**Tailored Trades Paper**

**Bishopsgate Institute Sept 12 2014**

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**‘A Working Royal Wardrobe – The Public Persona of Queen Alexandra’**

Queen Alexandra’s star has dimmed in the almost century since her death in 1925. Today she is perhaps best known as the long-suffering wife of Edward VII, subject to his excesses of food, tobacco, wine and women – this has become the misconception of her long life. Alexandra was, of course, much more than a wronged wife. This paper will examine how a celebrated figure such as Alexandra most certainly was, managed and maintained her public appearance both at home and whilst embarking on the many travels that she undertook. Alexandra quickly gained a reputation for her elegant and appropriate appearance, no matter what the occasion or location. She did not put a sartorial foot wrong. In fact, it could be argued that her astute choices were a powerful tool in her social arsenal. It is only Alexandra’s story in part, however. Behind the careful construction of her public appearances were those whose job it was to clothe the royal body. These are shadowy figures, often invisible in the historical record – dressers, wardrobe maids, launderers, dressmakers, tailors and messengers. The sum of their combined skills created the working wardrobe for one of the most recognised and popular women of her time.

The very act of acquiring dress was no mean feat for Alexandra. Shopping itself in the manner described by contemporary observers at the time in London was impossible for so popular and easily recognisable a woman as she was. In 1859, Augustus Sala’s vivid depiction of one of the metropolis’s principle shopping areas draws a scene of social, colourful chaos: ‘Regent Street is an avenue of superfluities, a great trunk-road in Vanity Fair. Fancy watchmakers, haberdashers, and photographers; fancy stationers, fancy hosiers, and fancy staymakers; music shops, shawl shops, jewellers, French glove shops, perfumery and point lace shops, confectioners and milliners; these are the merchants whose wares are exhibited in this Bezesteen of the world.’

The journalist Arthur Beavan makes a reference to the means by which Alexandra was able to look as she wished, without a trip to Regent Street. The author was allowed access to the Princess of Wale’s London residence Marlborough House and the daily life of its occupants and he noted: ‘...she has a decided penchant for millinery. As a rule Her Royal Highness designs her own dresses: that is to say coloured pictures of the proposed gown are submitted to her, and she, with brush or pencil, alters the picture to suit her own perfect taste.’ Brief though this vignette is, of Alexandra ‘at home’, the description of her private decision making far from the public gaze is instructive. Beavan portrays the confident client, the woman who could take a design and customize it to meet her requirements. If this is indeed an accurate depiction of one of Princess Alexandra’s means of acquiring her clothes, it also deals efficiently with any concerns over discretion and privacy. Dressmakers kept a dress form that matched their most favoured clients’ measurements, and once supplied with her amended design, could undertake the commission with a minimum of fuss.

A single folio of Alexandra’s wardrobe accounts from the year 1898 reveals the variety of patronage and the geographical spread of the retailers that the Princess of Wales patronised at this time. The page includes payments made between May and November and lists 29 different payees. Of these, eight are dressmakers including Mme Leclerq-Vigourous whose address listed in trade directories is 105-109 Oxford Street, Berthe & Yeo on Somerset St and four French establishments. Five of the names appearing in the ledger can be described as more generic outfitters – Swan & Edgar who had premises in Picadilly and on Regent St, Graham & Son found at 26 Portman Square, Woolland Bros whose large Knightsbridge store ran from 1-7 Lowndes Terrace, Givry & Co on 39 Conduit St and Howell & James occupying Nos.5-9 Regent St. This page alone contains entries for Brigg & Son the umbrella maker at 23 St James St, Attoff & Norman the bootmakers at 69 New Bond Street, Robert Heath the hatter found on Oxford St, the furrier Poland & Son also on Oxford St, Garrard’s the jeweller at 25 & 26 Haymarket and the perfumer Piesse & Lubin at 2 New Bond Street. What this sample reveals most significantly is twofold – firstly the variety of specific trades that occupied the market for dress and its associated ephemera during the period and secondly the relatively close proximity of these establishments to one another. More pertinent still in this assessment of Alexandra’s shopping habits is the location of their London residence, Marlborough House, only two or three streets away from most of those suppliers listed. Not only does this begin to allow an interpretation of Alexandra’s strategies of consumption but amplifies the role of her household, relating the proximity of her home to the location of the retailers and the complexities of fetching ordered goods. Additional duties of the dresser are brought more sharply into focus through such analysis as they managed the collection of goods for the wardrobe.

