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The Decline of Female Mourning Wear: A Case Study Analysis of Frederic Forster's Mourning Warehouse 1849-1923 in Leeds, UK

By Kevin Almond and Judith Simpson

This article discusses substantial new research which explored the trade in UK female mourning wear by tracing the history of Frederic Forster's Mourning Warehouse, situated on Lower Briggate in Leeds 1849-1923. It also interrogated the small collection of Forster items held by Leeds Museums and Galleries (LMG). This helped to develop an understanding of why UK female mourning wear, which dominated the High Street in the late nineteenth century, began to diminish. The research subsequently examined what the Forster items signify to a present-day audience and whether the need for special clothing to denote mourning has decreased or is met by other clothing practices in a globalized world. A review of literature raised several explanations, suggesting that the cultural work done by mourning clothing is no longer required today and the symbolic efficacy of black mourning clothing disappeared as black became increasingly popular in fashionable dress. The study tested these suppositions through an object-based analysis of the items in the LMG collection and a database search of newspaper advertisements from Frederic Forster in the period 1849 – 1923. The research activities were filmed to synthesise the insights and the film was discussed with a selection of interview participants to explore significant new knowledge and understanding about the decline of the UK, female mourning dress trade.

Key Words: UK Female Mourning Wear; Frederic Forster's Mourning Warehouse, Leeds; Sartorial Practice; Mourning Dress; Cultural; Symbolism

INTRODUCTION

This article presents a research project which investigated the history of Frederic Forster's Mourning Warehouse in Leeds 1849 – 1923 and examined the cultural and symbolic work performed by the items sold at the time of their production. It also seeks to establish why the trade in UK female mourning wear began to diminish. The research explored the significance of the Frederic Forster (1823 - 1917) items to a present-day audience, considering whether the need for special clothing to denote mourning has decreased or is now met by other clothing practices. The project was funded by a Leeds Museums and Galleries and University of Leeds Cultural Institute, Cross Disciplinary grant. This aimed to build a relationship between Leeds Museums and Galleries and University of Leeds academics.¹ It allowed the curators and academics to investigate how the content of a dress and textile collection can be used within academic research to reveal untold stories.

The aims of the study were to:

1. Explore what cultural and symbolic work was performed by the items in Frederic Forster's mourning warehouse at the time of their production.
2. Establish what these items signify to a present-day audience.
3. Consider whether the need for special clothing to denote female mourning has disappeared or is met by other clothing practices.

The structure of the article is organised around the aims of the research. A broad literature review focused upon the female mourning wear trade in the UK in both the nineteenth and early twentieth century. This gave a context to the more focused analysis of female mourning wear in Leeds and the case study looking at Frederic Foster's Mourning Warehouse. The methodology section describes and justifies the qualitative approach taken in the research and the analysis techniques

adopted to gather and study the data. The findings section is in two parts. It begins with an overview of Frederic Forster's Mourning Warehouse that combines a chronological history of the business as well as describing the clothing items they sold, their customer base and their position within the cultural landscape of Leeds 1849 – 1923 (Figure 1). Much of this information was gained from a thorough review of advertisements promoting the business placed in local newspapers including, *Leeds Mercury*, *Leeds Intelligencer* and *Leeds Times*. Reference was also made to other newspaper articles, including an interview with the son of Frederic Forster in *Leeds Mercury*.² Further information was retrieved from trade directories, genealogy databases, and etiquette books. Interviews with Natalie Raw, curator of Dress and Textiles and Kitty Ross, Curator of Leeds History from Leeds Museums and Galleries gave an overview of female mourning dress in Leeds and further information about Frederic Forster's business. Three Frederic Forster mourning garments and other mourning paraphernalia, such as brooches and mourning cards held in the Leeds collection were examined. The literature review identified no existing account of the history of Frederic Forster's Mourning Warehouse therefore this research is an important contribution to new literature and findings.

The second part of the findings reviewed the semi-structured interview responses to the short film produced from the research and a discussion based around its three aims. To capture a range of viewpoints, interviews were conducted with dress historians, fashion academics, fashion students, fashion and textile designers, as well as non-clothing specialists. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and common themes were identified. Here, the case study of Frederic Forster's Mourning Warehouse was used as a catalyst to develop a clear understanding of why UK female mourning wear gradually diminished and how other clothing practices began to take

its place. The final section drew conclusions from this research. It considered what the study signified to a contemporary audience and how this historical research sets a context for the wearing of contemporary female mourning dress and its future direction in a globalized world.



[Figure 1. Detail of mourning clothes at the Discovery Centre, Leeds Museums and Galleries. Photograph courtesy of Andrew Lord.]

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review focused on an in-depth evaluation of a variety of books, journal and newspaper articles, websites, trade directories, advertisements and discussions of mourning wear in both historical and contemporary magazines. The analysis aimed to develop a general understanding related to UK female mourning wear in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and how this has been documented through the existing literature.

