**‘Think of me as I was now I am breaking up’ Queen Alexandra and the Art of Royal Camouflage 1863-1925**

In 1925 on the day of Queen Alexandra’s funeral, T E Lawrence recalled with sadness a short audience he had been ordered to attend some time before her death. He arrived in the hushed corridors of her London residence Marlborough House and wrote of it afterwards:

‘When we reached the presence, and I saw the mummied thing, the bird-like head cocked on one side, not artfully but by disease, the red-rimmed eyes, the enamelled face, which the famous smile scissored across all angular and heart-rending: - then I nearly ran away in pity. The body should not be kept alive after the lamp of sense has gone out. There were the ghosts of all her lovely airs, the little graces, the once-effective sway and movement of the figure which had been her consolation.’ This devastatingly honest portrait of the former Queen consort would have been one that she herself recognised, often referring to herself in later years as an ‘ugly old woman’ and imploring her friend Lord Knutsford to ‘think of me as I was now I am breaking up.’

Alexandra’s royal career had spanned more than sixty years at the time of her death, decades during which she had been feted as one of the beauties of her generation. Only after the death of her husband, King Edward VII, did she largely retreat from the public eye at the age of 66.

Married in 1863, the Prince and Princess of Wales had lived at the heart of London Society, darlings of the British aristocracy. Alexandra was a Danish Princess chosen by Queen Victoria to marry the wayward Prince of Wales in a bid to tame his wild ways. Aged 19, Alexandra married Edward on March 10 1863. Their marriage was not unproblematic. Edward proved to be a far from reliable husband, frequently embroiled in public scandal and private dalliance. In her day, Alexandra Princess of Wales was one of the most photographed women of her generation. She brought youth and beauty to the British Monarchy at a time when its popularity had waned. Queen Victoria had descended into perpetual mourning for her beloved Albert who had died after contracting typhoid fever in 1861. Her withdrawal from public life prompted a period of public dissatisfaction with an inaccessible monarch. In contrast, Alexandra’s appearance was frequently reported upon in the daily broadsheets and her sartorial choices regularly described by contemporary commentators The aim of my research has been to use surviving material culture to examine more closely a supposedly known biographical subject and to explore how these objects, in tandem with other historical sources, can add significantly to the historical record. In the 1997 exhibition In Royal Fashion, Kay Staniland articulated the impression that such survivals can make upon the modern observer: ‘it offers an actual contact with its original owner, an outer skin which is still strongly permeated with the bodily characteristics of that personality.’

The remaining threads of what was once a much larger working wardrobe now survive in ten different museums worldwide. Disparate and fragmented Alexandra’s clothing has become separated both geographically and contextually. Unlike some other collections of royal dress which have been collected in one place and form a more coherent grouping, Alexandra’s garments are random survivals and so have never been studied collectively before. In spite of the many biographies written about Alexandra, Princess of Wales and Queen Consort, all of which acknowledge the importance that dress played in her life, there has been no attempt until now to analyse those garments that have survived. Living much of her life in a public space either through her social and civic commitments or through photographs and press reports, she recognised from an early point in her royal career that the sartorial decisions she made were a crucial part of maintaining her public image. This self-awareness extended into an appreciation of herself as a royal body and for the rest of her public life she took great care to ensure that she clothed her body both to enhance accepted notions of ‘good taste’ but also to disguise elements of physical frailty. This paper will consider examples of these sartorial strategies which Alexandra as Princess of Wales and later Queen Consort employed.