The identity of Alexandra’s first ‘maids’ or ‘dressers’ as they were referred to officially has not been recorded. Nor indeed have any direct accounts of their work in the household of the new Princess of Wales survived. Given evidence of Queen Victoria’s dominant role concerning the establishment of this household, however, it is reasonable to assume that its substance in this respect would have mirrored her own. The papers concerning the reign of Queen Victoria are both broad in scope and comprehensive in detail. In particular, the set of volumes from the Queen’s Office of Robes offers an invaluable insight into the day-to-day maintenance of a unique, busy, working Royal wardrobe. Perhaps the strongest sense inferred from the ledgers relating to the Office of Robes is that of a cohesive, independent department; a large cog in a larger machine running the royal household.

The inclusion of a messenger salaried to the Office of Robes may perhaps answer questions as to some of the logistical problems faced by the large numbers of suppliers and the regular requirements of such a large wardrobe. On a monthly salary of £22, the name of John Maclean, messenger, appears on the final line of the administrative posts in the department. ‘Messenger’s Disbursements’ would suggest that he was claiming for travelling expenses and other sundry costs incurred. The suggestion is of daily errands to collect items of clothing from specific retailers, launderers, haberdashery for the dressers, the settling of accounts and a myriad other trips into the city that simply would not have been feasible for the dressers to carry out. He was paid less than the principal dresser who commanded a monthly sum of £37, but more than the third dresser on £17. The proximity of the dresser to her mistress both physically and mentally placed her in an almost unique position within the household. Unlike the ladies-in-waiting whose weeks in service operated under a rota system, the dressers and wardrobe maids were a permanent fixture of the wardrobe room and therefore Alexandra’s daily life. A later description of the arrangements at Marlborough House describes the workspace that the dressers occupied. In addition to the chintzy dressing room which by itself measured 25x19 feet with a large mirror inlaid into the door, Alexandra had another space set aside for storage: ‘Her Royal Highness’s wardrobe room – that indispensable adjunct of Royalty – is on the second floor over the kitchen; that of the Prince being on the other side of the house over the offices. Ordinary people’s garments can usually be stowed away in a comparatively small compass; but to be a Prince or Princess entails the possession of such a variety of State robes and uniforms that it is hardly surprising to find a large apartment devoted to the housing of them, with every imaginable contrivance for this purpose.’

Although dressers did not come from aristocratic backgrounds, their families were ‘good’ ones, known to the monarch through a network of trusted names and long-serving members of the household. The duties were arduous, remaining ‘on call’ before the Princess had risen for the day and only resting when she had retired for the night. Frieda Arnold, one of Queen Victoria’s dressers in the 1850s often recorded her weariness in letters home: ‘From early in the morning until late at night there are endless preparations to make and adornments for parties to help with, and my poor brain has to know weeks ahead on which day this or that ball, of this or that concert takes place, without my own feet ever dancing a step, or my own ears ever discerning a note of the beautiful music they play!’

Though the detail has survived outlining the daily duties of the dressers, information concerning the women themselves remains scant. Alexandra’s dressers are shadowy figures inhabiting the historical record fleetingly. Three names are known however: Bessie and Nettie Temple and Harriet Giltrap. The latter served Alexandra as dresser for almost forty years, taking up her post in 1886. Her name features frequently in the wardrobe accounts, her salary recorded in 1898 as £15 per quarter comprising wages and washing allowance. The centrality of the dresser’s position to the life of her royal mistress is perhaps what emerges most strongly in the brief glimpses gleaned from surviving sources.

Whilst dressers oversaw the maintenance of many of the more complex of the garments in Alexandra’s wardrobe, the accounts also show that the laundering and care of certain elements was outsourced to other establishments, either as part of a large scale laundry operation or because the object itself required specialist care. A royal laundry was purpose built by Prince Albert in 1846, situated at Kew Foot Road in Richmond. A recent conservation study of the area notes that: ‘The miniature train brought the Queen’s washing every day into Richmond Station from London, Windsor and Osborne House and all other royal households excluding Balmoral. It is claimed that 700,000 items a year or 1.5 tons of laundry a day were handled here.’ This laundry handled the linens of the royal family from bed linen to undergarments. The practice of laundry marking was a common one during the period, a number and set of initials being embroidered onto the object to identify ownership. Alexandra also had monogrammed articles of clothing and accessories such as chemises, camisoles, drawers and handkerchiefs as a means of identifying such generic items, examples of which still survive. Within her accounts there are also payments made to two other laundry firms – Rogers & Cook and Davis & Son. Whilst the royal laundry continued to service the royal household until its closure in the 1920s, it may have been more expedient to have another launderer located more centrally. Rogers & Cook were situated at 274 South Lambeth Road in a Georgian building which still stands today and so was much closer than the Richmond establishment.