The Rise and Decline of the Trade in UK Female Mourning Wear

Throughout the nineteenth century, mourning clothing was an important element in the rites of passage which followed a death. Mourners wore the black robes of religious asceticism to maximise prayers for the dead.³ It was also important to articulate social status by demonstrating that while death had removed an individual, the fabric of society remained strong.⁴ These contradictory themes created the basis of a feminine mourning identity, through which a woman could simultaneously demonstrate her religiosity, her status and her respect for the deceased. No equivalent male mourning identity evolved, but despite this, mourning etiquette necessitated the manufacture of huge amounts of black clothing. This created both opportunities and significant threats for the clothing trade, and from this point, the development of mourning wear was shaped by marketing discourses (expressed through advertisements, fashion columns, and advice columns in journals) which instructed people exactly how to dress in times of bereavement. In the nineteenth century, bereavement was frequent. Mourning in the UK saw entire classes of people wearing black to mark the death of an important person.⁵ Perpetual mourning could, however, depress the clothing trade by limiting the number of garments people purchased.⁶ Attempts to compensate for this led to a complicated etiquette, which obliged mourners to refresh their wardrobe frequently.

UK Royal Court mourning in the nineteenth century was divided into four phases and a different wardrobe was required for each phase.⁷ Widows' mourning followed a similar pattern. Deep (or first) mourning was worn in the first year following the death: this called for unrelieved black with crape fabric almost entirely covering skirt and bodice.⁸ The use of crape was significant in mourning dress because it was lustreless and did not reflect light.⁹ It was manufactured by companies in the UK such as Courtaulds and made from wool, silk or synthetic fibre, which had

a finely crinkled surface.¹⁰ Second mourning was worn in the second year of bereavement in which the volume of crape was reduced. Towards the end of the second year a widow could adopt ordinary mourning, which reserved crape for use on bonnets and allowed embroidery, ribbon and lace, and white collars and cuffs to be worn.¹¹ During the transition from second to ordinary mourning the use of crape became more decorative. A final stage of half-mourning (which some widows wore for the rest of their lives) reproduced the fashions of the day in the mourning palette of black, grey, mauve and white.¹² The efforts to stimulate demand for new mourning clothes were so successful that by the mid-nineteenth century mourning warehouses had appeared in all UK cities, selling everything required by the woman who must now spend years in mourning. As it became harder to distinguish between light mourning and fashionable daywear, silk or synthetic fabric parasols and handkerchiefs became important ways of confirming a bereaved status and this increased the need for specialist stores.¹³

The image in Figure 2 is a portrait of Catherine Elizabeth Cocks (1858-1946) from Leeds, taken in 1890 or 1891 when in mourning for her mother Mrs Ellen Hannah Huxley. It can be deduced that she is wearing second mourning. The crape is applied in a decorative manner (so it is not first mourning), much of her skirt is still covered by crape but she has not yet adopted the white collar and cuffs or the mourning jewellery that ordinary mourning permitted. On viewing the photograph, the dress historian Lou Taylor confirmed that:

A wife mourning for parents wore mourning dress for two years, parramatta cloth and crape for the first eighteen months, with twelve months in deep first mourning, six months in the second stage, with less crape than in first mourning- sewn on in more decorative designs as in the photograph and then three months in ordinary mourning and the final three months in half mourning- that is if she stuck closely to the rules, which not all women did by then.’¹⁴

Catherine Elizabeth Cocks is extremely fashionable in her peaky sleeves on the shoulders. It is interesting that she wears no mourning jewellery and no indoor mourning cap, which she would have worn if it had been her husband who had died.



[Figure 2. Cabinet portrait of Catherine Elizabeth Cocks (1858-1946) taken in 1890 or 1891 when in mourning for her mother Mrs Ellen Hannah Huxley; photographer, Dinnie, 18 Park Row, Leeds.

© Courtesy of Leeds Museums and Galleries.]

The arrival of the mourning warehouse coincided with the ascent of the department store and lavishly illustrated fashion advertising. Thus, in the late nineteenth century, the feminine mourning identity gave access to the pleasures of shopping and the possibilities for self-realisation associated with this. Mourning clothes were marketed

using images of beauty and the language of the new, the exotic and the aspirational. Advertisements and fashion spreads told the Victorian woman that in mourning, as in all her clothing needs, she should seek refinement, elegance and taste.¹⁵ For the woman who could not shop in London, a regional mourning warehouse promised high fashion mourning wear locally. In 1854, Mr. Hatfield proprietor of the *Bradford Mourning Warehouse* announced that his store was, ‘Replete with every article required for deep or slight mourningand the best markets [have been] sought to secure the latest novelties and fashions of shape’.¹⁶ However, the association of mourning clothing with the pleasures of consumption and identity heightened the perceived risks of getting the etiquette wrong. Women, whose very respectability depended on dressed performance, scoured magazines and etiquette books for guidance and became increasingly anxious as these sources often contradicted each other. For instance, in 1879, *Sylvia’s Home Journal* responded to a question on mourning etiquette in virtually every issue’.¹⁷

The position of the woman in late Victorian mourning was situated between manufacturing interests that supported the elaboration of mourning etiquette in order to maximise sales and magazine publishers who purported to advise while creating and mediating discourses that benefited them financially.¹⁸ By the early twentieth century, editions of newspapers which marked prominent deaths and funerals had become thinly veiled advertising supplements that offered a variety of goods with only the slightest connection to mourning: corsets, chic millinery and fashions from France. Fashion columns and responses to reader’s letters also tended to promote some commercial concerns over others. *The Gentlewoman* magazine, for instance, often promoted the store Dickins and Jones and was quick to send cash-strapped mourner ‘Kittie’ to their sale for a tailored costume.¹⁹

