

# THE COSTUME AND TEXTILE SOCIETY OF WALES

## NEWSLETTER 2013-2014

13 April 2013 AGM

Guest Speaker Heather Toomer

### Lace for Peacocks and Peahen: fashion from Tudor and Jacobean Courts

It was with real pleasure that we welcomed Heather Toomer back to speak about her specialist subject of Lace. Over the course of some 40 years Heather has collected and studied lace in all its forms ; sharing the knowledge she has gleaned by teaching, lecturing and writing books on identification of lace and the way it has been used to embellish fashionable adult and children's clothing in Britain and Europe. She has collaborated with Museum Curators on exhibitions often contributing lace from her own collection, encouraging us to take a more educated look at an often under-regarded textile, but one with a long history and the product of countless hours of labour by skilled craftsmen and women.

The wearing of hand crafted lace has long been associated with status and wealth and Sumptuary laws attempted to regulate the degree and quantity of lace that might be worn by an individual. Lace was an expensive commodity often costing more than silk and velvet cloths and was depicted in minute detail on the portraits painted during the Tudor and Jacobean Periods. Heather Toomer helped to curate the exhibition, ***Painted Pomp: Art and Fashion in the Age of Shakespeare*** at **The Holburne Museum**, in Bath and used images of the portraits to illustrate her talk on the historic development of lace during this period.

Lace making started in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century; early designs were worked in geometrical embroidery stitches on the warp and weft threads of fine linen. Gradually the patterns became more conspicuous, large holes, made with a stiletto, and were bound with thread; greater areas of material were cut out from around surface embroidery which also became more elaborate. Picots, loops, worked in buttonhole stitch were used to decorate the edges of raised work and a portrait of Eleanor of Mantua showed one of the earliest examples of lace made totally free of a backing fabric.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Northern Italy was an important centre for lace making supplying European nobility with high quality and very expensive lace. In 1575, Nicholas Hilliard painted a Court portrait of Elizabeth I, wearing a small ruff of Venetian Needlepoint lace at her neck and wrists. As Venetian Needlepoint was especially prized the names of the early types *reticella* and *punto in aria* are derived from that area. Throughout her reign Elizabeth continued to wear Italian lace which with time became increasingly elaborate in design, frequently including birds, animals and even tiny human figures.

Imported Venetian lace became increasingly expensive threatening bankruptcy to those who desired to own it, so Pattern Books were printed to satisfy the demand for more affordable lace. These books were purchased by ladies who might fill their leisure making lace and displaying their

embroidery skills or more probably used by professional needlewomen commissioned to make lace for patrons amongst the aristocracy and wealthy merchant and professional classes. Despite the highly prized status of lace as a status symbol relatively few examples have survived and so we must refer to 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century portraits for an accurate depiction of lace accessories; Diane Cecil carried a handkerchief edged with very wide venetian lace work, Edward Sackville wore a doublet with a deep square lace collar and cuffs together with a garter and bobbin lace shoe roses worked in precious metal threads, embellished with silver spangles.

Bobbin laces, like needlepoints, developed in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, but probably originated from silk and metal thread braids used to decorate clothing, a portrait of Anne Cecil shows one of the first examples of this type of lace. Bobbin Lace, a straight or continuous lace, is made on a pillow with threads carried on bone or wooden bobbins, woven, twisted and plaited around pins over a paper pattern. *Torchon* is the simplest form of bobbin lace and lends itself to flowing lines and dentate and scalloped edges which were popular in late 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The white silk or linen bobbin lace ruff, worn by a wealthy German Merchant possibly came from Flanders or Milan, both important centres of bobbin work. However, the portrait of Elizabeth Cary, an English aristocrat c.1614-18, depicts silver and silver gilt bobbin lace at the hem of her gown and on her shoes. Very few examples of such work survive as the threads were melted down and re-used, but it is often seen in portraiture and early 17<sup>th</sup> century gloves, embroidered and decorated with metal thread bobbin work were given as prestigious gifts and carried, not worn, by their owners.

There is evidence that tinted starch was used to give subtle tints to lace ruffs and coloured silks were often worked into Jacobean laces. In 1625 Jacobean Court fashion favoured the greater use of plain fabrics and standing collars and ruffs disappeared. Lace designs also changed pointed edges and geometric designs gradually gave way to stylised flowing floral designs with broad rounded scallops. Collars now fell down over the shoulders and were edged with deep bands of scalloped lace, as worn by Baron Capel and his Family, in a painting by Cornelius Johanson in 1640.

