

CYMDAEITHAS GWISGOEDD A TECSTILAU CYMRU THE COSTUME AND TEXTILE SOCIETY OF WALES

Newsletter September 2009

**Meetings are held at the National History Museum, St. Fagans.
Located in the Committee Room of the Office Block unless otherwise advertised.
Doors open 10.30am for coffee. 11am Morning Lecture 2pm Afternoon Lecture**

21 February 2009

Megan Davies Ngoumtsa, a Design Historian spoke about *The Relationship between Women and the Needle*. Quoting from letters and novels as well as embroidered sampler text she examined the attitudes and opinions expressed by women from Victorian to current times on the role of embroidery and stitch craft in their private and public lives. The role of needlework skills in the domestic setting was discussed as were the constraints set upon women, until universal education and the rise of the Arts and Crafts Movement led to a wider recognition of such skills. Modern opinions fluctuate wildly and we had a lively dialogue on our own feelings towards the needle and how attitudes would change in the future.

In the afternoon **Elen Phillips**, Curator for Domestic and Costume Collections, spoke about the *New Costume Store at the National History Museum*. Access is restricted for conservation reasons and we already knew that most items are boxed up and protected from sunlight so Elen selected special items to illustrate her talk in which she described her work as a curator dealing with the care, display, research and educational use of the collection. It takes considerable skill to deal with the various aspects of the job; deciding what to collect amongst the myriad textile articles that are part of the Welsh Heritage; researching their history and that of existing items in the collections and then making them available to the public to see on display and for

research and artistic purposes. The demands of conservation and public access are not always compatible and Elen and her colleagues have to be diplomatic, helpful and charming while pursuing museum business in St Fagans and out and about lecturing and promoting the museum and its collections.

4 April 2009

We agreed last year to offer our members an extra talk after the **AGM**, as many of you have to travel a long way and to encourage more people to attend in the morning.

Gaye Evans gave a talk entitled, *Landscape, Costume and Colour in Kashmir and Ladack*, Travelling with *Wild Frontiers* we visited the State of Ladack in Northwest India, once the major trading roads to Central Asia crossed the area but now the borders are closed or disputed and the state is isolated behind the Great Himalayan Range. Laying close to Tibet it shares Tibetan culture and religious traditions. We visited several monasteries, the gompas are the focus of religious, social and economic activities and at Hemis Gumpa we watched ceremonial dancing, the monks wearing antique masks colourful brocade costumes and felt shoes. Most of the gompas that we visited were vividly painted inside with brightly coloured Chinese and Tibetan textiles used to drape around statues, as hangings and to wrap up boxes containing sacred scrolls.



Monks at Hemis Gumpa

Ladack receives very little rainfall, mountains dominate the landscape and influence every aspect of life and much of the land is devoid of vegetation, but the colours are amazing. Where there is water it is harnessed to irrigate crops and hamlets survive over the long winter months on fruit and vegetables grown during the short summer season, storing fodder on the flat roof tops and keeping the animals inside. Old ways and traditions co-exist with modernity and while many people wear traditional dressing young men and children more often wear modern western clothing.



Tibetan style costume in the Nubra valley



The contrast could not have been greater as we climbed over the Himalayas past the disputed border with Pakistan and dropt

down into Kashmir. Srinager sits in a wide valley surrounded by fertile agricultural land, wooded hillsides and flower filled gardens.



We stayed in a houseboat on Dal Lake and visited the older parts of the city and the Mosque, as most of the population follow Islam we experienced a different culture from that to the north. The *salwar-kameez* was worn by men and women, with colourful displays of women's clothing hanging above shop fronts.

At the floating vegetable market men wore traditional garments, best suited for squatting on their tiny wooden boats, but in the Emporium selling Kashmir shawls and papier-mâché the dress was again western style.

In the afternoon **Elizabeth Friendship** spoke about the project which had taken up much of her time during 2008, that is her book titled ***Pattern Cutting for Men's Costume***. She studied fashion at St Martin's School of Art and went to the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, later to become Head of Theatre Design at the Royal Welsh Collage of Music and Drama. She explained how over 25 years of teaching she had developed a pattern cutting system to enable designers and costume-makers to construct everything from complex period costumes to giant inflatable models.

Elizabeth drew our attention to the way in which the cut and construction of clothes changes the way the body looks and explained how fashionable men have appeared to alter their body shape through history. As in female costume attention is focused on specific parts of the anatomy and these are emphasised giving exaggerated proportions as fashion dictates. The problems with reconstructing men's costume were discussed, few early

garments exist and those belong to the rich, so resource material has to come from paintings and sculpture. Two contrasting styles of costume were examined from the 16th century, peasant clothing depicted by Breugel and a state portrait of Henry VII by Hans Eworth. Close observation together with knowledge of sewing techniques and the variety and type of materials available at this period provide the basis for reconstructing costume.

