**Report on Costume and Textile Department, NMS,
for the C&TA Annual General Meeting, August 2020**

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Overview

Preparing this annual report is one of the comforting familiar rituals in the annual cycle of my job. It is a chance to take stock, wonder how the time is passing so quickly and reflect on the people who have visited and viewed the collections and the projects and events that have come and gone. Of course, everything is now clouded with the shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic and at the time of writing this report I don’t know the opening date for our countywide museums. Detailed and rigorous planning is being undertaken to ensure that people will be able to enjoy our museums in safety and I will attend the AGM and share those plans with you.

This year we said goodbye to Museum Trainee Katie Carter-Street and wish her all the best for her future career in museums. Katie’s passion for the collections was matched by her powerful sense of social justice which she brought to bear on her work on decolonialisation of museum collections. There is no C+T Trainee for 2020-21, after four years and four wonderful Trainees I have decided to have a fallow year and reassess before the next application process for Trainees begins again in the autumn.

Access to Collections

The year up to our closure in March brought a pretty typical range of visitors to the Norwich Castle Study Centre to access collections, students of Fashion and Textiles, artists, researchers and textile makers and enthusiasts, I will pick out a few to give a flavour of the collections accessed. Cathy Terry, Dr Michael Nix and I met with a Norwegian weaver, Charlotte Engstadt who weaves textiles based on those made in Norwich in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It is always wonderful to speak to makers and gain an insight into their craft and to broaden the network of people actively researching our wonderful local Stuffs.

I have had a couple of visits from Cassie Davies-Strodder, a PhD candidate who is researching two early 20th century women’s wardrobes that have been divided between the V&A and the Norwich C+T Collection. This year the focus has been on Lady Fairhaven with visits concentrating on assessing the collections, I even got to go on a research trip of my own to the V&A to see the outfits they collected which were truly stunning, especially her Stern Bros. bridal gown which was on display in the V&A’s recent wedding dresses exhibition.

We have supported the Norwich Castle Learning Teams programme with a diverse range of access all the way from 20th century costume from the Handling Collections for the under-5s Snapdragons group to A Level Masterclasses in tambour-frame embroidery, taught by Nik Ravenscroft and including a behind the scenes tour of the stores to see examples of embroidery and goldwork from the 18th and 19th centuries.

From further afield we welcomed a group of textile enthusiasts from all over the US on a Needlework Travel Tour, they spent time both at the Norwich Castle Study Centre looking at Norwich textiles and shawls and then on to the Museum of Norwich for a tour and loom demonstration.

Of course, much of the access to collections we provide is for students. This year we saw a quilting student from City College Norwich and a group of Gender and Politics students from the UEA. The majority of this work is for Fashion Design and Textiles and Surface Design students at Norwich University of the Arts. Every student on these two courses and the relatively new Fashion and Communication course have an induction to the collections with a tour and then are encouraged to return as individuals This year we had research visits to see a range of collections including plain sewing samplers and our magnificent 17th century bearing cloth. We also had four bespoke sessions arranged for students who are set work based on accessing and reading historic dress, the objects selected this year included one of Queen Victoria’s mourning dresses, a Norwich shawl, a 1960s paper dress and a Utility dress made of ticking. We also supported students designing a modern commemorative scarf in a project set up by the C&TA by showing a range of printed textiles from headscarves to handkerchiefs.

As ever the variety of reasons for people accessing collections is staggering. Some of my personal highlights this year included getting out an extraordinary embroidered carpet made for soprano Jenny Lind by the women of Lubeck which was requested by a heritage group from the Nurse’s League who have been looking into the history of the Jenny Lind Hospital, and showing 1830s dresses to a designer making costumes for a theatrical production called ‘Mother Country’ about the life of Mary Prince, abolitionist and Britain’s first Black British writer.

Events

In addition to our access working in the Norwich Castle Study Centre we also support the lively events programme at Norwich Castle. This year Cathy Terry and I gave a talk on Norwich pattern books and silks to support the critically acclaimed exhibition *Lines of Sight: Sebald’s East Anglia*. The Castle always has an action-packed school holiday programme and for the October half term we developed a special event on mourning dress which ran twice a day on the two Saturdays of the holidays. We were able to bring up a wide range of mourning dress and accessories including Norwich silk crape, but the highlight was Queen Victoria’s mourning dress mounted on a mannequin for which I thank our Textile Conservator Deborah and volunteer Ken Smith who worked to create the correct body shape for the dress with its 42inch waist!

Another special public event took place in the Norwich Castle Study Centre with the development of volunteer led tours of the stores which was delivered twice in a pilot scheme supported by the Learning Department who enabled us to be able to have sufficient staff to open the Shirehall building on a weekend. Five volunteers had training from me in the usual contents of a tour and the sorts of questions we get asked – usually pest control, contemporary collecting and where do you get all the stuff from!

November saw us hosting the annual Dress and Textiles Specialists Conference, DATS are the national subject specialist network and have over 400 members many of whom work in museums in curatorial or conservation roles. Over the two-day conference we had a range of speakers presenting papers on the conference theme of ‘Redressing Diversity’ which encompassed LGBTQ+ histories in Pride T-shirts and Norman Hartnell’s sequinned pyjamas; BAME histories in collecting African fashion and textiles and researching links to the slave trade in the Burrell Collections and Disability history through Frida Kahlo’s dress. It was a privilege to host the conference and to show the delegates our stores and collections which reflected the themes of the conference including special sessions on Lorina Bulwer’s embroidered letters and David Shenton’s magnificent ‘Duvet of Love’.