The Decline of Formal Female Mourning Wear in Britain

The use of formal female mourning wear in the UK began to wane in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was partly due to the rejection, by many women, of the feminine mourning identity and a realisation that things could be done differently. In a changing world, women no longer found the adoption of a distinctive mourning identity useful or desirable. Increased life expectancy and reduced child mortality meant it was no longer necessary to focus upon the accommodation of grief.²⁰ Meanwhile, the movement of women into the workforce meant that it was no longer possible for them to perform the work of mourning on behalf of their families.²¹ Indeed many women no longer wished to do so. Mourning wear, women protested, was injurious to their health and inconsistent with their new aspirations to be considered equal citizens, 'The widow's dress positively amounts to a mild form of suttee...It is in fact a survival of the outward expression of the inferiority of women for...the inferior always expresses grief for the superior.'²²

Elaborate and sustained mourning dress had also lost the approval of the intelligentsia and the Church who declared themselves unable to see any purpose in the behaviour and condemned it as being in poor taste and needlessly expensive.²³ Extravagant mourning was denounced and it was argued that it benefitted no one but the clothing trade and that traditional forms of mourning had only survived because unscrupulous undertakers and drapers had bullied people into spending money on archaic and incongruous practices.²⁴ It could be argued that the demise of mourning wear had less to do with individual purchasing decisions than with the need to present British society as modern, optimistic, successful and focused on the future rather than on the past. Mourning clothes promote social cohesion, define group identity, and make values and mores visible.²⁵ It is possible that the demise of mourning wear in

twentieth century Britain represented the wish of those who held power to draw less attention to death, because death was becoming increasingly something for which they could be blamed. Death in war could be attributed to poor military planning, death from disease might be ascribed to poor sanitary arrangements or deficiencies in medical knowledge, death from poverty was no longer seen as the fault of the poor but blamed upon those who managed the resources.²⁶

By the early twentieth century, the wearing of mourning clothing was driven by the dictates of the press and, most particularly, by fashion writers. Nonetheless, what the journalists of the early twentieth century advised reflected the needs of the wider group. As the high death toll of World War I, made overt mourning a significant threat to national morale, fashion commentators such as the editors of *UK Vogue* ensured that the lessons learnt from war were remembered. 'The awful devastation of war taught us to look upon death [as]...the lot of any of us at any moment; a fact to be faced with defiance. Black would be the livery of the world unless the spirit of those left behind rose against it. ... Mourning therefore ... should not be worn too long'.²⁷ What was being cultivated through fashion advice was a distinctively stoical response to death. People were still expected to experience pain when bereaved, and to signal this pain to others, yet at the same time they were expected to make it clear that there would be no emotional breakdown and that business would continue as usual.²⁸ The wearing of sober clothes at times of national tragedy became the way in which this specific response was coded. Victorian mourning practice, with its elaborate wardrobe and cloistered women, was replaced by something more functional for an industrial society that needed to keep factories operational and women in the workplace.

Methodology

The methodological approach within the research was qualitative.²⁹ This endorsed an intimate perspective of the events, beliefs, conduct, viewpoints, and relationship women had with mourning wear in the UK during the period of Frederic Forster's business (1849 – 1923) and up to the present day. The academics Denzin and Lincoln commented how, 'Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied.'³⁰ Through the analysis of Frederic Forster's Mourning Warehouse and the female mourning trade in Leeds, it was essential to closely examine the collection of data in order to understand its social and aesthetic context.

Three methods of data collection were adopted: archival research, object-based research and semi-structured interviews. Archival research was appropriate due to the collaboration with Leeds Museums and Galleries curators and the Frederic Forster garments and mourning objects within their collection.³¹ Mourning wear items were also examined in the Yorkshire Fashion Archive held at University of Leeds.³² Archival research was key to retrieving information from data base searches of newspaper and trade journal references to mourning wear sold by Frederic Forster throughout the period 1849 – 1923. The principal collections accessed were the University of Leeds Library, Leeds Local History Library and the British Library Newspaper Archive. Object-based research was utilised to examine the items identified in the archives.³³ This endorsed an in-depth scrutiny of the characteristics and qualities of the objects, including clothes, jewellery, accessories, mourning cards and photographs as well as the documents identified in advertisements and trade directories. Semi-structured interviews were held with the varied selection of participants. This type of interview is loosely structured to generate a conversation

related to the research theme.³⁴ Six interviews were held with a cross section of dress and fashion experts as well as those with little knowledge of the subject. The opinions gathered from the different types of participants were considered essential in order to formulate broad perceptions related to the research aims. Interviewees consisted of two dress historians who are mourning wear experts; two fashion academics with specialist knowledge of dress history; two fashion students (one undergraduate and one PhD student), two fashion and textile designers, two members of the Goth movement who have an interest in Victorian black clothing, as well as two non-clothing specialists.³⁵ The data was analysed using thematic analysis, which, ‘Focus[ses] on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data’.³⁶ This provided an effective way of identifying themes within data gathered from different sources. It was used to explore the nature of the mourning wear trade in Leeds 1849 – 1923, and how this can be contextualized today.