It was impressive how much information could be amassed and we did not have time to examine some of the other aspects of Elizabeth's book covering pattern and toile construction, 17 and 18th century non-fashionable costume and hints on fabrics and construction methods. It was worth all the trials and hard work to get this new text for costume makers into print.

16th May 2009

This was a vintage day as we had, unusually, two gentlemen speakers.



In the morning **Rodney Mace** gave a talk entitled, ***The Life Cycle of a Man's Suit in 20th Century Britain***, subtitled ***Lust to Dust*** as the suit starts its life as an object of desire and ends in dust when worn out and shredded to be reconstituted as mungo or shoddy.

In his fascinating talk Rodney traced the processes from the development of sheep farming in late 18th century Australia, turning the fleece into fabric in the West Riding of Yorkshire, to the art of the tailor and eventually the customer.



The diversity of tailoring skills was illustrated with photographs of early immigrants in Birmingham, the Kray brothers in immaculate matching suits and some actual suits including one from the former Speaker of the House of Commons, Bernard Weatherill's firm in Saville Row.

The afternoon speaker was **Raymond Holman** who continued the theme of men's clothing in his talk, ***Designing Costumes for TV*** as he concentrated on dressing John Barrowman for *Torchwood*. Raymond has worked in television for twenty-five years, twenty of them being as a designer the last ten of which he has designed major productions. He outlined the many processes from getting the commission to the end product we see on the screen. He illustrated his talk with the actual costumes John Barrowman wore and explained that what seems to the audience to be one coat is very likely to be several.



The actor may have to stand on top of a building with his long coat blowing in the wind; this may well be too heavy if he has to run in another scene and that scene shot many times. The scenes will not be recorded in sequence so a shot where the actor has to be covered in mud or have gun shot holes through his coat may be filmed before scenes when he looks immaculate. As each coat may cost £1,000 to make, costing is very important and there is no room for extravagance.

This was a most enjoyable day and we all learnt a great deal about men's suits and television costumes

20 June

Sadly we did not have a great take up for the Summer Trip to **Forge Mill Needle Museum** at Redditch, in Worcestershire. We should have advertised the trip more widely and with more enthusiasm, but the four of us who did go had a really entertaining day. After driving twice around Redditch ring road we finally found Forge Mill, a small redbrick building tucked in between the mill pond and Bordesly Abbey Visitor Centre. I had wondered how we would fill our day, but it was like a Tardis inside and we spent over four hours looking around the museum leaving no time to explore the Abbey Meadows Trail.

The first floor gallery was full of quilts, a selection from the personal collection belonging to Jane Cobbett. The quilts which came from America, Britain and India represented nearly two hundred years of

needlecraft and many different techniques of patchwork, embroidery and quilting. We particularly enjoyed the accompanying booklet which described each piece and highlighted why it had been included in Jane Cobbett's collection. We wondered at the industry of a 12 year old boy in the 19th century who had hand stitched thousands of inch size hexagons together, the velvets and silk still vivid but showing signs of wear with the foundation paper visible in places. An American quilt patched and embroidered with the outline of tiny hands and badges and emblems, recording important family events, We recognised dress fabrics from our childhood on a 1960's bedcover and we discussed a modern Indian throw which was made up of old chemise and sari pieces.

We descended to the basement where the history of needle manufacture in the Redditch area was displayed. I had not imagined that such a complex operation was involved in what began as a cottage industry employing entire communities in the manufacture of needles. Up to thirty different processes, most hot, dirty and dangerous were described using tableau, illustrated boards, models and the spoken word. The rolling and finishing mill and packing shed were laid out ready for the next work shift and recordings of retired employees evoked an industry which has now ceased. In the museum shop most of the machine and sewing needles were made in China.

On the top floor of Forge Mill was a display of the different types of needles that had been made and some of the ways in which they had been used. From 6 foot long mattress needles to fine hair like half inch long surgical needles, harpoon heads and fish hooks and curved bronze tools used to sew up gunpowder bags. Wooden cases on the walls housed satin backed displays which had been sent to trade exhibitions at home and abroad, advertising the ranges of needles available, sharps, thins, crewel, darning, beading and embroidery the list went on. It was a fascinating visit and one to be recommended.

Edited by **Gaye Evans** November 2009