One of the last events we were able to host before lockdown was a study day organised by the Medieval Dress and Textiles Specialists, who stretched their date range slightly to focus on Tudor knitting with an examination of our knitted caps and socks, we also managed to discuss other objects form the same source, a London rubbish dump excavated in the 1890s, including remains of a leather boot and what appear to be sections of a codpiece!

Acquisitions

Two significant acquisitions were made this year, firstly the arrival of four embroideries from artists of the Barrington Farm Arts Trust which were acquired with funding from the C&TA. Three works are by James Gladwell whose work has been widely exhibited including the touring exhibition Outside In, a solo show at the Pallant House Gallery and in the Inheritance Open Art exhibition at Norwich Castle where he won the first prize for his work ‘The Farm’. The fourth item in the collection is a collaborative piece between Barrington Farm resident and artist Barbara Symonds and artist Antonia Riviere. Their ‘Apron’ is a conversation in stitch with cut-out pattern pieces of an unmade apron embroidered in turns by each artist with motifs and words.

The other highlight of this year was the generous donation of a collection of stunning Norwich Shawls from Helen Hoyte. Anyone who has been to one of Helen’s many brilliant talks on the history of the Norwich Shawl or seen the recent film made by the C&TA will be familiar with these stunning shawls and we are incredibly grateful to Helen for passing their care over to Norfolk Museums Service. The range of these shawls demonstrate the development of style, shape and technological innovation charting the rise and peak of the Norwich Shawl industry and as such a perfectly curated collection will be used as an overview collection replacing the current selection used for group and student visits in the Norwich Castle Study Centre. Once again, I would like to thank Helen for this extraordinary donation and I look forward to seeing these shawls on a very regular basis when we are able to welcome visitors again.

Conservation

As some members will remember from last year’s update, the C&TA have agreed to finance conservation work to enable the display of a panel from the extraordinary Bellerophon Tapestries in the forthcoming British Museum Partnership Medieval Gallery as part of the redevelopment of Norwich Castle’s Norman Keep. Progress this year has focussed on an extensive assessment with tapestry expert Kysnia Marko to devise a treatment plan. In the first phase C&TA funds have already paid for photography which will provide digital access to the tapestries remotely and in the redeveloped gallery enabling the whole story of the myth of Bellerophon to be told while only one is on display and showing close-up details and giving an insight into the conservation process. The rest of grant will be used to carry out a minimal conservation treatment so we can show one panel for two years. This initial conservation treatment will consist of surface-cleaning the tapestry, removing cotton webbing applied in the 1970s and replacing with a new galloon and giving the panel a new lining and Velcro support to suspend it with. While the tapestry is on display we will launch a fundraising project to fully conserve all five panels, including wet cleaning at a specialist facility with a complete realignment of the weave structure to correct distortion and consolidation of weak areas to provide support for another century.

This year saw preparations being made for a summer exhibition that was due to open in July 2020 called Textile Treasures and featuring our wonderful quilt collection. Sadly, this exhibition has had to be postponed due to the C-19 pandemic but conservation treatment for the objects has been carried out which is always a brilliant investment in the collections and will enable us to mount the exhibition relatively quickly, so watch this space.

Loans out

2019 was quite a busy year for loans to other institutions and I am as always very grateful for the support of our Collections Management and Conservation Departments who facilitate the loans process so smoothly. John Craske’s magnificent ‘Evacuation of Dunkirk’ embroidered panel travelled back to its maker’s home last summer as part of the *Folkart: time on our hands* exhibition at Sheringham Museum. This fantastic show was curated by Lisa Little, formerly Curatorial Assistant in the C+T Department who made an informal loan request for the ‘Evacuation’ almost as soon as she got the job at Sheringham! It was wonderful to be able to see this monumental work alongside so many other Craske pieces some of which had never been displayed publicly before.

We also sent two fabulous gowns and some accessories from the wardrobe of Cara Broughton, Lady Fairhaven, to the National Trust property Anglesey Abbey which was left to the NT by her son Urban Huttleston Broughton, Lord Fairhaven. It was wonderful to see the visual synchronicity between Lady Fairhaven’s extravagant style and the elaborate furnishings of Anglesey Abbey.

At the other end of the sartorial spectrum we were delighted to be able to contribute to Southend Central Museum’s exhibition *Subcultures*, an exploration of the construction of identity through dress. The two objects we loaned were a Greaser jacket and waistcoat worn by a young woman from Norwich in the early 1970s and a Mod revival parka dating from the early 1980s. These two objects articulate two very different subcultures, in essence they represent the classic Mod and Rocker and although traditionally they would be at odds, they have far more in common than the music and type of bike that would have divided them. Both garments show extensive customisation as their wearers constructed their identities through the addition of patches and badges with studs and tassels for the Greaser and a Norwich Castle Bitter beer towel for the Mod.

The variety of loans we made is a great testament to the broad scope of the collections and the varied narratives the collections can tell and the audiences that they reach through our loans programme.

Volunteers

As always, I am profoundly grateful for the loyal and dedicated team of volunteers without whom we wouldn’t be able to achieve half of the range of activity we do in the course of the year. The invaluable support they provide includes finding, cataloguing, arranging and putting away books and resources for students, researchers and staff; processing new entries to the collection by writing records, measuring, packing and updating locations. Each volunteer brings specialist skills to their work with us including photography, sewing skills – which are mostly used to make underpinnings for displaying dress for exhibitions or photography and research and writing for additional object history context. As mentioned above some volunteers took on the daunting task of learning and delivering a public tour and many of the volunteers support the curatorial staff in making collections accessible by talking about the objects they work on and in this particularly busy year they also supported the tours for the DATS conference. The past few months of not being in our building and seeing everyone on a weekly basis has starkly shown just how much of a community effort the business of managing the collections is and I am very much looking forward to seeing everyone again.