



MIND THE GAP
A new generation
of dentists can help
tweak imperfections
for all ages

IS IT TIME TO GO THE EXTRA SMILE?

*Non-invasive, hi-tech wizardry means that
it's never too late for an orthodontic update*
By CHARLES BURLINGTON

IN MY MIND'S EYE, MY TEETH WERE pretty good: straight, tidy, white enough. Then one day, my now-wife showed me a photograph of the two of us on holiday – and in the cold flash of the camera, there it was. A decidedly crooked-looking smile, exacerbated by my two front teeth, which had slowly yet surely drifted apart over the years. Any wider and you'd be able to drive a lorry between them. I didn't look unattractive per se – but I did look old.

I racked my brains. When had all this happened? I'd been through all the teenage turmoil of braces decades before and had memories of a mouthful of metal: 'train-tracks' that were veritable magnets for bits of food, that got kicked in football games and throbbed

incessantly whenever they were adjusted. Then again, everyone was doing it at the time – for 14-year-olds, it was a rite of passage – and a few years later, they were off, my teeth feeling alarmingly big compared to before, and super-slippery without their bulky metal brackets on top. I had assumed that was me sorted.

It turns out I was wrong. The slender metal wires that now remained (adhering to the backs of my gnashers, supposedly to keep them in their correct positions) weren't entirely fool-proof: my teeth had been moving out of line, millimetre by millimetre. One day, biting into a crisp apple, I felt a stabbing pain in my gums – the bottom wire had snapped – and though it bothered me, I never did get around to getting

it fixed. It never occurred to me that tiny scrap of metal could have such an impact.

Wonky teeth can have a huge effect on your self-esteem. I'd always been confident – but suddenly I found myself hiding my mouth behind my hand when I laughed, or smiling awkwardly with my lips closed in photos. To make matters worse, my wedding was less than a year away. Added to the stress of planning a wedding during lockdown, trying to get my teeth back into shape while the world remained closed seemed like a monumental task.

Still, it afforded me more time at home, which I put to use researching orthodontists. There was an overwhelming number of options: from the fixed braces of my youth

to 'lingual' versions (secured behind your teeth, for undetectable straightening) and 'invisible' ones such as Invisalign. Eventually, I bit the bullet and made an appointment.

E-Line Orthodontics was eons away from the clinics I remembered growing up. A stone's throw from Harley Street, it's as slick as a boutique hotel, with art on the walls and staff kitted out in Ralph Lauren polo shirts. As I waited, sipping an espresso, I was relieved to see that I wasn't the only grown-up. Maybe braces weren't just the domain of the pre-pubescent.

The director of orthodontics, Dr Kaval Patel, agreed. 'We're definitely seeing more adults coming in,' he said, leading me into a gleaming white treatment room. 'A lot are coming for re-treatment: some as a result of poor maintenance; some because they never had the correct diagnosis in the first place.'

As I leant back in a leather chair, Dr Patel handed me a mirror. Straightening my upper teeth should be straightforward; however my lower teeth would take longer, he told me – and the broken wire wasn't helping. 'Ideally, we would not put any fixed retainer wires on anyone,' he admitted. 'I would encourage the use of plastic retainers, which are designed to be worn at night, as they are much more adept at holding the teeth in position.' I thought the wires had been keeping my teeth in the right place, but it turns out they were doing more harm than good. Dr Patel offers Invisalign but his prescription for me was 18 months of fixed braces: to close the gap between my front teeth, realign the molars at the back and correct the slant. The braces could come off temporarily, for the big day, he assured me – but first, the wires had to go.

Carefully, he prised off what remained of the wires from the backs of my teeth – and when they were off, the sense of relief was almost tangible. Immediately I could feel a difference: as if my teeth were 'normalising' then and there, shifting back into their correct positions, free from their wiry straitjackets. Next, it was time for hygienist Ruby, who scraped off the ancient wire-fixing glue and cleaned diligently between each tooth. Back home, being able to floss after years of fiddling with little brushes was a revelation.

