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## **Yorkshire Fashion Archive**

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The Yorkshire Fashion Archive (YFA) is a small teaching and research collection held in the School of Design at the University of Leeds, located in Leeds, West Yorkshire, in the UK (Figure 1). The collection began humbly, with a small exhibition of loaned items, curated by teaching staff on the BA (Hons) Fashion Design course at Bretton Hall College, near Barnsley, South Yorkshire in 1999. The exhibition was intended as a celebration of the new millennium and a retrospective of the sartorial tastes of Yorkshire folk between 1950 and 1999. When the Fashion Design course at Bretton Hall, which was validated by University of Leeds, moved to the University of Leeds campus, in Leeds City Centre in 2001, the growing collection was relocated to what is now the School of Design. In 2003 the collection was formally given its title, and a committee was established to steer the management and care of the archive collection.



Figure 1. Images from the Yorkshire Fashion Archive. The dress (left) was bought in department store Schofields in Leeds in the 1970s and features a large poppy print and kimono style sleeves. The

image (centre) is of a YFA donor's mother modelling eveningwear for Marshall and Snelgrove, another department store in Leeds in the early 1950s. Right: Bata platform wedge sandals, 1970s.  
© Courtesy of Yorkshire Fashion Archive, University of Leeds.

The archive is rooted in regionalism due to its focus on the locale of the county of Yorkshire in the United Kingdom and the economic and cultural characteristics of the fashionable clothing bought, made and worn by its homogenous population. Yorkshire is the largest county in the UK and is divided into four sectors: East, West, North and South Yorkshire. It combines vast expanses of countryside with a variety of villages, market towns and five cities: Leeds, Bradford, York, Hull, and Sheffield. The history and cultural heritage of the region is derived from its landscape, industry, art, and literature. For the past 200 years the region has had a mixed economy inspired by its rural and urban composition. This ranges from traditional industries such as farming, the woollen textile industry and coal mining to service-based industries and tourism. The contrast between the more sophisticated urbanity of the cities with the more rural areas of Yorkshire's countryside have provided a rich diversity of donations to the Yorkshire Fashion Archive that represent different facets of fashionable Yorkshire life. The items held in the collection were almost exclusively bought, made, or worn in Yorkshire, and many are accompanied by information which records the stories of the people and the provenance of the clothing. The geographical specificity of the archive allows the collection to act as a repository of regional social and cultural change related to fashion, and more specifically the changes in women's lives in the region, as around 75% of the collection is made up of womenswear and women's accessories.

Around 100 individual donors have contributed to the collection, with the earliest items of dress dating back to the 1860s, and the most recent items of dress from the early 2000s. The original remit of the collection was to amass items representing 20<sup>th</sup> century dress, however this was broadened to include the earlier items, and the occasional piece from the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The YFA now holds well in excess of 1400 items of dress and accessories, a large collection of vintage dressmaking patterns dating from between the 1920s and 1990s, dress-related objects such as donors' collections of haberdashery and a myriad of print media including industry publications and popular magazine titles relating to fashion. Where possible, further information, stories and photographs were collected with the items of dress on accession, to contextualise the donations. This allows researchers to learn about the social events, local traditions and celebrations that make up the fabric of the regional culture of Yorkshire. A small number of oral history recordings are also available in the YFA collection, having been recorded as part of exhibition preparation or conversations when items were donated.

Much of the collection is made up of everyday dress related to fashion and as such it records the experiences of the masses rather than a social elite. There are numerous examples of clothing made in Yorkshire, both domestically and in the local clothing industry which, when combined with the Yorkshire woollen textile industry, made up a large percentage of employment, and specifically women's employment, in the region in the early to mid-twentieth century. The scale of the men's tailoring industry in and around Leeds was second only to London in the United Kingdom, but there was also an economically significant trade in womenswear. Some of the local companies represented in the YFA are Burtons, Harella, Elsie Whiteley and Marlbeck, with their products having been manufactured in Leeds and Halifax. Alongside the Yorkshire-based companies there are examples of well-known twentieth century trademarks such as Cresta, Bus Stop, Ossie Clark, Hebe, Mary Quant and many more (Figures 2 and 3). Designer brands that had been worn in Yorkshire make up a smaller, but valuable part of the collection to inform teaching and research, including garments by Burberry, Jean Muir, Yohji Yamamoto and Issey Miyake. The homemade items in the archive demonstrate the wealth of creativity in the region, with talented home dressmakers producing professional-looking garments from patterns cut by Jean Muir for Vogue; intricate and unique embellishments on girl's dresses and a collection of around 30 pieces of knitwear made up instinctively by a single knitter without using knitting patterns.



