

CYMDEITHAS GWISGOEDD A THECSTILAU CYMRU

THE COSTUME AND TEXTILE SOCIETY OF WALES

NEWSLETTER February - December 2015

21 February 2015

Sarah Thursfield *High Medieval Dress- The early tunic from Saxon to Plantagenet*

Sarah Thursfield has been sewing for more than 40 years, researching the history of dress for more than 20 years, tracing the development of clothing technology and making clothes and teaching dressmaking skills to re-enactment groups. She is proud to be a traditional craftsman and keen to pass on the most ancient of human skills to anyone willing to learn. She is currently working on volume 2 of her book *'The Medieval Tailor's Assistant'* first published in 2001.

Sarah explained that she approached the problem of reconstructing Medieval costume by looking at images from manuscripts and sculptures and asking how the clothing worked; what techniques were used, who made, how made, how many layers. Bone needles and scraps of fibre have survived from Palaeolithic times; spring shears appear about 500BC, these were used for sheep shearing, but were also capable of cutting cloth. Complex garments survive from the Iron Age and were made of animal skin not cloth. Complex skills were required to produce woven textiles, cloth was precious and not to be wasted, so when cut and shaped garments did develop they were objects of great prestige. Early examples of clothing found in Europe had tubular sleeves attached to a tunic body, later remnants from a Norwegian glacier show tapered sleeves inserted in a tunic which had the fabric selvedge wrapped around the torso.

One of the earliest examples of a garment with insets to give added width comes from the 4th Century. Triangular gores were frequently used in medieval

clothing, allowing greater movement on outer wear when riding and walking and gussets were inserted into the arms of linen and flax undergarments.

The trade in woolen goods was of tremendous importance in Medieval Britain and commerce led to the establishment of a standard system of measurement, Henry II ordered that metal rules, marked in inches, be sent to every Shire in the land, although units relating to fabric width($\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{2}$ and nail) continued to be used by *tailors*, the name given both for cutter and cutting.

In the late 11th Century there were complaints that fashionable clothing was outrageously tight but how tight is tight?, generally there is little evidence for fastenings although at least one illustration shows a woman lacing herself into her dress. By the 13th Century draped robes of fine woven woolen fabric appear, worn under sleeveless surcottes lined with silk or fur. (Interestingly both silk and fur were products of trade along the 'Silk Roads', imported by the Venetians and Genoese to meet demand from the rest of Europe). The wealthy wore undergarments of fine embroidered linen which could be washed and acted as a soft layer under woolen clothing and they would



possess a '*robe of garments*'. This was a set of garments consisting of an unlined *tunic*- a long loose robe pulled over the head with gored panels from the waist adding fullness at the hem and long tapered sleeves sewn along at the shoulders the back. Before 1300 the sleeve was left unfastened with a slit at the wrist, then buttons were used and by the 1350's buttons decorated the entire length of the sleeve. A sleeveless *surcotte* lined with linen, silk or fur and a separate matching *hood*

(illustrated above) to be worn over the *tunic*. For external use a *hooded surcotte* and an *overcoat* or *mantle* made of thick woolen fabric again lined

with fur completed the wardrobe. Sarah displayed her collection of Medieval garments, describing the finer points of their construction and finally we were able to handle and examine them at the end of her talk, it was a fascinating insight into the Medieval world.

Katie Owens *'Dot the Dyer'*- An overview of the Medieval Wool Industry

Katie demonstrates the art of carding, spinning and dyeing at medieval re-enactment Events in the guise of *'Dot the Dyer'*. She has been spinning since the age of 10 years, but in real life she travels the country as an agent for an Organic Livestock Feed Company. She is a lady of many talents who gave us a very engaging talk about the history of the woollen industry during Medieval Times.

Iron Age sheep in Britain were small and goat like, the Romans introduced white horned sheep which were bred in Saxon times by the Monasteries for their wool. Huge flocks ran over the hills of Yorkshire and by late Medieval Period it was estimated that there were more sheep in Wales than people, all this was controlled by the Church which built up a monopoly in the highly lucrative wool trade. Enormous amounts of wool were exported in the 12th Century to Europe, most went to Flemish Traders as it was renowned for its quality and length of staple and all the wool was used to make fabric.



Women were involved in all the processes converting fleece to yarn; shearing, sorting, carding and combing etc. The fleece was washed to remove dirt and debris then re oiled using rapeseed oil, linseed oil, even rancid butter was used before carding. Carding plates were used to disentangle and line up the fibres ready to be spun, a relatively easy task often undertaken by children as young

as 4 years. Katie demonstrated the process on a machine, its design based on historical documentation, which she uses at re-enactment events. Women and girls, who were taught from the age of seven to spin, were employed in the home to spin the carded wool, creating a light lofty yarn which was used to make broadcloth. Broadcloth is a twilled wool or worsted, a dense plain woven cloth, first produced in Flanders in the 11th Century and then throughout Europe during the medieval period.

To encourage the weaving industry in England Edward III raised taxes levied on exported fleeces and lowered the taxes on cloth made in Britain by immigrant Flemish weavers. Initially white undyed cloth was exported to Antwerp to be finished and dyed in Flanders, but by the beginning of the 14th Century as the production grew so did English dyeing grow in importance and Dyers Guilds were formed.