The next day, I read through the follow-up notes that arrived by email. Dr Patel's treatment plan would deliver the results I wanted – there was no doubt – but I was apprehensive about going back to the fixed braces that he thought were the best option. Plus, time definitely wasn't on my side. By this point, I had less than six months to go until the wedding – it was quite literally getting down to the wire – so I decided to seek a second opinion.

This was with orthodontist Dr Chaw-Su Kyi. Calm and reassuring, the clinical director of West London Orthodontist has been enthusiastically fitting braces from her Harley Street and Hammersmith clinics for more than eight years (for kids, but also for adults looking to get their smiles back into shape). Dr Kyi was measured in her approach and authoritative. She listened as I explained my reservations about fixed braces – I'd soon be back to work, holding face-to-face meetings with clients, being photographed at my wedding – and that concealing a mouthful of metal seemed unthinkable.

Dr Kyi agreed that the first line of action was to create a straighter smile in time for the big day – while working to correct my bite and ensure that my back teeth were also aligned. She explained how, with age, the back teeth cave in and the facial skeleton deteriorates – a structural change that has a huge impact on the lower face. 'Repositioning the back teeth is key,' she told me, 'not just to support the jaw, but to create a wider, more youthful-looking smile.'

Then she asked if I'd considered Invisalign. I'd heard of it, of course: using clear plastic retainers (or 'aligners') to slowly nudge your teeth back into line, week by week. And I had to admit it sounded long-winded and arduous. However, Dr Kyi explained that Invisalign had changed a lot since its inception and that, thanks to some hi-tech advances, treatment was swifter than ever – and far more predictable; so much so that she was confident she could get a good result in time for the wedding. It sounded too good to be true – and yet, I was intrigued.

Then the gadgets came out. I lay back as Dr Kyi held what looked like a cyber-toothbrush against each of my teeth. 'By digitally scanning the teeth, gums and jaws with the iTero, I can see precise 3D images of the mouth,' she explained, as she moved the device along the top row, then the bottom. 'This means that we can map the entire straightening journey before the alignment begins.' (Thrillingly, it

also eliminates the need for 'impressions', which I remembered from years past: those unyielding plastic trays filled with cold, purple gloop, which seemed designed to make you gag involuntarily.)

Minutes later, a 3D rendering of my mouth flashed up on the screen, and Dr Kyi explained the subtle alterations that would leave my teeth looking straighter but still balanced and – crucially – in keeping with my face. I was impressed: seeing my mouth brought to life was weirdly cool, and I made an appointment to get things underway the following week.

When I return, Dr Kyi shows me a whizzy little video that demonstrates exactly how the retainers will move my teeth. 'Using the ClinCheck technology from Invisalign helps me to map out how I want to direct each tooth movement, and plan the treatment from start to finish,' she explains. 'A bit like a GPS.' Not only does this make the treatment highly predictable, but it also enables Dr Kyi to determine how many aligners I'll need to cajole my teeth back into position. She foresees the total mouth reconstruction taking 18 retainers over 10 months, wearing them for a minimum of 22 hours per day. If I stick to the plan, my top teeth – which require less adjustment – will be camera-ready in time for the wedding.

I leave the clinic, my future smile neatly packaged up inside a box, and with tiny composite 'attachments' stuck to my teeth. Undetectable to the naked eye, these dots have been strategically placed where additional force is required, helping the aligners to move the teeth in a targeted way. Back home, I stand in front of the bathroom mirror and click the first of my retainers into place. It's a little uncomfortable but I have to say they are, well, near-invisible. So far, so good.

Even better, there's no running back and forth to the clinic for regular adjustments. Instead, I'm to chart my progress using what looks like a virtual-reality headset – but is in fact part of a clever, at-home, AI-powered dental monitoring system. Every few weeks, I attach it to my phone, fire up the app and photograph my teeth – images of which are beamed across to Dr Kyi, who determines if I'm ready to move on to the next 3D-printed aligner. It's a slick bit of kit and oddly satisfying to use.