FINDINGS

An Overview of Frederic Forster’s Mourning Warehouse

Much of the information concerning the history of Frederic Forster’s Mourning Warehouse was retrieved from the database searches of newspaper and trade journal references to mourning wear during the years 1849 – 1923. The store was opened by the draper, Frederick Forster on Lower Briggate, in Leeds in 1849 (Figure 2). Forster was born in London and it can be surmised that he came to Leeds from Liverpool in 1849. *Perry’s Bankrupt and Insolvent Gazette* lists the dissolving of a silk merchant partnership in Liverpool on 27 October 1849 between George Foreman and Frederic Forster.³⁷ This may not be the same Frederic Forster but he is listed as a silk mercer, which was the original occupation of most mourning warehouse owners and the date

coincides with the opening of the Leeds warehouse. The business is listed in *White's Leeds and the Clothing Districts of Yorkshire*, as 12 Briggate, along with Raynor and Sons Solicitors, which suggests Forster had part of the building at that point.³⁸ The Forster family lived in a dwelling house in Cudworth Court, an alleyway behind the shop.

There were several mourning warehouses in Leeds during the nineteenth century. The Borough Mourning Warehouse operated from number 15 Lower Briggate. Two different companies traded under the Banner of The Yorkshire Mourning Warehouse.³⁹ Bakers of Lower Headrow sometimes used the title, The People's Drapery and Mourning House, while John Milling & Partners, promoted their mourning wear department as, The General Mourning Warehouse. Mourning wear was also available at most haberdashers, and at mixed enterprises such as John Wales Smith & Son on Commercial Street, a business that described itself as 'Tailors, Hatters, Hosiers and Undertakers'. The department store Marshall and Snelgrove had a black goods department, which catered for the bereaved. What distinguished Forster's enterprise was its longevity and the fact that he employed specialized crape workers on the premises.⁴⁰ Although general drapers and department stores sold mourning wear, the mourning warehouse offered customers two distinct advantages. 'Every requisite for....mourning is always in stock, ready for instant wear' and they were able to interpret the social mores associated with mourning attire.⁴¹ Many of Forster's staff lived in, which enabled him to fulfil large orders quickly.⁴² From 1891, he was boasting of a factory adjacent to the premises.⁴³ A photograph of Frederic Forster's Mourning Warehouse and a recreation of Frederic Forster's shop front are detailed in figures 3 and 4.



[Figure 3. Frederic Forster's Mourning Warehouse, Lower Briggate, Leeds, founded 1849. Photo c. 1870-1890, possibly taken by J Wormald. © Courtesy of Leeds Museums and Galleries.]



[Figure 4. Recreation of Frederic Forster's shop front, Abbey House Museum, Leeds. Photograph courtesy of Kevin Almond © Courtesy of Leeds Museums and Galleries.]

The business appears to have bought in mourning wear to sell to its customers from buying trips to London and markets selling mourning clothing. As well as manufacturing their own garments and accessories, they employed a team of people who could alter mourning clothes for clientele. Therefore, throughout the time period 1849 - 1923 the goods sold were a mix of made-to-measure and ready-to-wear. This information is clear from advertisements that described the merchandise but also advertised for makers to produce the clothes. For instance, *Leeds Mercury* included adverts for jobs as alteration hands, 'Wanted a junior hand; also, a respectable youth as an apprentice.'⁴⁴ This highlights the need to build a team of people to manufacture on the premises. An 1854 advert from *Leeds Times* emphasized low prices, value and variety, 'F. Forster respectfully invites attention to his extensive stock of every article required for family and slight mourning at prices strictly moderate and begs to announce that he has just received some of the newest styles'.⁴⁵ Despite the sombre nature of his business, Forster strove to provide a luxurious and exciting shopping experience. He boasted of spacious showrooms and 'Private and well-lighted fitting-rooms'.⁴⁶ His goods were offered to the public in a series of curated shows, which followed his buying trips to London and various markets.⁴⁷ Forster promoted his clothing as high quality fashion and was proud to offer, 'The latest novelties for the season'.⁴⁸ He was also an astute businessperson claiming to have the widest range of mourning wear in the provinces with affordable prices.⁴⁹ If clients were unable to visit his shop, he offered to send, 'An experienced dressmaker...immediately (free of expense) to families with bonnets, mantles, costumes and patterns of materials in all qualities'.⁵⁰

The review of 354 newspaper advertisements for Frederic Forster's Mourning Warehouse during the period studied revealed many details about the variety and type

of female mourning clothing sold as well as the influence of fashion on these clothes.⁵¹ Merchandise included black fabrics for the home dressmaker; coats and dresses; gloves and scarves; mourning jewellery; parasols and furs (Figure5). From the 1850s to the 1870s influences from other European countries predominated within the stock. In the 1850s, both French flowers and French merinos were sold. By the late 1860s, winter fabrics included new black India crape cloth and French merino and silks – English, French, German, Prussian and Swiss. From the 1870s to the 1890s, black Persian cords, Sedan cords, French all-wool merinos and cashmeres, silks from France and Germany were sold including desirable fabrics – French, English, and German – in black. In the early 1900s, French and English millinery were sold and a 1905 advertisement promoted an assortment of black fabrics from France, England and Germany.⁵² The emergence of winter fabrics at the beginning of the twentieth century, such as ostrich feathers, alpaca and karakul wool were made into coats, skirts, millinery, jackets and mantles. During the latter part of the period, Forster's also began to sell non-mourning attire, which indicates a need to attract different customers beyond those of female mourners.