Figure 2. Cresta, Peony dress, 1950s. This dress was bought for 38 guineas in 1959 at upscale department store Marshall and Snelgrove, in Leeds. The dress is made of synthetic taffeta in a bold peony print and features intricate shaping through the bodice and an interpretation of a 'sack back' train, reminiscent of the 'robes à la Française' of the late 1700s.

© Courtesy of Yorkshire Fashion Archive, University of Leeds.



Figure 3. Bus Stop, skirt and top, 1970s purchased in Leeds. Bus Stop was a London based boutique launched by Lee Bender and her husband in 1968 (Vintage Fashion Guild, 2024) and which traded until 1979. The skirt and top are made from a soft synthetic jersey fabric and features a 1960s art deco revival style print.

© Courtesy of Yorkshire Fashion Archive, University of Leeds.

As the archive became more established, the fashion design programme team at the University of Leeds curated a series of public exhibitions to showcase key pieces from the collection to the wider community in Yorkshire. The exhibitions were open to members of the general public who visited the individual venues and the displays were designed to facilitate a broad understanding of the Yorkshire Fashion Archive and to raise its profile. Salts Mill, an enormous former textile mill in Saltaire, Bradford (itself a UNESCO World Heritage site) was the location of the first exhibition, *Dress Rehearsal* in 2011, and a further two exhibitions: *Wool Re-Fashioned* in 2012, and *Jonathan Silver: 'Romantic Capitalist'* in 2013. Two more exhibitions were curated using artefacts from the YFA; at Barnsley Civic in South Yorkshire in 2015: *Snapshot: A Story of Family, Fashion and Friends*, and at

University of Leeds International Textile Archive (ULITA) in 2016<sup>1</sup>: *The Synthetics Revolution* in 2016, which explored the impact of synthetic fibres on the woollen textile industry. *Dress Rehearsal* (2011) focussed on items in the collection which had stories relating to the clothing, such as a salmon pink lace wedding dress from the 1950s (pink being a highly unusual choice for a wedding dress at the time) and teenage high street fashion from the late 1960s. *Wool Re-Fashioned* (2012) was the result of an ambitious student project, in collaboration with The Woolmark Company, using fine merino wool fabrics to redesign archive pieces for a modern audience, adopting technologies such as laser cutting and unconventional construction techniques (Figure 4). *Jonathan Silver: Romantic Capitalist* (2013) paid homage to the late entrepreneur who bought and restored Salt's Mill, exhibiting a selection of the 100 or so items of his clothing which were donated to the YFA, and which demonstrated his interest in designer brands such as Yohji Yamamoto throughout the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>2</sup> *Snapshot: A Story of Family, Fashion and Friends* (2015) was a photographic exhibition which explored donor stories and reminiscences through detailed object-based photography of selected pieces from donor collections and their own family photographs. Finally, *The Synthetics Revolution* (2016) documented the growth of synthetic fibres in textiles and fashion in the mid-twentieth century, collaborating with University of Leeds International Textile Archive to explore the development of synthetic fibres and textiles and how these new materials and products were marketed to consumers.

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<sup>1</sup> ULITA - University of Leeds International Textile Archive. This is an archive of world textiles and related objects from diverse cultures including European, Egyptian, Indonesian, Japanese, West African, Indian and Chinese sources. ULITA is a large collection which was originally formed as a teaching collection in the Department of Textile Industries which pre-dated the School of Design at the University of Leeds. It is widely utilised by researchers, scholars and the general public.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Silver was an entrepreneur from Bradford, West Yorkshire, who had a successful chain of menswear stores, including Salts Clothing Company, established in 1993, which produced men's shirts, tailored woollen suits, silk/linen jackets and cotton shirts and trousers, and the YFA has several examples of clothing from this brand. Jonathan Silver was involved in the redevelopment of Dean Clough Mills in Halifax, then bought and restored the old woollen mill - Salts Mill in Saltaire. The mill has a lasting connection with Bradford-born artist David Hockney due to a permanent exhibition of his work on the ground floor and has a variety of shops, food and drink establishments and exhibition space.



