

Elliot Haworth

## Look at those lugholes!

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*One young man's struggle to persuade the world that there is more to him than oversized earlobes.*



The year is 2007, I'm 15 years old, about to finish my GCSE's and getting ready to leave school forever. My hair is long and curly, my jeans are low and tight, a selection of bracelets, band tees and chunky skateboard shoes are my desperate attempt to embellish my individuality.

5 Myspace and MSN messenger were then the Facebook of their day. I spent late nights online discovering heavy metal bands and came to idolise the "post-grunge", alternative look they had: piercings, tattoos and a bad ass attitude to die for. At the time I thought I was being different by emulating these musicians – my ears pierced, headphones in and music loud; in rural Somerset where I was at boarding school I was already a sight for sore eyes – but I wanted to stand out further still.

10 That's when I decided to "stretch" my ears. I would return home to Southampton at weekends and half terms and it was there I spotted what I thought of as "my sort" of people, people with giant holes through their ears who seemed to skulk around in a cool sort of fashion I tried to copy. I wanted my ears like theirs and, not thinking of the pain it might cause or, most importantly, what it might mean for my future, I began to research the history of ear stretching and how to do it.

15 It turned out that what I thought was a new trend had been around for many thousands of years and that I was hardly an innovator of this form of "body modification". "Otzi the Iceman", the world's oldest mummified body, who lived around 3300BC and whose corpse was discovered frozen in a glacier between Italy and Austria, was wearing an ear-stretcher somewhere between 7-11mm. The practice of ear stretching has been used by various ancient tribes on all continents: it was a means of distinguishing authority and rank, an idea not dissimilar to the African tradition that still exists today within tribes like the  
20 Mursi, where women stretch their necks and lips to show female strength and self-esteem.

The method of actually stretching an ear varies according to geographical location: in traditional Southern American tribal culture in Peru and Brazil, for example, a piercing is made with sharpened wood or bone and then stretched with a shell until it heals with a small hole intact. The next stage is again dependent on

25 location and tradition. Either incremental weights are hung from the healed lobe, so the hole stretches over time, or, as is more common in Asia, pieces of wood, reed or some other thin, generally organic material are squeezed into the hole one at a time to achieve the same effect.

In contemporary stretching procedures, the process is more hygienic; generally a piercing with a larger needle or “dermal punch” is made by a professional and left to heal for about six weeks. Then a cone shaped taper is inserted in increasing gauges until the desired size is reached and healed, at which point the  
30 wearer can insert jewellery of their choice in the hole in the lobe.

Well, I wasn’t going to go down the beach and find a nice conch to shove through my already pierced ear. I’d also heard of people using biro’s and padlocks to “stretch and weigh” in order to achieve the look but decided against that approach. I eventually found an American company that sold a “taper kit” ranging from 2.5mm to 12mm in gauge. One night in my bedroom, I slowly pushed the little plastic taper through  
35 my lobe until it reached 8mm. I was oblivious to the damage I was doing by stretching so quickly in the name of vanity, I wanted to make my ears as big as I could as quickly as possible. Within a week I had mutilated my ear by forcing the 12mm taper to fit; it was red and throbbing with pain but as far as I was concerned it looked really, really cool.

My Father wasn’t best pleased, but I felt like a bad ass and didn’t really care. People would ask: “Why have you put yourself through that?” “Does it hurt?” “What will you do when you’re older?” and other questions that I eventually developed inane standard responses for: “Dunno”. “Yes”. “Not sure”. The most fervent of all my interrogators were my grandparents, who still make comments about “those bloody holes in your ears”, and how I would never get a job as a journalist anywhere “looking like that” – let alone on the big papers I wanted to work for.

