

FUTURESCAN 4: VALUING PRACTICE

The relationship between Yorkshire fashion consumers and their clothing in the 20th Century

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Abstract

The research explores preliminary work conducted for an extended research project that investigates how attitudes towards the quality and quantity of clothing possessions, their length of active service and their disposal has changed over the course of the twentieth century. This phase of the study utilises the Yorkshire Fashion Archive (YFA), housed at University of Leeds, as a resource to examine clothing and social history within the Yorkshire region in the twentieth century. It also considers the value of the relationships between clothing and the wearer. The emotional connections to particular items of clothing are examined through interviews with donors and the oral histories connected to donated items. An object-based research approach is adopted to analyse a selection of the handmade and mended clothing from the archive. In an area such as Yorkshire with a rich textile heritage, the material objects and oral histories connected to them give a wealth of information about the lives of Yorkshire people in the twentieth century. This permits an analysis of the changes in the skill base in the region, both in commercial manufacture and the making of clothing in the home as well as consumers' shifting attitudes towards the clothes they chose to wear themselves.

Keywords: everyday fashion, handmade, womenswear, education, needlecraft

Introduction

The Yorkshire Fashion Archive (YFA) collection is unusual in that it constitutes 'everyday' fashion and clothing, which differs from many costume collections in major museums and archives, that tend to prioritise '...artifacts with high economic, aesthetic or inherent value...' (Mida and Kim 2015: 68). The fact that the collection holds examples of everyday clothing means that this is a representative sample of the clothing that Yorkshire people actually bought, made or wore during the twentieth century. This provides an opportunity, not only to study 'perfect' or valuable clothing possessions, but also to see everyday objects, often with visible signs of wear, which have been altered and mended, but have been retained nonetheless. The reasons why these items have been stored, saved and treasured, before being donated to the YFA will be examined, to unpick the stories of Yorkshire women in the twentieth century. The collection comprises womenswear, menswear and childrenswear, clothing and accessories, but as the majority of the collection is made up of womenswear, the study will focus in on this part of the collection, predominantly in the period 1939-1999, where more first-hand evidence remains. An important part of the research will consist of memories and perceptions gathered through oral histories and interviews, therefore it is essential to study a period which is still within living memory.

Using Mida and Kim's (2015) approach to object-based research, the objects and narratives of one donor's collection of women's and children's clothing is examined here, within the cultural context of Yorkshire life in the mid-twentieth century and encompassing three of the broader themes of the research; Women's education and changing role in society, textile heritage and skills, and the archive as a final resting place for memories.

Sadie Espie's Collection in the Yorkshire Fashion Archive

In 2011, a donation was made to the YFA by the daughter of Sarah Espie (known as Sadie), who was born in January 1927 in Ripon, North Yorkshire. Notable items donated include girls' clothing, made by Sadie for her daughters, but there are also other items in the collection which make this donation particularly interesting. Alongside the dresses and skirts made by Sadie as an adult, there are also school work books, items made by Sadie as a child, diary entries about the needlecraft she completed each day, and sketches of Sadie sewing that were made by her husband, Len. Together, these items document the creative life of a talented needlewoman through her education, motherhood and as an art and needlecraft teacher.

One of the most revealing artifacts in this collection is the diary that Sadie kept. Sadie's diary between 1945 and 1948, when she was aged approximately 18–21, demonstrates the prominence of dressmaking and knitting in her everyday life. Whilst making clothes at home was fairly common at this period, it seems that Sadie had a particular passion for her creative pastimes, and she notes the work completed on each of her projects daily. Entries include comments such as, 'First day back at home. Knitted a bit of white jumper...' and '...still sewing – did blue linen dress alterations...' (Espie 1945-1948: no pagination). The diary gives scant details about other activities, but there are mentions of occasional trips to buy a pair of new shoes, a coat, crocheted gloves and of visits to family and friends. Keeping a detailed account of the needlework completed appears to have been a family trait, as Sadie's mother also kept a diligent record of progress with the needlework she completed in a notebook. This includes notes of the alterations that she made to knitting patterns to suit each recipient, the type and quantity of yarn needed for a project, row counting and one entry in May 1934 that shows making up instructions for 'Douglas' Grammar School Scarf' (Espie 1933-1962: no pagination).

Sadie's eldest daughter, Jane, reported that from the age of 11 Sadie made all of her own, her sister's and her mother's clothing. Sadie's needlework skills were learnt at school or from books; the items donated to the YFA contain Sadie's Domestic Science textbook, printed in 1904 but still in use during her schooling in the 1930s, and her needlework exercise book. Both attest to an education somewhat different to that which would be familiar to girls today. The Domestic Science book (Lush 1904: v) covers information about 'Food: its composition and Nutritive Value', 'Clothing and Its Use', 'The Skin and Personal Cleanliness'. The section on Clothing is particularly representative of early twentieth century morality as it refers to the notion that 'Clothing serves as a mark for Civilisation' (Lush 1904: 52) and also covers the health implications of clothing which is too tight, particularly corsets, boots and shoes. There is also a considerable amount of detail on how to wash clothing, even down to the most suitable day of the week to carry out the laundry of differing types of clothing and household textiles.