Figure 4. Image from Wool Re-Fashioned exhibition in 2012. The exhibition showcased work from a student project which reinterpreted archival garments for a contemporary fashion consumer using the Woolmark Company's 'No Finer Feeling' lightweight merino wool fabric. The archival garments ranged from a 1940s wedding dress (reimagined as a siren suit) to a men's 1970s synthetic safari jacket. The dress above is a gold lurex 1970s disco dress reimagined as a maxi length wool and faux leather dress with leg o'mutton sleeves and zips used as a decorative edge on the ties.

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The main objective of the collection is to support teaching and research in the School of Design, with items from the collection frequently being used for object-based research for technical or design projects, particularly with undergraduate students. The collection also supports research conducted by academic staff within the School of Design and the wider research community. Visitors to the archive have included college students for a drawing class as part of their art curriculum, PhD students from a number of different institutions who are researching different aspects of fashion and clothing history, television production companies and presenters developing content for special-interest documentaries, and artists looking for inspiration for their commissions (most recently an artist who was interested in printed textile designs from the 1950s).



The archive has been used as major case study in two School of Design, PhD programmes and these researchers have presented their work at a variety of international dress history conferences. It has also been examined as a case study in the findings in a variety of publications in international journals including: *Catwalk: The Journal of Fashion, Beauty and Style*; *Fashion Practice: The Journal of Design, Creative Practice and the Fashion Industry*; *Costume – The Journal of the Costume Society*; *Art Libraries Journal* and *Clothing Cultures*. These publications discussed key pieces from the archive in relation to the aims and objectives of the research in question. The paper, *Disrupting the Fashion Archive: The Serendipity of Manufacturing Mistakes* (Almond, 2020), describes a case study that asked fashion design students to identify mistakes in manufacture, in selected garments from the Yorkshire Fashion Archive. It explored the potential for accidental or intentional mistakes to be a source of inspiration for fashion design. One of the pieces discussed in this paper was the wool fringed dress from 1945 (Figure 5). It had been made by a home dressmaker during the Make do and Mend campaign established in World War II, from a piece of men's suiting and heavy black fringing that was typically used as an upholstery trim on a chair. The garment revealed some poor manufacturing skills, identified as mistakes, such as over-wide seams had been snipped too close to the sewing line, which therefore frayed. A further key piece from the Make do and Mend period was discussed in the article, *Forgotten Wardrobes: Keepers of Lost Clothes* (Almond and Wadsworth, 2022). This was a hand knitted grey cardigan with cabling from c.1943. Odd scraps of wool were used in the construction of the garment and brightly coloured flowers had been hand embroidered in red, burgundy, blue and cream.



Figure 5. Wool fringed dress from 1945. This had been created by a home dressmaker during the Make do and Mend campaign established in World War II. It is made from a piece of men's suiting and heavy black fringing that was typically used as an upholstery trim on a chair. The garment revealed some poor manufacturing skills, identified as mistakes, such as over-wide seams had been snipped too close to the sewing line, which therefore frayed.

© Courtesy of Yorkshire Fashion Archive, University of Leeds.

Currently the collection is only accessible on-site and by appointment, as there are no dedicated members of staff allocated time to manage it. The archive room itself is a compact space, with rolling bays having been converted from weaving yarn skips (a reminder of the previous incarnation of the School of Design whose title was - The Department of Textile Industries) to hanging spaces, with shelves above to house items which are boxed, or which are best stored flat, such as knitwear. There is a small amount of space to showcase items from the collection on mannequins at the front of the archive room, and some table-top space to work with artefacts, both for research and cataloguing.

