

MEMBERS MEETING 14th April 2009

“An Elizabethan Lady’s Wardrobe Revealed” Talk by Maureen Taylor illustrated with examples of Elizabethan men’s women’s and children’s outfits which she made herself.

Before Maureen commenced her talk she asked for a female volunteer from the audience to dress the part of an Elizabethan lady. New member Kate Deveril duly offered her services and looked stunning in costume.

Maureen explained that very rich ladies had “wardrobes” of clothes. The word wardrobe has two meanings. It is a collection of clothes and from the 19c we think of a wardrobe as a cupboard with a rail and coat hangers. In Elizabethan days clothes were kept in coffers or chests in a room or ward for robes, hence the word wardrobe. The chests would have been large and they would be moved from house to house by servants. The clothes in the chest would be wrapped in linen to stop them from creasing and sprinkled with sweet smelling powders to keep them fresh. Every ten days to two weeks they would have been taken out, brushed and shaken to rid them of moths. Clothes were often hung in the guard robe (early tower latrine) as it was thought that the smell would get rid of the moths!

We are fortunate in that in 1601 an inventory was made of Bess of Hardwick’s clothes. It gives a description of each garment and tells how they were cared for, repaired and made over. There were 2000 to 3000 items of clothing in the inventory. Different outfits would be worn to curry favour with various ambassadors. The whole outfit would be designed to reflect a particular country. For example a Spanish, French or Polish style.

Servants were often paid with their master or mistresses old clothes. However, laws in force at that time meant they could not actually wear these clothes so they were often sold by the servants to theatrical “lady” players (women were portrayed by men) and so England had the best dressed players in Europe.

Since Roman times sumptuary laws governed the colours, fabrics and styles that people were able to wear according to their station in life. Henry VIII did not enforce this code but Elizabeth I did with a vengeance. After Elizabeth died in 1603 James I abolished this law. Middling persons like yeoman or professions adopted watered down styles and these can still be seen today in the dress of clergy, lawyers and graduates. In Elizabeth times some fabrics, like velvet, could only be

worn on certain parts of the dress (for example on the sleeve) by certain people. A fine would be imposed if this rule were breached. Colours too were restricted in their use. Black especially and deep blue could only be worn by the rich and purple was restricted to royalty. Servants were only allowed to wear pale blue and colours described as clay, rat colour, pease porridge, horse flea, goose turd and puke! Fabrics too were restricted. The rich wore lawn, cotton, satin and taffeta but the servants could only have worsted. Fabrics were often a valuable part of a person's estate and clothing was often itemised in a will. Clothes would be made over from these items and garments were often 30 years out of date. The fabrics used at this time were often hand spun and therefore of great value. The Victoria and Albert Museum has examples of fabric from this era and they were fantastically valuable so nothing was wasted.

Maureen then described some of the outfits she had brought along displayed on stands. First was a lady's walking or riding dress. This was a practical dress that was comfortable to wear. It features Polish braiding. The bodice was a doublet based on those used by men it also features an overtop mantle to keep the body warm. These gowns were often lined with fur. Imagine how cold it would have been in winter in places like Hardwick Hall.

The man's outfit is based on a portrait of the Earl of Leicester 1580-1590. At this time it was fashionable to have a big belly as this indicated that you could afford food. Young men that were not well endowed were padded to give the illusion of a large stomach. The cape would be worn with one sleeve as an affectation. The outfit features a "codpiece". This name does not refer to a fish but to a bag being another name for cod.

Children were dressed like miniature versions of their parents. Arabella, Bess of Hardwick's granddaughter at 23 months old is shown in a portrait looking like an adult. There were practical reasons for keeping male children in skirts until they were at least five years old. There were no nappies in those days and it was easier to clean them up if they wore skirts. In addition many male children died in childhood and there was a superstition that it would fool the devil if they were dressed as girls.

Dresses in the period 1560-1580 would include a mantle. This would be a loose garment worn over the dress. In summer it would be of linen and in winter would be lined with fur for warmth. This style is similar to the duster coat or swagger coat that was fashionable in the 1950's and 60's.

Maureen then demonstrated how an Elizabethan woman would get dressed from underwear to being fully clothed in court dress. She started with a plain smock or shift. She explained in Elizabethan times people did not wash regularly. For example the rich washed once or twice a year. Queen Elizabeth I washed once a month and King Louis of France washed three times in a lifetime! The first layer of clothing, the shift, was therefore there to protect the precious bodice from the unwashed body. The shape of the neckline would be round but had to be covered or square shaped when a woman was married. This was achieved with a “filler” which would be stiffened with the sap from daffodils, bluebells or cuckoo- pint roots. Starch was not discovered until 1563.