Of course, Invisalign requires a fair bit of self-policing. You should only take the aligners off to eat or drink, after which you need to brush your teeth and promptly replace them. And if anything got me into shape for my wedding, it was probably the absence of snacking and flat whites: I simply couldn't be bothered with the hassle. Still, I liked how inconspicuous the ▷

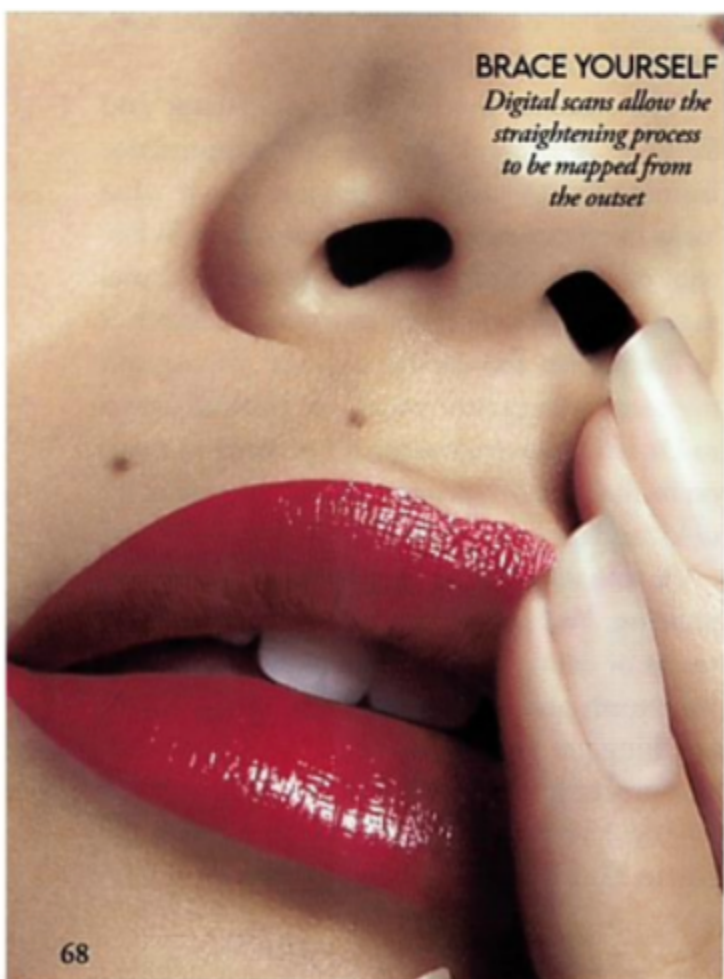
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aligners were: they went undetected in meetings, and the sleek black box I'd been given for storing them could easily have been mistaken for an AirPods case. I was worried I might lisp or sound odd while wearing them, but no one was any the wiser. The only people who did notice were those who had also worn Invisalign themselves, and who were eager to tell you their own stories. Knowing I wasn't the only person over 16 doing it was reassuring.

The first few months were definitely the most gratifying. Ever diligent, I wore the retainers night and day, racing through my clear plastic aligners with Dr Kyi's approval. After one month, my mouth already looked neater; after two months, the gap between my top teeth was less apparent and, by the day of my wedding four months later, it was gone completely. When I look back on the photographs, I couldn't be more relieved that I went ahead with the treatment.

Of course, the ensuing celebrations and subsequent honeymoon meant I did slip up over the following weeks – so I can't say I was surprised when Dr Kyi suggested occasionally that I stick with one particular aligner instead of moving to the next one. However, in total, it took just under one year to get my teeth to where I wanted them to be. When I look in the mirror now, the reflection that stares back at me looks happier, more confident and somehow younger. I'm still wearing retainers, just at night, to keep things in line. I take more time when flossing my teeth and I haven't skipped a dental appointment since. Better still, I smile more. And isn't that the aim? □

Invisalign from £5,000; westlondonorthodontist.co.uk



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