

The complex history of falling asleep

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Credit: Vera Kratochvil/public domain

When your head hits the pillow and you close your eyes after a long, hard day, it may seem like the most natural thing in the world, but did you know that simply falling sleep has a complex history?

A new book, *Sleep in Early Modern England*, by the University of Manchester historian Dr. Sasha Handley, investigates a period of around 300 years, from the 15th to 18th centuries, during which there was a revolution in the way Britain sleeps, and its continuing impact today.

Dr Handley said, "Sleep has always been the single most time-consuming activity— or should that be inactivity?—in our daily lives, yet its history has barely been told. It is a history that is as culturally dependent as it is founded on biological and environmental factors.

"The impact sleep has on our daily lives cannot be underestimated. Therefore, knowing and understanding its history is paramount to knowing and understanding ourselves."

During this period, great scientific strides were being taken in all aspects of [everyday life](#), and the night-time ritual of sleeping was no different. The 1660s saw a revolution in the physiological understanding of the body's nervous system and, for the first time, the connection between sleep and dreams and their relationship to the brain was made, linking them to the body's health and the mind's reason.

Dr Handley added: "The quest to achieve peaceful sleep shaped the rhythms and environments of everyday life, but from 1660 to 1760 there was also a critical break with ages-old folklore and superstition. Sleep came to be viewed differently, which heralded radical shifts in what sleep meant, how it was habitually performed, and the place it occupied in people's lives."

In the book, Dr Handley also explains the birth of our material culture in the early 18th century and new forms of sociability and shifting religious beliefs. These changes in culture shaped the material transformation of English households and, in turn, our bedrooms.

Dr Handley said: "In the 18th century we can see how people ordered their sleeping hours, bedtime routines and bedchambers which reveal the unique cultural meanings of [sleep](#) during that period. In doing so, we can see just how acutely conscious of the unconscious early modern societies actually were."

Provided by University of Manchester

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