Heather Toomer suggested that we might like to visit the exhibition in Bath to see more of the lace in the paintings that she had described in her talk and several of us decided to do just that.

Should you be like to know more about the history of Lace, I found '*European Laces – An Introduction*' pub by Heather Toomer in 2002, to be both beautiful to look at and an interesting read.

May 2013

Notes on a visit to Bath to **The Holborne Museum** to see the exhibition ***Painted Pomp: Art and Fashion in the Age of Shakespeare***. After a very fraught journey by train to Bath, Joyce, Louise, Ruth and Gaye arrived at Great Pulteney Street. The Museum forecourt was ablaze with spring colours. Great tubs full of orange tulips gave a taste of the riches on display inside.

The Roper Gallery is quite small, but it housed an important group of Jacobean portraits which formed the centrepiece of the exhibition. There were nine full-length portraits by William Larkin, painted around 1613-18, of the family and relations of Thomas Howard, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Suffolk, possibly to mark the marriage between the Cecil and Howard families.

The sumptuous costumes, depicted in such fine detail by the artist, were clearly intended to impress as statements of wealth and power. In the middle of the gallery a selection of 17<sup>th</sup> century clothing

and accessories were displayed in glass cubes affording us a close-up view of rare fans, shoes, gloves and gauntlets. Pieces of *punto in aria* lace, elaborate shirts decorated with fine black work embroidery and cutwork.

Mounted on stands were two complete replica outfits from Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, commissioned by Mark and Juliet Rylance from historic designer and maker Jenny Tiramani. Extended video footage showed the complicated process of dressing a man and woman in full Jacobean costume.

It was a lovely exhibition, like a box of jewels and we were surprised at how much time had passed as we set off to look for a very late lunch! No time to see any other sites in Bath before a mad dash for the return train back to Cardiff.

## **27 July**

### **Vintage Village Bazaar**

St Fagans Community Hall was the centre of activity on Saturday 27 July as our Society held a Table Top Sale. We wanted to promote the Society and its programme of talks, attract new faces and to give our existing members the opportunity to recycle, swop and exchange vintage clothing and accessories, bric a brac and any surplus sewing bits and pieces.

All your Committee members worked incredibly hard to make the event a great success. The hall was decorated outside with bunting, car park signposted and inside was filled with tables.

There was space for fourteen stalls, of which, half were taken by our own members. We were assisted by friends and daughters who did an impressive job encouraging our visitors to buy the lovely items on display and making suggestions as to how they might use their purchases. We were joined by West of England Society friends, from across the channel; craftswomen from The Model House in Llantrisant and other stallholders came from Swansea, Barry and Cardiff.

We tapped into the increasing enthusiasm for Vintage fashion and after the success of the TV Sewing Bee series a new generation appear eager to make their own unique clothing and accessories. It has been suggested that we could repeat the event next year later in the summer, so watch this space.

## **21 September**

### **Elizabeth Friendship**

#### **Pattern Cutting for Women's Clothing**

As a founder member of this Society and one who has often been called upon to talk to us about her work and travels it was a pleasure to hear about her latest project, a book on pattern cutting.

During her busy career in the Theatre and as Head of Theatre Design at the Royal Welsh Collage of Music and Drama, Elizabeth has developed pattern cutting systems to assist students to cut and construct period costumes.

**Creating Historical Clothes, Pattern Cutting from Tudor to Victorian times**, had not yet reached the bookshops in September, so we were given a privileged preview of its cover and contents. The primary aim of Elizabeth's books has been to give her students the skills to make accurate period costume. This book shows how to draft a pattern as an alternative to cutting on a stand or enlarging patterns drawn on a grid. The metric measurement provided are a guide to the student for there is no single 'standard' as body shape changes throughout life, with height and ethnicity. Once a paper pattern is drawn up, a calico toile is made and fitted; alterations are recorded and the calico recut forming the basis for the paper pattern which is marked up with directions to assist the dressmaker. Only then is it time to cut out material for the final garment.

The contents were similar to that of the previous book on Men's Costume Major, but I think Elizabeth was happier working with the new publishers. She had provided the artwork for 120 pattern illustrations; this appeared generous as the publisher had only requested 90! She also selected the paintings which have been faithfully reproduced in full colour. It was interesting to hear about the negotiations that take place between the author and the publishing team, about layout and content, before a book reaches completion.