One of the challenges faced by the archive is the lack of funding. Although it has dedicated space in the School of Design, access for students and researchers is only made possible because of the commitment and passion of the small number of staff involved with the collection. Space has also become an issue as the storage space in the archive room is almost full. This can disappoint potential donors as some items have had to be turned away due to limited space capacity. This is unfortunate as valuable relics are potentially discarded and left unrecorded. There is a need to prioritise resources, so where similar items are already held in the collection, or if items don't quite fit the context of the YFA more careful consideration needs to be made about the donations accepted. The archive room does not have ideal conditions for the storage of textiles as there is no specialised heat and moisture control, however the donations are stored carefully in Tyvek covers and archival-grade boxes to prolong their lifespan. One of the important features of the archive are the stories collected with the donations. These are often recorded or written down and relate to wider contexts beyond the clothing and fashion items. This connects to Yorkshire fashion identities relating to place, repair, industrial manufacture and home dressmaking and touches on other disciplines such as history, society and culture. Public engagement workshops have been held in association with the archive, collecting memories relating to dress and its cultural contexts. Cross sections of people from different communities in Yorkshire have been interviewed to document people's thoughts about specific archival pieces. For instance, a workshop held at Leeds Discovery Centre on September 11 2019, considered dress through the lens of regional social history by exploring women's involvement with everyday clothing and fashion (Figure 6) (Almond and Evans, 2022). A call was advertised to request attendees who had an interest in everyday dress in Yorkshire. This resulted in a gathering of people that included, home dressmakers; people who had worked in the Yorkshire clothing industry, people with recollections of shopping for clothes in Yorkshire as well as a dress historian and several fashion academics. A recent workshop on July 24 2023, explored mourning dress and multiculturalism in the region. The people invited included, a member of the subcultural Goth movement; a member of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community; a member of the Afro Caribbean community; members of the Indian community and a Leeds based expert in dress history.



Figure 6. Participants in the Public Engagement Workshop at Leeds Discovery Centre, September 11 2019. This was funded by a grant from University of Leeds Cultural Institute and Leeds Museums and Galleries. It explored women's experiences of everyday clothing in Yorkshire, 1939 – 1999. In the photograph attendees were able to conduct object-based research, examining examples of everyday dress from both the Yorkshire Fashion Archive and the Leeds Museums and Galleries Dress and Textiles Collection. © Photograph courtesy of Alice Humphrey.

The Yorkshire Fashion Archive is one of several research and teaching archives in fashion and textiles housed in UK universities. There has been previous research that has attempted to document these various archives. This was initiated through a report on textile archives in the UK written for the launch of the *Journal of Design History* in 1988 by Hazel Clarke. She described 20 colleges who housed fashion or textile collections that had either been purchased to serve the needs of a course or which had been donated. The report explored the archive contents, what they represented as well as their challenges and opportunities. Further recent research by four institutions in the UK who are connected through the Association of Fashion and Textiles Courses (FTC) attempted to expand on Hazel Clarke's findings by exploring the development of further fashion and textiles archives in UK higher education institutions. This resulted in a contemporary mapping of these archives. The results were presented at the Archiving Fashion Conference, The Fashion Institute of Technology New York (Almond K, Briggs Goode A, Britt H, Groves A. 2023). This

recent research identified only one further archive that represented fashion and textiles worn and produced in the region in which their institution was situated. This was The Textiles & Dress Collection at Falmouth University, UK, a collection that focusses on everyday dress and textiles, a good proportion of which is connected to or comes from Cornwall or the wider Southwest of the UK. Amongst them, The Yorkshire Fashion Archive is unique because it provides an original record of fashion and dress in Yorkshire that documents the social history of the region through items manufactured by its dressmakers and the local clothing industry. Interestingly some of the items come to the archive as unsuitable for museum collections due to wear and tear, but that is something that is advocated as contributing to our knowledge of how 'everyday people' lived and interacted with fashion and dress. The archive is also one of three important archives at University of Leeds utilised as a teaching and research resource by the international fashion industry and education. The further two archives are the previously discussed: University of Leeds International Textile Archive (ULITA), now part of the University of Leeds Special Collections, and the Marks and Spencer Archive.

In a global context there is significant value in fashion archives that represent the region in which they are housed. Firstly, they present an opportunity to document and disseminate information about the way fashion was purchased, worn and produced in their region and is a record of how fashionable dress has been interpreted in relation to its environs. The provenance of individual artefacts can also be recorded which can trace places of origin and records of ownership, the history of garments as well as the people who wore them. As a teaching resource it presents a chance to understand how fashion and dress is interpreted beyond the confines of sophisticated global fashion centres such as New York, London, Milan and Paris and can be viewed as proximate to the everyday setting where the clothes were worn. Many designers and crafts people exist in smaller provincial areas and fashion has been consumed and worn in the context of local conditions, climates and cultures around the globe. These items have been styled and worn in ways that relate to their environs as the consumer connects to different cultures and traditions in their individual interpretations of fashionable trends. From a research perspective cross examination of different regionally based archives, presents an anthropological opportunity to consider the origin and development of fashion within different societies and cultures. The future ambition of the custodians of the Yorkshire Fashion Archive is to pursue these global connections and the wider possibilities for the dissemination of the rich and fascinating source of information contained in the collection, significantly contributing to the development of global fashion history and object-based research.

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