[Figure 5. Detail of parasols and fans worn for mourning wear from the recreation of Frederic Forster's shop front, Abbey House Museum, Leeds. © Courtesy of Leeds Museums and Galleries.]

It was evident that by the early 1900s adverts were often repeated, which could have reflected a difficulty in selling stock or the popularity of standard items remaining in the mourner's wardrobe for future use. Advertisements for clothing that transcended periods of mourning began to appear during the final years of the business.⁵³ In 1909, silks and materials for mourning and non-mourning wear were promoted, as well as grey for mourning and non-mourning wear. By 1911, the latest shades in grey and navy materials suitable for non-mourning wear became popular. From 1912 to 1913, adverts appeared for general attire and the latest and most authentic fashions in all departments. This gravitated to coloured costumes and dresses throughout the First World War period (1914 - 1918). By 1922, jumpers in black and colours, coloured costumes and black and coloured hosiery were advertised. Whilst Forester began to seek other markets as the need for mourning wear began to dwindle it is interesting to note that by 1917, the business was no longer listed as a mourning draper, simply a draper.⁵⁴

Key findings from the analysis of newspaper advertisements revealed the following:

1. Foster's stock varied with the seasons.
2. Forster offered mourning clothing for different activities.
3. Forster's stock was influenced by textiles and fashions from European countries and that changed over time

4. Forster's advertisements often copied those of the large London stores selling mourning wear such as *Jay's Mourning Warehouse* and *Peter Robinson*.
5. Forster appeared to be marketing his mourning attire as a fashion related product.
6. The decline in mourning dress from the First World War led to the need to diversify the goods offered for sale.

Analysis of Frederic Forster Garments

Three Frederick Forster female garments are held in the dress and textiles collection at Leeds Museums and Galleries.⁵⁵ The curator of dress and textiles, Natalie Raw confirmed that they did not have much information about the provenance of the three items, therefore there is little detail about who exactly wore them or why they were kept. These were observed, photographed and filmed. Each of the garments demonstrate an adherence to the fashionable female silhouette of the period and date from the early 1900s. They abide by the strict etiquette required for mourning attire in this time period. This included the different stages of mourning wear dictated by the UK Royal Court, deep mourning, second mourning, ordinary mourning and half mourning.⁵⁶

The first garment was a mourning cape from c.1900 (Figure 6). This is not the usual dull wool or silk of first and second mourning, rather a garment worn at the end of the mourning period. It is made from black silk with a jacquard woven floral design, fastened with hooks and eyes at the top. It has black satin ribbon around the neck and down the front. There is black bead decoration on the shoulders and it has a black silk lining and is trimmed with wide black silk, shiny ribbons. Capes were very fashionable in late Victorian England and woman often owned at least three.⁵⁷ The

second garment is a mourning jacket from *c.* 1908 (Figure 7). The invoice recording the purchase of the jacket also survives (Figure 8). Made from black silk satin, the broad lapels were embroidered with lace, which was included on the cuffs, around the hem (most missing) and on vertical strips around the garment. It has a high collar with fluted fabric, padded shoulders and fastens with one round, fabric-covered button as well as hooks and eyes. It is fully lined with black silk twill and has a flared skirt with gathered waist. The jacket represented half-mourning for a well-off woman or could be worn once crape was discarded. Both the cape and jacket were donated to the Leeds Museums and Galleries in 1946 by a Mrs. Hirst and each had a Frederic Foster label sewn into the lining. Natalie Raw confirmed, 'They were donated with lots of other 19th and early 20th century items of clothing to Abbey House Museum, which opened in 1927 as a Folk History Museum. In the early days of the museum the collection was mainly built up from objects donated by local people to preserve the history of the local area, so these are part of that'.⁵⁸ The third garment was a bodice from *c.* 1900 (figure 9). It was originally part of a dress and made from black wool and silk crape. It was donated in 2011 and had been passed on down through the family before it came to the collection but there was no information about who could have worn it. The bodice has a high collar, long sleeves and integral boning on the inside of the garment (Figure 10). The inside tape belt has a dressmaker's label, 'Frederic Forster, 12 Briggate Leeds' (figure 11). This is a smart, expensive looking, etiquette-correct bodice decorated with crape put on in fanciful ways and was for second mourning.