Styles and fashion developments are introduced at the beginning of each chapter from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the student is encouraged to study closely any available portraits and illustrations by contemporary artists as they contain important details on costume. An example was given to us from the book that of a Hans Holbein drawing of a lady, c.1535 which shows both the front and back views of her costume. The bodice is cut in one piece in front and kept flat and unwrinkled by boned stays. The back neckline comes to a 'V' and lines drawn on either side of the centre-back seam may indicate that fabric was cut into panels or they might be tucks which could be let out if the owner became pregnant or grew stouter with age. Most portraits are of wealthy sitters, but clothing was expensive and often required adaption over time.

Basic patterns are provided and modified versions for period garments show bodice, skirt and sleeve details, also patterns for the stomachers, hoop petticoats and panniers that transformed the body shape over successive periods. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century fashion seemed to change with increasing speed; the revealing Empire style, swathed with imported Kashmir shawls brought back by the East India Company, gave way to more ornate styles with wider skirts. These changes are shown in paintings and illustrations and also in fashion plates and magazines, in addition photographs and costume collections survive to assist the costume designer and maker and patterns are provided in the book up to the final years of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Thank you Elizabeth it was an interesting and amusing talk, I am now the owner of this book and have given a copy to a friend, who is the Wardrobe Mistress for a Wiltshire Dramatic company, as I know she will find it useful.

**Andy Burke**

**Construction of a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Lady's Shoe**

Andy is a maker of historical shoes and boots, who spoke to us about the history of shoemaking from Roman times to the Present Day. We asked him to return to demonstrate his craft which he did by talking about the construction of a pair of 19<sup>th</sup> Century lady's shoes.

The traditional tools of his trade were handed around as he described how they were used; many had not changed shape for centuries, pincers, awls and knives stropped to get a razor sharp edge. Seams and welts are sewn with waxed linen thread, using a needle made of pierced Boar's hair. Illustrated were machines too large to transport; a long arm treadle machine to sew boot seams; a skirting machine used to thin, taper or step the edges of leather pieces and to make paper thin decorative leather and a finishing machine for sanding and polishing.

A massive amount of time and labour is involved in the making of individually tailored shoes. The foot is measured around the toe joints and the instep height is recorded then extra allowances are made for special needs such as bunions or hammer toes. A wooden last is customized by the addition of glue and layers of tape and leather, further leather is added to create the specific shoe shape required by the client. Once the last is prepared the insole is applied to the base of the shoe and the uppers are glued to hold the pieces together, no pins are used at this stage. Before lasting the leather is soaked for several hours before the uppers can be pulled to shape and tacked at the toe and heel, this requires considerable strength so in the past making the uppers was women's work and lasting and finishing was carried out by men.

Heel blocks were made of layers of leather, or carved from a piece of hard wood such as elm, elder and beech. A piece of well soaked leather was then glued around the heel and it was tacked onto the shoe. Andy had made a pair of high heeled lady's shoes of pale blue leather decorated with narrow bands of dark blue leather using the techniques he had described and the shoes were passed around and examined while he went on to describe how he would make a welted shoe for a man. The whole process is complex and involved strength to cut, pierce and hammer, then manipulation of double needles and waxed thread to sew several layers of wet leather together then finally rubbing the sole to close over the stitching to make the shoes water tight.

**16 November**

**Shelly Tobin**

***Marriage a la Mode, a critical look at wedding dresses***

Shelly Tobin's work as Costume Curator for the National Trust at Killerton Hall and at the RAM Museum in Exeter have given her ample opportunities to study the history of wedding apparel over the past 300 years. Indeed with one book on the subject to her name, she was at the time of her talk waiting for her new book, '*Wedding Dresses*' to come off the Shire press.

Unsurprisingly Royal Wedding wear has been a major influence in bridal fashion in Britain and gowns worn for Christian rituals have influenced the rest of the world, illustrated by brides in the Far East who wear both traditional costume and long white western style gowns during the marriage ceremonies. The simple gown worn by Queen Victoria for her wedding to Albert in 1840 seems to have started the custom for white as the colour of choice for brides, although many women could

not afford a single high maintenance garment and chose fabrics in shades of grey or pastels that could be used again,

Portraits celebrating Royal betrothals and weddings record the conspicuous display of wealth and consumption of costly fabrics, precious metals and jewels by Royalty and their Courtiers. In 1641 when William and Mary were betrothed as children, Mary wore a gown of cloth of silver brocade and William a red satin suit trimmed with gold lace. In 1761 Queen Charlotte is reputed to have worn the same gown for her Wedding and two weeks later at her Coronation, this is not surprising when you realise that her dress was made of silver tissue embroidered with silver thread, the train was violet velvet laced with gold and the stomacher was covered in diamonds and worth a fortune! Such luxurious garments would have been worn again at Court and may have been copied in less rich fabrics by prosperous gentry and affluent merchants.

