask Rima Theisen, a trainee teacher from Ramsgate, who was diagnosed with alopecia universalis (an auto-immune condition that causes complete hair loss) in 2018, shortly after the birth of her daughter. "I was known for my hair: it was thick, dark and down



THEA



LENNIE



RIMA



CARLA



MARY JOYCE



RUTH AND MARION

Photographs taken at Level 11 Photography  
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to my waist, so it was a huge shock to everyone, including me, when it dropped out," Rima remembers. However, after shaving off the remnants for bald state and treat it as "an alternative haircut", enhancing her features with jazzy makeup and big earrings rather than donning a wig every day. "I didn't want to hide what had happened," she explains. Although personally comfortable with what she calls her "monk's tonsure", Rima still struggles with societal preconceptions. "People automatically assume I'm ill because I'm bald. Viewpoints are changing around identity and gender, but there's still an expectation that while it's ok for a man to be bald, women should have hair." Via her Instagram account, @thebaldmama, she now advocates for alternative beauty standards for women.

Social attitudes towards hairstyles have long been an issue for people of colour. As an inclusion manager in a primary school, Carla Long is used to curious children touching her curls: more creepily, she's caught strangers sniffing her hair. "At work, I'll often get comments like, 'Oh, you've changed your hair,' if I wear it in a different style," says social worker Thea Renee. "It doesn't bother me, but some people of colour feel awkward that their hair is a topic of conversation." Even compliments can be tricky. "From a young age, I was told I had 'nice hair', but I was aware it was different to my classmates'. So that label - even though it's a positive thing to say - can make you uncomfortable in some situations," Thea adds.

There's also pressure to conform to 'traditional' dress codes at work. While Mary-Joyce Insaiddoo, a family lawyer, has worn braids and natural afro styles to work in the past, and says the local legal profession has embraced her diversity, she "wouldn't have dared to go to court with [my] hair in an afro." Thea has had similar qualms about her natural hair before a job interview: "I remember thinking, is this professional, or should I put it up? Sometimes, natural black hair is considered a bit wild, it doesn't fit in the box. But you shouldn't be ashamed to have your hair 'out'."

As a person of colour, it's not just how you wear your hair that can be an issue, but how far you have to travel to get it done. With over 30 salons in Margate alone, offering everything from cheap'n'cheerful trims to organic Aveda products, you'd assume no-one needs to venture further than the other side of town for a hair appointment. Yet many POC commute to the capital due to the paucity of black hair specialists (there is just one dedicated salon, Mirrors) and hair-

care product shops in Thanet. "You can't just pop into Boots," points out Carla. "They've started stocking a small range, but only very recently. Usually, I go up to London with a little wheelee suitcase to visit the hair shops and buy a year's worth of co-washes, deep conditioners and hair dye. And I would experiment more, if there were more local salons catering to mixed-race and black hair."

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For some women, like Thea, who's been going to the same south London stylist - a friend of her mother's - for years, deep-seated loyalty also plays a part. Mary-Joyce agrees. "My hairdresser has done my hair since I was 17, so I'm just not confident going anywhere else!" she laughs. "She's very good to me and even travelled down [to do my hair] for my daughter's christening last year. We've got a real commitment to each other."

It's telling that we talk about our stylists like life partners: for many of us, finding "the one" is part of the journey to loving - or at least accepting - our hair. It's a journey that's full of twists and wrong turns. As a teenager Thea ironed her naturally curly hair on an ironing board to emulate her friends' sleek, straight tresses, while Carla suffered chemical burns to her scalp trying to achieve a *Thriller*-esque wet-look perm. These days Thea wears braids ("great if you're lazy, as they last for a couple of months"). Carla simply runs product through her natural spiral curls "and gives it a bit of shake-through". And Mary-Joyce opts for "get-up-and-go" extensions. Though she loves her natural afro, "it's hard work, and I don't have the time and patience," she admits.

Ultimately, our ability to choose our hairstyles is what's important, says Roxy, not what heritage, culture or society dictates. Her mother might be 86 but, as Marion points out, that doesn't mean having a "little old lady cut": instead, Ruth sports a chic platinum bob. Complicated it might be, but in a vibrant, creative community like Margate, our relationship with our hair need never be dull. "Unlike a tattoo, [the style of your hair] isn't permanent," concludes Sally. "You can always change it - and that's the beauty of it."