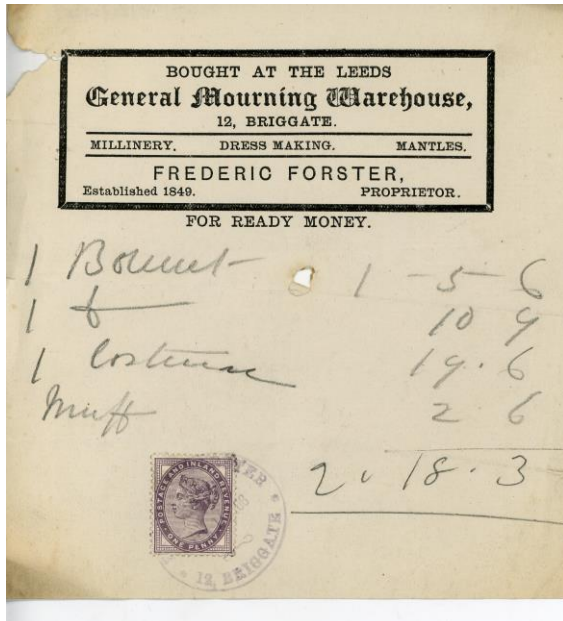
[Figure 6. Frederic Forster mourning cape from C. 1900

© Courtesy of Leeds Museums and Galleries. Photograph courtesy of Michael Anderson.]



[Figure 7. Mourning jacket from C. 1908

© Courtesy of Leeds Museums and Galleries. Photograph courtesy of Michael Anderson.]



[Figure 8. Frederic Forster invoice C. 1908

© Courtesy of Leeds Museums and Galleries.]



[Figure 9. Mourning bodice from C.1900

© Courtesy of Leeds Museums and Galleries. Photograph courtesy of Michael Anderson.]



[Figure 10. Inside of mourning bodice from C. 1900

© Courtesy of Leeds Museums and Galleries. Photograph courtesy of Michael Anderson.]



[Figure 11. Frederic Forster label sewn into garment.

© Courtesy of Leeds Museums and Galleries. Photograph courtesy of Michael Anderson.]

The Decline of the Business

An article about the son of Frederic Forster in *Leeds Mercury* in 1934 provided some insight into why the business eventually closed.⁵⁹ Mr Forster (Frederick Amos Forster, 1855 – 1952) at the age of 79 had been in the drapery trade since 1871, when he joined his father's business. He noted that Forster's Mourning Warehouse had been famous in Leeds; however, as social traditions began to change, particularly after the First World War, the demand for complete mourning wear had decreased and this led to the closure of the store in 1923. Forster considered that people did not feel inclined to make the same show as before or go to the expense of outfitting the household servants. He recalled that at the height of the mourning trade in the late nineteenth century he would buy 25 yards of black crape fabric at a time, whereas by 1933 it was difficult to find the fabric in Leeds. He remembered selling 150 black gloves for one funeral alone. An article that reported the closure of the mourning warehouse in 1923, quoted Forster as saying, 'Mourning has gone out of fashion. Formally, we stocked piles of crape as high as the ceiling. Those were the days of mourning scarves, hatbands and black dresses. Black gloves too were much worn. But the modern tendency is to reduce mourning to a minimum. There is no longer the demand for it'.⁶⁰ Foster also noted that the high cost of mourning wear was considered extravagant in 1923 and many people in Leeds disapproved of this.

Discussion of Interview Responses to Film and Questions

The following section explores the responses from the semi-structured interviews to the short film produced from the initial research activities as well as responses to the three aims for the study described in the introduction.⁶¹ The film was produced in collaboration with Bradford Movie Makers. It is entitled *Frederic Forster's Mourning*

Warehouse and can be located through the following link -

<https://youtu.be/UfDjc2A119o>.⁶² This includes edited scenes from the filming of the Frederic Forster garments at Leeds Museums and Galleries (Figure 12) and footage of the mock-up of Frederic Forster's shop at Abbey House Museum in Leeds, as well as interviews with curators, Natalie Raw and Kitty Ross. The film also includes descriptions of the three mourning garments from Forster's Warehouse with details about how they were manufactured and what they could signify to a contemporary audience. The interviewees were assembled in order to gather a cross section of thoughts and opinions related to the research, as described in the methodology. The interviews were held separately with each group. It is recognised that some of the comments came from academics with prior knowledge whereas other comments came from the general musings of those who were discussing things from a broader perspective with less depth of knowledge. All responses have been kept anonymous in order to present a general overview of the research aims, which gave rise to some thought-provoking points. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed utilising thematic analysis to identify themes and patterns from the responses. These are discussed under each question. Quotes from each interviewee have been kept anonymous.



[Figure 12. Filming of Frederic Forster garments at Discovery Centre, Leeds.

Photograph courtesy of Andrew Lord.]

1. What cultural and symbolic work was performed by the items in Frederic Forster's mourning warehouse at the time of their production?