Lace was important on the Continent and it was suggested that the white wedding gown and veil may have originated within European Catholic Society. Fashion plates engraved in France were disseminated around Europe and by the 1830's lace and veils were very important items of bridal wear. Queen Victoria's gown was made of white satin decorated with Honiton lace, her choices proved very influential, demand soared and the local economy of East Devon flourished. Bobbin lace flowers and leaf patterns were sewn onto fine netting, the '*sprigs*' were made at home by piece workers, exchanged for tokens and goods and finished in Branscombe to be transported to London and sold abroad and in Britain. When Princess Alexander married Edward, Prince of Wales, she wore a silver and lace gown and veil of Devon lace. For those less wealthy brides, pastels such as grey blue, otherwise known as London Smoke were popular. A new wife would expect to wear her dress again after her wedding for 'best' and it was often modified for evening wear or at Court.

Edwina Mountbatten and Princess Marina both wore white satin wedding dresses setting the fashion in the 1920's and 30's, possibly also influenced by the glamorous costumes seen on the Silver Screen.

When Wallace Simpson was married in 1937, her long-sleeved jacket and slim floor-length gown in 'Wallis Blue' became one of the most copied dresses of the age. Within days copies went on sale in New York and budget copies were soon available in department stores. The simplicity of this dress heralded the austere styles that would follow during the War years.

Shelly drew her lavishly illustrated talk to a close with comments on the significance of provenance for any collection of wedding clothes. Written or verbal accounts of the owner's, when and how the garments were used and their subsequent histories are important and a primary concern to the Curator when including new items to a collection. This led on to the afternoon session when our members had been invited to share with us their own personal wedding memorabilia.

### Show and Tell Session

Here are few additional comments to accompany Shelly Tobin's talk. I hope that by now the Shire publication will be available and understand that the V&A Museum is about to hold an Exhibition on the Wedding Dress in the Spring of 2014 which should be interesting. I was intrigued to discover how fashions developed after the war and it appears that wedding dresses seemed to take on a life of their own, a celebration of white sumptuous fabric, embroidery and lace. Princess Elizabeth wore a full skirted beaded and embroidered gown with a train and long veil in 1947 a style imitated by many of her subjects during the next few decades. Grace Kelly created a sensation when she married her Prince in 1956 in a dress designed by Hollywood costume designer Helen Rose.

The gown designed by David and Elizabeth Emanuel for Princess Diana in 1981 was described as 'the archetypal fairy-tale princess dress'. Seen by an estimated 700 million people around the globe, it was an expression of opulence and excess which promoted the fashion for silk and taffeta, big skirts and ruffles. It was Grace Kelly's gown that became a benchmark for future brides to aspire to and inspired the design more than half a century later for the dress worn by Kate Middleton when she married her own Prince.

Of course we must remember that today more people get married in Civil Ceremonies and their wedding apparel reflects many trends; the Red Carpet dress 'for your perfect day when you are the star', understated elegances, fancy dress or a nod to the past with a vintage and retro.

The afternoon session was I understand a fascinating affair. Family photographs of successive generations at their weddings reflected both the lives of the participants and changing fashion styles. Ann gave an account of the gowns that she had designed and made by hand during her career as a dress and costume maker, she also spoke about wedding celebrations she had attended in Morocco. Jill showed designs for the Calendar and lovely invitation cards used for her daughter's wedding, which were based on the tracery of the gates outside the castle at St Fagans. She also spoke about the hand drawn sketches given to her by David Emanuel of his design for a wedding gown. Finally two dresses from the 1960's evoked memories of a mix up when the intended wedding dress was not completed in time, a substitute had to be found and the original was used as a 'going away' outfit. I do wish that I had been able to stay in the afternoon, it is always a delight to hear and see what people have to say and show at these sessions. I was due to fly to India the next day and had to pack, but more of that visit in February when we meet to talk about Traditional Weaving and Textiles.

Gaye Evans