Sadie's school needlework book, dated September 1937, gives examples of the kind of skills girls were taught to prepare them for the domestic tasks expected of both girls and grown women in this period. This included darning, patching and a good understanding of the basics of pattern drafting and

garment construction, including a bodice with a peter pan collar. At the age of 10, Sadie was already being instructed in the skills that would serve her and her family well through the Second World War (WW2) and the subsequent rationing of household supplies and clothing. An example of the practice of 'Make Do and Mend' is noted in Sadie's diary in 1946 where she notes that she is 'Making waistcoat & skirt from aunt Fanny's khaki frock - looking ok - dying it maroon...' (Espie 1945-1948: no pagination). Robinson (2012: 3) discusses the 'gendering of needlework' in her paper on Women and Needlework in Britain 1920-1970, highlighting the role that class played in women's engagement with needlework. Despite girls being taught the basic skills deemed necessary for running an efficient household at school, there was often a class divide between those of more comfortable means, who had the leisure time to sew for pleasure, and those who had little leisure time, but economic hardship necessitated making or mending out of obligation. In Sadie's case it is probable that she sewed as an enjoyable pastime, but it is also likely that she sewed as a thrifty way to indulge her love of clothing.

Sadie met Len Bower when they were both studying Fine Art at Leeds College of Art, and they married in December 1950 in Ripon's Holy Trinity Church. Sadie made her own wedding dress, from ivory and pale golden brocade fabric. The dress was floor length, with long sleeves, a curved yoke with a deep border. The back of the dress boasts nine tiny hand-bound buttonholes and covered buttons to the waist. The dress was later altered, with the sleeves being removed, the hem being taken up, and black velvet piping and ivory beads being added to the yoke so that the dress could be used as eveningwear (figures 1, 2 and 3). The dress was donated to the YFA with a matching handbag, which had been made from the sleeves when the wedding dress was altered.

Historian Julie Summers, who has written about many aspects of the Second World War, notes that during WW2, 'The fashion was still for a white wedding with long dress, veil and all the trimmings, but some women...chose to wear a dress and jacket or costume that could be worn on other occasions' (2016: 143). As Sadie and Len's wedding took place just 5 years after the end of WW2, and less than two years after the end of clothes rationing, it would still have been common practice to plan for a wedding dress to be used for another purpose after the wedding.



Figure 1: Sadie and Len's wedding day.



Figures 2 and 3: Sadie's handmade wedding dress, altered to be worn as eveningwear.

After completing her studies at Leeds College of Art in 1949-50, Sadie was employed as an art teacher at Lawnswood High School in Headingley, Leeds. She worked at the school for about four years, and was head of the art department for some of this time. Sadie left this post to have her first child, but when Jane (b. 1955) was a toddler Sadie took a position at the Yorkshire Training College of Housecraft in Leeds, where she taught art and design for applications such as menu cards. Later, she was head-hunted to work at a private primary school in Headingley, Richmond House Preparatory School, where she worked on a part time basis teaching art.

Sadie and Len Espie had three children, Jane (b. 1955), Andrew (b. 1962) and Sarah (b. 1969). The children were well dressed by Sadie, and she designed and made several remarkable dresses for the girls which were donated to the YFA. In the collection are some hand-smocked toddler dresses, appliqued and embroidered young girls dresses (figures 4-8) and later, dresses and skirts which demonstrate the styles preferred by a young teenager in the 1960s (figures 9 and 10). It is clear that Sadie was familiar with popular fashion styles and was able to translate these into clothing for her children, but also had the ability and creative flair to create unique and attractive design details. The dresses shown in figures 4-8 are examples of a variety of animal themed dresses that Sadie made. These three dresses are all made on a base of cotton sailcloth which was durable and practical for small children. The dresses all bear marks of wear, particularly the hemline, which was left generously deep to allow for alterations to be made for growing girls. The hems have visibly been let down as Jane grew. The Bee dress (see detail in figure 6) has an appliqued and embroidered yoke and pockets, and is trimmed with guipure lace. The bees' wings are made from fragments of the guipure lace, caught in place by the body of the bee.



Figure 4: 'Mousey Dress' c. 1959.



Figure 5: Green dress with drawn thread work, c. 1965.



Figure 6: 'Bee dress', c. 1958.