The majority of interviewees felt this was a broad question to answer. It was also somewhat challenging to evaluate, as the film did not provide a general account of the different stages of mourning each Frederic Forster's garment was connected to (deep mourning, second mourning, ordinary mourning or half mourning). The warehouse was judged to be about business as mourning was a complicated visual performance that required many mourning clothes for those associated with the bereavement. Due to this, it needed a level of entrepreneurialism in its marketing, reflected in Frederic Forster advertisements over time. Black was noted to be a sad colour, however the beauty of the garments contrasted symbolically with the sorrow of the event. This created a brand for mourning. At a time when many people made clothes at home, it would have been impossible to produce them in time for a funeral, so it was important to have a company such as Forster's in Leeds. It was also suggested that female dressmakers were exploited in the clothing industry because mourning wear was very

difficult to sew and the clothes had to be made in black, using black thread in poorly lit working conditions. The business fulfilled a clear need and the brand name arose from it. Issues such as class were reflected in the mourning clothes. One respondent said, 'Items were strictly controlled according to mourning etiquette. Also, it was a class thing as you had to be able to afford the etiquette of mourning'.⁶³ The dress historians observed that less well-off women in Leeds would not have been able to afford Forster's clothes and would have had to resort to dyeing existing clothing black.

Some of the interviewees considered the situation of the shop in a fashionable part of Leeds and what this would mean for a woman to visit, during a time of emotional difficulty. As a store with a well-merchandised display, it inspired a cultural performance of consumption with items strictly controlled according to mourning etiquette. There was further discussion related to the performative nature of mourning wear and its general etiquette. One respondent commented, 'The public versus private thing is important. I wonder how many widows were outwardly in deep mourning towards the end of the nineteenth century, but secretly going –Yes!'⁶⁴ It was easy to become enthralled by the beauty of the garments and materials therefore purchasing mourning wear was not the worst task that needed to be accomplished after a bereavement. This reflects a cultural concept related to looking both appropriate and stylish. One respondent commented on the reason for the rise in mourning consumption, 'After Albert died people went mad for black....I'm sure they were trying to keep up with the Jones's and Mrs so-and-so - the mill owner would want better funeral gear than the other mill owners'.⁶⁵ Black clothes were therefore used as a visual signifier to show the world you were in mourning but they also needed to be aesthetically pleasing. The Frederic Forster items were a visible indication for ways in which others could deal with the bereaved person or family.

There were also many symbolic connections to mourning wear in the jewellery and accessories sold at Frederic Forster. Mourning was ultimately used as a catalyst to create something beautiful through personal adornment.

2. What do these items signify to a present-day audience?

The general response to this question was that it depended on the age of the person and that older people may remember black being worn more frequently at funerals. It was also obvious that the Fredric Forster items were related to female mourning wear due to the decorative use of black fabric. The clothing reflected the organisation of society at that time: clothing was structured and society was structured. There was a place for everything and everything was in that place. One respondent felt the items look alien today, commenting, 'They have a creepy, slightly gothic feel. They do not look fun and reflect a level of repression for women as wearers'.⁶⁶ Other respondents agreed, however acknowledging that they could identify things about them that were familiar, whether it was because of their expertise, or an interest in Goth culture. Many thought the items needed to be explained to a modern-day audience but recognised that the clothes would appeal to Goths and similar subcultural groups with an interest in the dark side, due to the abundant use of black fabric and historicism in the design. Some discussion focussed on the tragic loss of life in the aftermath of the First World War. This resulted in a shortage of fabrics and a reappraisal of funeral rituals including female mourning wear. One commented, 'When does the performance involved in mourning wear stop being a cathartic thing and when does it become overwhelming, for instance after the First World War when it was all too much'.⁶⁷

Several respondents observed how few people wear black for contemporary funerals and at many memorial services for famous people, celebrities appear in designer black. The paparazzi subsequently discuss these outfits, becoming the harbingers of what is appropriate as well as stylish. An example of this was during Queen Elizabeth II's funeral in 2022. Invited dignitaries, world leaders, celebrities and the British Royal family wore designer black for the ceremony. After the Queen's funeral, the media began to dissect the outfits in a similar way to outfits that appear at a red-carpet event. This was in stark contrast to the attire worn by the crowds of people who gathered to watch the procession in the street. Few wore black and many were in sports clothes. Comparisons were made with the funeral of Queen Victoria in 1901 when Frederic Forster was in business. Footage of the event shows the crowds were all dressed in black.⁶⁸ Further respondents reflected that mourning items from the Frederic Forster period have proved inspirational to contemporary fashion designers such as Alexander McQueen whose gothic inspired clothes have often exuded an air of melancholic romanticism. One respondent commented, 'Today it's more global. Black is not sad today it is cool and is worn as fashion in a different context. In Frederic Forster's time few women wore black in everyday life but it is a common colour to wear today.'⁶⁹ The detailed construction, artisanship and use of embellishment in the Forster items was also noted to be hugely appealing and enduring.

3. Has the need for special clothing to denote mourning disappeared, or is it being met by other clothing practices?

The majority of respondents considered that people today continue to be drawn to the wearing of appropriate clothing for a funeral. Human beings want to observe

mourning in some way and express this through what they wear; however, these clothes are not necessarily black. One respondent said, 'Do we ever move on from the material culture of grief or do we shift things around'.⁷⁰ The wearing of black mourning clothes at a funeral has altered today as people may wear brightly coloured or sombre garments depending on the wishes of the deceased or the deceased's family. One respondent commented, 'Funerals today are often used as a chance to celebrate the life of the person who has died, so mourners are asked to wear bright colours and rugby or football tops: something that the deceased would have enjoyed'.⁷¹ In addition, the traditions associated with recovering from a bereavement are much swifter in contemporary society. Some respondents lamented that there was a romanticism attached to historical mourning wear such as that sold in Frederic Forster's Mourning Warehouse and the association with mourning clothing marked a milestone in a person's life.