The next layer was a petticoat. This was often made of red flannel or was fur lined in winter. If the petticoat had hoops this often led to problems going to the toilet. To overcome this, women would straddle a commode.

Both men and women wore woollen hose supported by ribbons, belts or garters. The belts often caused ulcerated legs because they restricted the blood flow. It is believed that the order of the garter was so named because Edward I wanted to reward one of his soldiers on the field of battle and all he could give him was his garter. The hose was knitted from fine 3 ply wool and extended to the top of the legs. In Elizabethan times they would have been yellow or red.

The next item was a pair of bodies laced front and back to form a bodice. This was stiffened with either reed or willow or if you were rich with whalebone or strips of iron. They were lined with linen, cotton or silk. Queen Elizabeth's were lined with soft leather to stop chaffing. The “V” shape squashed the body into a flat shape and acted like body armour.

After the bodice comes the Spanish farthingale. This is cone shaped and consists of 6 to 12 hoops. The hoops were made of wood or iron or if the person was poor of stiff plaited rope. Wearing a farthingale meant that the person was unable to move easily. This was a statement indicating how rich they were and that they had servants so did not have to move. In the 18c the farthingale became square with panniers and in the 19c developed into a crinoline.

The French liked women with big hips so to accentuate their figure a “bum roll” was worn over the hips to make them look bigger. The roll was made of cheap fabric stuffed with feathers, fur, sawdust, fabric or rags. They were never washed and consequently attracted fleas.

By the time Elizabeth was in her mid 60's she was losing her looks so she began copying her father's (Henry VIII) way of dress. She was padded to look stout and in portraits was made to fill the picture.

The next garment was the underskirt, a name which is still used today. This would be either black or red. The round of the neckline would be filled with a triangular shaped piece of material.

Shoes would have been backless with a low heel. They would be lined with fur if it was cold and if the weather were muddy they would wear wooden platforms.

Next came an overskirt that was waxed, plus a cape. The skirts were made of fabric and were detachable. Whether it was raining or sunny women would wear a mask called a visage to protect their complexion.

A girdle was a belt worn by men and women. It often had a jewel at the end, or a mirror, or a pomander with a perfumed soaked rag. Perfume was expensive and only for the rich. The girdle might also include a book of hours with moral and religious prayers, saint's days, sayings and zodiacs. The wearing of hats was governed by clothing laws which Elizabeth I introduced in 1573. Hats were worn over a net or caul that covered the hair. The hats were a variety of shapes; a round pill box; a "pippen" like those worn at the order of the garter or a doctorate; a french hood which was heart or crescent shaped or a tall hat like a puritan's or welsh women's.

Different coloured sleeves could be worn with the same dress. Red or green were popular, hence the song "Greensleeves".

The Ditchling portrait of Queen Elizabeth I illustrates the "Dallas" effect that a shoulder roll could create. Elizabeth was slim when young but could be made to look stout. Big shoulders and big skirts made the waist look smaller.

Not many examples of Elizabethan clothes survive, however, as the rich were buried in their clothes some funerary clothes have survived in Denmark. Clothes carried messages. For example embroidered cherries were said to represent passion as they were the fruit of love. Bess of Hardwick collected pearls. These represented purity and were very expensive. One portrait of Bess in her 70's shows her with six ropes of pearls. These would have been worth a fortune.

The rich were able to afford to eat sugar. This led to black rotten teeth or bad breath. To disguise this fact women used fans to hide their bad teeth or carried pomanders to mask their bad breath. Those who lost teeth often padded their cheeks out but this meant that people could not tell what they were saying!

Ruffs were worn by both men and women and were often 16-18 inches wide. This made eating difficult so they used long handled spoons.

Appearance was not restricted to dress. Women often wore wigs because they had no hair. These would be red or blond. Eyelashes were plucked out and hair dyed with ammonia, sulphur or urine this often resulted in hair loss. Make-up was part of a ladies appearance. Elizabethan ladies had white skin in comparison to the brown skin of women who worked on the land. Faces were often masked with make-up to cover smallpox scars. Various poisonous substances were used which were harmful to health like mercury to make the skin soft and drops of belladonna which were put in the eyes to make them attractive. Eyebrows were shaved or plucked and cheeks were reddened with cochineal or red madder dye.

The last item to be added to Maureen's Elizabethan dress was a large head rail to support the veil. The final whole ensemble of an Elizabethan lady was very impressive and drew applause from the audience.

A vote of thanks was given by Yvonne Mason.