45 Over the next few years, I pierced and stretched my other ear and eventually my lobes reached the 32mm gauge they are today. Now, however, stretched ears are a common sight in any town or city which, for me, is an ironic slap in the face. What I was out to achieve, after all, was individuality. Now everyone seemed to have them. Travie McCoy, lead singer and rapper of the pop-rock band Gym Class Heroes and Tom DeLonge of pop punk band Blink-182, were the first celebrities to appear with stretched ears. They also have a lot of visible tattoos and piercings, which along with other tattooed celebrities such as David Beckham, Angelina Jolie, Rihanna and Eminem have helped to popularise the “alternative” look into the mainstream. This newfound tribalism, once a popular way of signalling one’s alternativeness or membership of a particular subculture, has grown exponentially to the point where even Selfridges have cashed in on the look. They are currently using a model in prominent advertisements on London buses who is covered in tattoos and  
50 has his ears stretched. This “challenges conventional notions of beauty” in a London bus advertising campaign.

As I grew out of my rebellious phase, I really did begin to worry about getting a job. Would my grandparents’ prediction come true? I thought my writing was good enough and I was brimming with enthusiasm and ideas, but – even when I dressed smartly – the immediate emphasis was on the dangling  
60 plates of wood wedged in my ears. At university when I told people of my life plans and goals the immediate question was always: “But what about your ears?” To which I would generally respond with something along the lines of: “I really hope in this day and age that an employer will see past my appearance and judge me on my aptitude for the job”. In truth I was terrified. Most of my friends with stretched ears couldn’t get a job in a supermarket, let alone a quality newspaper.

65 When, eventually, I needed work experience, I headed straight for *the Telegraph*. I had a host of articles and a polished CV and I was determined to woo them with my writing talent. Horror of horrors: I learned from the website I had to record a two-minute video explaining why I wanted to work at the paper. Yes,

70 they would look at my CV and hopefully read some of my articles, but they were also going to see up close the holes in my ears. My rhetoric about aptitude-over-appearance seemed futile and I assumed I would be dismissed as some self-mutilating, incapable idiot. I was wrong and here I am, having the time of my life, holes and all.

75 Many people were surprised I got work experience here because of my appearance, while others have commended me for getting so far “despite the holes”. It’s a moot point within alternative circles that having visible piercings and tattoos, let alone big holes through your ears, diminishes your job prospects. Unlike the Selfridges advert I certainly had no intention of “challenging conventional notions of beauty” when I stretched my ears, I was just lost in the depths of teenage ignorance, barely able to think beyond the day in hand. People often ask me if I have ever regretted stretching my ears and it’s true, I have, albeit only briefly.

80 On a previous work experience placement at a local tabloid newspaper in Darwin, Australia, I took my stretchers out because I was sick of the incessant questions and leering looks from the locals. I still wanted to stand out, but in a positive way. Having grown up (a bit), I now wanted to be taken seriously but I felt my look would always impede my chances. I even considered getting a reversal procedure to cut and stitch the holes back together.

85 When I returned to England, minus the stretchers and just some saggy holes in my ears – that were more offensive to the eye than the jewellery I had before – it didn’t take me long to relax back into the more tolerant British way of life. I was surrounded by friends who felt I had sacrificed a part of personality for the sake of pleasing others. Within a few weeks I was back up to size and felt like myself again. I really believed, and still do believe, that my stretchers had become a defining part of my individuality and that despite the potentially negative affects on my career, I was prepared to risk keeping them because I didn’t want to  
90 work for an organisation that wouldn’t accept me for who I was.

95 So for anyone reading this who has stretched ears, tattoos and piercings, or even just a quirky hair cut, I hope my story proves, to an extent, that it is possible to work in a competitive industry despite having an alternative appearance. This week at *the Telegraph* has given me the confidence and determination to see past my own appearance and focus on my capabilities, because ultimately a person’s appearance has little affect on their mind-set and drive to achieve. I hope also that other employers show the same tolerance *the Telegraph* has. Today there is so much emphasis on individuality that it would be a real shame for capable people to lose out because they are just trying to be themselves. And besides: if the body is a temple, why not decorate that temple, paint the walls and enjoy it?

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