At home in the capital, Alexandra had to be at her most accessible during the many evening entertainments undertaken during the London Season from May to August every year. From her twenties through to her sixties, Alexandra could not venture out for the evening without attracting the public gaze. The knowledge that she was under regular scrutiny would determine how as both Princess and Queen she would appear at evening entertainments. Even to define evenings out for her was more complex than it would have been for other members of society at that time and the degree of ‘eveningness’ could vary dependent on the occasion, the host and the location.

Evening entertainments for Alexandra in practical terms, meant hard work. Between April and July of 1875 *The Times* recorded 44 evenings out for the Princess of Wales covering dinners, concerts, dances and State Balls. Out of these 44, seven consisted of two or more entertainments on the same night in a different location and under the eye of a different host. A dress in the Liverpool collection appears to offer a solution to the multi-venue evening. This example, a creation of the Parisian house of Rouff, brings an altogether different dimension to Alexandra’s evening dress. Dating to 1895, it is fragmented having been unpicked at some point before its entry into the museum. However, its constituent parts have survived and reveal a surprising addition. Instead of one, there are two bodices. The practice of constructing two bodices to be worn at different times with the same skirt was not uncommon. Known as ‘transformation dress’, it was possible with one skirt to create two outfits suitable for different times of day. Often the transformation took the wearer from day to evening, with a long sleeved plain bodice for daywear and a low décolletage more decorative example for evening. In this case, the fabric and embellishment of the skirt precludes it being worn during the day. In spite of its fragmented condition, this dress offers a practical solution to an evening such as this, a high bodice with full elbow length sleeves being eminently suitable for early evening, theatre or dinner, whilst the alternate bodice of the same fabric and embellishment but with a lower décolleté and shorter sleeves would suit the later events such as the many balls attended by Alexandra throughout the London Season.

If managing a wardrobe at home was a complex affair then the organisation of it whilst travelling was yet more so. Consuelo Vanderbilt outlined in her autobiography the necessary garments for a country house visit: ‘To begin with, even breakfast, which was served at 9.30 in the dining room, demanded an elegant costume of velvet or silk. Having seen the men off to their sport, the ladies spent the morning round the fire reading the papers and gossiping. We next changed into tweeds to join the guns for luncheon, which was served in the High Lodge or in a tent. Afterwards we usually accompanied the guns and watched a drive or two before returning home. An elaborate tea gown was donned for tea, after which we played cards or listened to a Viennese band or to the organ until time to dress for dinner, when again we adorned ourselves in satin, or brocade, with a great display of jewels. All these changes necessitated a tremendous outlay, since one was not supposed to wear the same gown twice. That meant sixteen dresses for four days.’ That she has quantified these frequent changes of dress is instructive here. Sixteen dresses over a four day period with the addition of travelling garments, footwear, nightwear, underwear and accessories amounts to a sizeable volume for what was a relatively short period.

Since her reputation for shrewd dress choices followed her for decades, it is fair to assume that Alexandra too would have liaised with her dressers in the garment choices for such trips accounting for particular occasions, evening entertainments and seasonal requirements. Once such decisions had been made it was then left to the dressers to pack and eventually unpack, a duty that was the most tiring according to Frieda: ‘To arrive like that at a house where one’s only welcome is from endless boxes with still more endless contents to unpack is dreadful beyond description. Packing was a skill that some upper class women were prepared to pay for. A recent exhibition featuring the designers Louis Vuitton and Marc Jacobs explored Vuitton’s early career in Paris: ‘Louis Vuitton gained his experience in the art of packing by travelling to the homes of wealthy ladies where he was employed to pack their clothes before they embarked on long journeys’. There are no references in either Queen Alexandra’s wardrobe accounts or any surviving documentary material to suggest that she paid for her clothes to be packed for long journeys, but the length of the voyages and the separation of baggage and traveller meant that logistically this had to be carefully managed. The dressers had to be clear that they retained enough clothing for the days or weeks of travel whilst the bulk of the luggage was transported.

To conclude, it has become apparent during the course of research using both the garments themselves and the documentary evidence that Alexandra’s working wardrobe was an exemplar of late 19th century organisational skills, the strengths of those whose job it was to maintain such a wardrobe and the sartorial shrewdness of Alexandra herself. In the past dress history has been placed at the periphery of serious scholarship. This has been redressed in recent times thanks to the efforts of curators and academics in the field and in metaphorically unpicking the clothing of a figure such as Alexandra a rich contextualisation of manufacture, of people and their place in time has been realised.