Significantly, many respondents noted that one of the most interesting developments in the UK today is the impact of multiculturalism on funeral practice and mourning dress. Throughout the period of Frederic Forster's business (1849–1923) this did not exist, as UK society was not so culturally diverse. In contemporary UK funerals, many diverse practices take place due to the cultural background and religious belief of the deceased. Therefore, the sartorial expression of bereavement takes different forms. One respondent from the student group noted that white is traditionally the colour of mourning in China, symbolizing purity and rebirth. In South Africa and Ghana, red is the colour associated with mourning and is linked with honour and patriotism. In Guatemala, Brazil and Thailand, purple is associated with mourning, defining sorrow and spirituality. Today we do not necessarily need to express grief through the wearing of black as the deceased may have had family and

friends from a variety of cultural or ethnic backgrounds who would wear a multitude of colours and styles of clothes to express bereavement. One respondent commented, ‘With family funerals from different cultures you don't have to wear black, the family may ask you to wear a particular colour, but you are expected to look respectful. You wouldn't be looked at askance if you turned up and you've not got black on as long as you look smart’.⁷² This would apply to both male and female mourning wear.

Significant Themes

The significant themes to emerge from the semi-structured interviews indicate that the diminishing trade in UK female mourning wear could be traced by exploring the history of Frederic Forster’s Mourning Warehouse and the material objects the business sold. The devastation and loss of life in the First World War was noted as having a substantial cultural effect on the mourning dress trade as the huge loss of life in the war led women to reappraise mourning rituals and the way they dressed to attend a funeral. Comparisons were made with the clothes worn in the crowds at the funerals of both Queen Victoria in 1901 and Queen Elizabeth II in 2022. The emotions displayed by both crowds were passionate and tearful however the sombre black clothes worn in 1901 contrasted widely with the array of casual clothes in a huge variety of colours worn in 2022. This resulted in much discussion related to how global societies continue to display an emotional outpouring of grief, but the material culture of grief displayed through clothing shifts in emphasis.

Frederic Forster’s Mourning Warehouse was judged to be a business that tapped into the complex visual etiquette and many mourning clothes required of female mourners in Leeds throughout 1849 – 1923. This was reflected in the

entrepreneurial approach to marketing featured in the Frederic Forster advertisements. Mourning was considered to be a complicated visual performance, personified by the use of black, noted to be a colour that represented sadness. It was also noted that class was reflected in the cultural performance of mourning wear consumption and a person's wealth denoted what could be afforded. In terms of female mourning wear, it was recognised that dressmakers were exploited in the making of black clothing, as these were difficult to sew, particularly in the working conditions of small businesses such as Forster's with small spaces and lack of adequate lighting. This regional exploration of mourning wear within a particular timeframe can therefore be considered within an important international context. This relates to whether the need to wear specialist formal clothing for a funeral has lessened or is being met by other clothing practices that reflect contemporary worldwide issues such as ethnicity, globalisation and inclusivity. The cultural and symbolic work of the Frederic Forster items at the time of their production was discussed in relation to what these clothes mean today. This supported a contextualization of contemporary mourning attire and the material culture associated with the sartorial representation of mourning in a multi-cultural world.

CONCLUSION

The study has focussed upon the decline of formal female mourning wear in the UK and has utilised the case study related to Frederic Forster's Mourning Warehouse in Leeds as a catalyst to explore this. In the context of its regional setting, the findings contribute to a significant expansion of the range and depth of research about the mourning wear trade in Leeds and in particular the account of Frederic Forster's business, which has been relatively undocumented. This represents a valuable

contribution to new literature and is an important point of reference, which will have a lasting influence. Understanding this heritage also assists in contextualizing it with a much wider view of contemporary, global mourning wear practice. Developing an appreciation of its history from this regional perspective empowers people to consider the relevance and appropriateness of mourning dress in an evolving world.

The semi-structured interviews with the range of participants explored the aims of the research. The findings suggest people today, are drawn to the wearing of appropriate clothing for a funeral but the clothes are not necessarily black or sombre and this can vary between different cultures. Traditions associated with a bereavement are quickly acted upon in contemporary society and the time associated with mourning does not last long. The sartorial presentation of bereavement is therefore expressed in many different ways. The data collected for this research proved expansive and beyond the confines of the aims of this article so could be further studied as a catalyst for new thinking. The research could travel in a variety of future directions. For example, the collation of 354 newspaper advertisements for Frederic Forster's business merits much further scrutiny. If the data was methodically organized greater detail could be gained from the adverts to demonstrate a graphic view of changes in the business. This would contribute to further in-depth historical analysis. The issue of class and the affordability of the mourning clothing sold by Frederic Forster is another under researched area. There is also a gap in literature recording global, multicultural variations in contemporary mourning clothes and their significance. The research is therefore significant and innovative because it presents an important expansion of research into female mourning wear and its findings demonstrate the depth of the subject and potential avenues for further exploration of a fascinating, consistently evolving subject.

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