The medieval woman was often responsible for dyeing her own fabric and would have used natural substances which might be grown and collected locally. Katie briefly introduced the most frequently used dyes as woad, weld madder and indigo. Weld, obtained by using the whole plant to impart lovely shades of yellow, was home grown. Woad and weld combined to give greens and blue and indigo produced blues of varying intensity. There was a thriving trade in indigo and woad which were imported mostly from Southern France. Madder, extracted from the roots of *rubia tinctorum*, a type of goose grass and



cleavers such as lady's bedstraw, was used to create various shades of red.

Growing material for plant based dyes was very time and labour intensive, as was the dyeing process which required specialist knowledge of

mordants and dye baths. The rise of Weavers and Dyers Guilds attest to the importance of the Textile industry and a lot of money was made from its

products which were highly desirable finding a ready market amongst the more affluent members of Medieval Society.

Both talks and demonstrations in February gave a fascinating and informative insight through clothing and textiles into social and domestic life in Medieval Times.

18 April 2015

AGM Due to family and work commitments Elen Philips has found it necessary to stand down as Chairman of our Society. We were all very sorry and wanted to thank her for her enthusiastic and valued contributions to the Society helping with organisation of meetings, suggesting lecturers and as a Speaker over the past few years.

We have elected new members onto the Committee and are working hard to maintain a stimulating programme of lectures and events. The Vintage Village Bazaar has involved several of our members and provided a showcase for their work and we have an embroidery challenge/workshop planned for February 2016. As usual we are always eager to receive suggestions for new or repeat topics, speakers or activities for future programmes.

Guest Speaker Rosie Taylor-Davies

Whose Petticoat is this? Uncovering the Secrets of a rare 18th Century Court Mantua

Rosie Taylor-Davies captivated her audience with the description of her research into the origins of a beautiful 18th Century gown. Using a multi-disciplinary approach she illustrated the extraordinary amount of detail that can be gained by looking at an item.

Whose petticoat is this? Is the subject of nine years of object based research. The 'Petticoat' had been kept for many years in a tin chest belonging to the Piggott family at Doddeshall Park, they recognised that it was a beautiful and valuable object and took it to the Royal School of Embroidery at Hampton Court where Rosie first saw it in 2005. The metal embroidery threads were loose in places, but untarnished and there were a few holes that needed

repairing and the gown's shape suggested a date of 1870-80, however there were contradictory signs that suggested an earlier date.

The weight of the satin was too heavy for gathering, the folds were not symmetrical and covered the embroidery, this gown had been altered, possibly used for dressing up and so began an investigation into its history which encompassed the 18th Century trades and crafts that contributed to its creation and to its social and genealogical history.

The gown was constructed of the finest quality Duchess Satin, the width of the fabric suggested an English origin; French silk was usually wider, but reference to the Port of London Shipping Records suggested that the silk might have come from Italy. As a part of the research Rosie wanted to study the techniques required to reproduce a satin of equal quality. This proved to be very challenging because of the density of the warp and weft and the gossamer quality of the threads, taking several weavers and many months of labour to produce a six meter length of material.

By minute examination of the sewing details it was concluded that the gown had been altered c.1870 and later in 1890, 19th Century lace and tapes were also found on the bodice. The original embroidered skirt was part of a mantua, a style of informal dress originating in 17th Century France becoming more fitted in 18th Century England where it became mandatory apparel at Court. The sculptured bodice was worn over stays and the petticoat was held out above a framework of whalebone and cane. This was a period of conspicuous consumption, both male and female clothing were elaborately embroidered and the Georgian Court held regular functions and levees at which courtiers were expected to wear their best apparel.

Silk was the fabric of choice at Court and during the 18th Century surface designs changed rapidly; Statutes were passed to prevent the import of foreign silks and Huguenot weavers were established in London. King George was a patron of Botanical art and this influenced his courtiers in the style of their dress. Naturalistic floral embroidery of tulips, auriculas and carnations were popular, reaching a peak in 1740 and then became more stylistic. Embroidery on the Doddershall gown suggests a pre-1740 date.



A piece of contemporary embroidery (c.1736) showing the naturalistic floral designs similar to that on the petticoat

Rosie examined the techniques used in 18th Century embroidery workshops and

calculated that the cost in man hours and materials would have been phenomenal. Records show that to be apprenticed as an embroiderer cost over three times as much as that to be a surgeon, the work must have been intense but the status and earning capacity of a workshop owner was high.

In conclusion we learnt something of the family history associated with the gown and indeed to whom the petticoat might have belonged. It seems probable that Lady Ann, who had made a love match with Sir William Worsley, wore her beautiful gown as a young bride to be presented at Court. We even had the suggestion that it might have been for the King's Birthday Ball in November 1738. Rosie had discovered so much fascinating information from her research into the petticoat; her talk was a real joy and left us all impressed and even a little emotional over the romantic story that had been revealed.

On the **25 July 2015** a third **Vintage and Retro Village Bazaar** was held in St Fagans Village Hall. Again tables were taken by members, friends and relatives who wanted to clear and re-cycle the contents of their wardrobes and work boxes. There still seems to be interesting things that people are finding and this year there were craft and embroidered articles made especially by some of our members, which were nice to see.

Thank you again to everyone who worked so hard to make this event a success it was a lovely opportunity to catch up with everyone's news.

Gaye Evans (Secretary and Editor)