The Mousey dress, which Jane calls 'the masterpiece of the collection' (see detail in figure 7) also has an appliqued and embroidered yoke, and a decorative band around the skirt of the dress which depicts mice clinging to ears of wheat. There are also ladybirds and tiny blue flowers on the band. The mice have leather ears and glass bead eyes, and the hand embroidery on their bodies gives the impression of fur. Jane explained that her mother had asked which animal she would like on her next dress, and when Jane requested a mouse, she found the perfect picture in her book of farm animals for her mother to use as reference. This was Jane's favourite dress, and she was only allowed to use it on special occasions. Jane remembered wearing the dress one day, and the other children being awe struck by its design.



Figure 7: 'Mousey dress', detail, c. 1959.

The green drawn-thread work dress (see detail in figure 8) has an exquisite contrasting yoke which demonstrates different patterns of drawn-thread work in the stylised flower heads.



Figure 8: Green dress with drawn thread work detail, 1965.

The Dirndl skirt and blanket dress (detail shown in figures 9 and 10), both made in the late 1960s, demonstrate a distinct change in aesthetic style from a natural and life-like style of embroidery to stylised forms in bright colours, which is typical of the 1960s/1970s. The Dirndl skirt is pale pink and is decorated with applique and hand embroidery, with fabric swatches applied to create the stylised flower heads. The skirt originally had a fringed trim on the hem, but this was later replaced with a black ruffled hem. Jane remembers arguing with her mother as she wanted to wear this skirt to school but was not allowed to, for fear that she would ruin the skirt in her art class.

The 'blanket dress', worn by Jane when she was approximately 13-14 years of age, was made out of the dense mauve-coloured fabric when Sadie decided that the colour was too nice for it to simply be a blanket. The neckline is elaborately embroidered in bright colours and a cursive design, showcasing several different embroidery stitches and textures.



Figure 9: Detail of applique and embroidery on Dirndl skirt, late 1960s.



Figure 10: Detail of embroidery on yoke of 'Blanket Dress', late 1960s.

While it is clear that Sadie made the dresses for her daughters due to her enjoyment of and talent in dressmaking, it is also possible that she made the clothing due to a relative lack of availability of good quality ready-made children's clothing in local shops in the 1950s. This has been widely reported by other donors to the YFA and is supported by Buckley (1999: 60), who states that:

Both my younger sister and I were dressed through childhood in mainly home-made clothes...this was not always down to cost as neither family were particularly poor. Rather it was due to the apparent shoddiness of much shop-bought clothing...

However, there was good availability of sewing patterns in department stores (and by mail order through magazines such as *Woman's Weekly*) for those who could not or did not wish to draft their own. The City of Leeds, where Sadie and Len settled, boasted a number of well-established fabric shops at this period. West Yorkshire's textile industry was still enjoying relative prosperity in the mid-twentieth century, largely due to the production of woollen cloth and manufacture of men's tailoring. There were numerous mill shops selling good quality cloth, and yarn for hand knitting was still widely produced in the region by companies such as Sirdar (Wakefield), Patons and Baldwin (Huddersfield and Alloa) and Thomas B. Ramsden & Co. (Bradford).

The Archive as a 'final resting place' for memories

The YFA is used as a resource for teaching and research, which seems to be the main quality that attracts local people to make donations. The fact that the items have an inherent emotional value to donors means that they are more comfortable donating the items for study than leaving them to an uncertain future where they may no longer be cared for, particularly as donors reach their later years.

Clothing has a close relationship with the body that wears it and also with the hands that have meticulously cut, stitched, embroidered or knitted it. In the case of Sadie Espie's work, it was exactly this relationship with skilled hands and artistic flair that made the girls' dresses so remarkable to Sadie's daughter, Jane. The workmanship in the Mousey Dress, Bee Dress and Flower Dress in particular are exceptional, both in terms of their design and decoration. However, it is highly likely that the dresses were retained due to their emotional value to Sadie's daughter because of their '...tangible connection with one's past history which is tied in with us remembering both self and one's relationship with others...' (Guy and Banim 2000: 322).

Donors to the YFA have often assumed that hand-made pieces will be of less value to the collection than branded garments, but when prompted they are usually able to offer a detailed account of the personal significance of these items. The material objects are able to unlock memories of childhood, of family holidays and of people dear to them, who are now long gone. Cwerner (2001: 87) suggests that, 'In the wardrobe, clothes turn into fossilized memories of a person's past...', but as such they offer a valuable historical resource to understand the lives and experiences of their wearer(s), and their maker(s). The future direction for the research will include further exploration of make, signs of wear and accompanying narratives from the clothing from the rich source of examples in the YFA. This will build up a substantial, first hand record of the changes in the skill base in the region and develop new knowledge about the social history of the Yorkshire region in the twentieth century.

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