Even before the marriage had taken place rumour abounded of a childhood illness which had left its mark upon the young Princess and briefly threw the future of the proposed union into doubt. The Crown Princess of Prussia – Queen Victoria’s eldest daughter – had been instructed to report back to her mother all details relating to the Danish princess Alexandra. In 1862 she referred to a small scar she had noticed on Alexandra’s neck which was suggested might have been caused by scrofula, a tuberculous infection of the lymph nodes. Fears of consumptive tendencies caused a brief period of concern but these proved groundless and she was reassured that the scar had been caused, somewhat mysteriously, by a neglected childhood cold. British monarchical paranoia surrounding inherited illness was hardly surprising. The madness of Queen Victoria’s great uncle, King George III and her own son Leopold’s haemophilia had provoked a degree of Royal sensitivity towards the robustness of those charged with continuing the royal line. What this episode taught the soon to be Princess of Wales from the outset however, was the importance of public perception. Never again did she appear in person, in portraiture or in photographs without her neck covered. Thus did she make her first strategic decisions whereby choice of dress and appearance was based on the need to disguise or divert attention from a perceived physical flaw. During the day, high necked blouses or a simple ribbon hid her neck from view and for evening functions where low décolleté necklines dominated, she created a craze for jewelled dog collars.

As Princess of Wales, Alexandra early gained a reputation for her appearance based upon astute assessments of the occasion and what was required in terms of tasteful dress. In an era dominated by a complex set of codified dress rules the Princess successfully negotiated the demands of etiquette. Concerns about her health during the first years of her marriage were apparently rife however. In spite of the many favourable press reports acknowledging her beauty, the Queen in private began to express concern over her daughter in law’s appearance. In March 1864, two months after the birth of Alexandra’s first child the Queen wrote to her Uncle, the King of Belgium: ‘Alix’s altered appearance is the observation of everyone.’ Another observer at Court noted that she was ‘terribly thin and pale’ and an American visitor recorded that ‘her shoulders are thin and her figure fragile...to me she wants some of the roast beef and ale of England to give her flesh’. Certainly Alexandra’s frame did not suit the British trend. Without exception all of her surviving garments attest to the slenderness of her body. The bodice of her wedding dress measures a mere 8 inches from seam to seam, effectively giving her a sixteen inch waist. And yet a court gown dating to 1903 when Queen Alexandra was 59 measures 9 inches from seam to seam, forty years and six pregnancies having altered her frame hardly at all. The evidence of the clothes themselves then, appears to confirm that rather than being indicative of an ailing body, Alexandra’s slimness was simply genetic. In fact her choice of day dress from the 1870s onwards served to emphasise her build. In a departure from prevailing trends, she took to daily wearing tailored yachting suits previously confined to the Cowes Week regatta on the Isle of Wight. These pared down suits, unembellished and beautifully cut accentuated her slim figure perhaps as a subtle rebuke to those who implied that her shape was indicative of poor health. Twenty years after her arrival in the UK, The Queen Lady’s Newspaper was still writing about her: ‘The Princess of Wales in the daytime wore nothing but exquisitely fitting tailormade costumes.’

On the contrary, evidence would suggest that during the first years of her marriage she demonstrated a robustness borne of a more informal childhood than that of her husband’s family. She famously cartwheeled down the corridor of Windsor Castle on her first visit there to the astonishment of her sisters-in-law to be and in 1869 during a visit to Egypt, an alarmed lady in waiting Mrs Grey recorded in her journal: ‘We found a donkey running about which was at once caught, and the Princess rode on it through the fields in the cleverest way without saddle or bridle.’

However an early and sadly prophetic letter from the Queen to her eldest daughter in May 1863 had hinted at future troubles for Alexandra. She described Alexandra thus: ‘Alas! She is deaf and everyone observes it, which is a sad misfortune.’ Alexandra had inherited from her mother the disease known as otosclerosis, a form of deafness exacerbated by illness or by pregnancy. It was following both illness and pregnancy in 1867 that Alexandra was struck by the debilitating condition with which she was afflicted for the rest of her life. Severe rheumatic fever after the birth of her daughter Louise was the catalyst of this decline. The episode had caused such public concern, so great was her popularity that Alexandra had a series of photographs taken during her convalescence. She was acutely aware of the public appetite for her image and so cartes de visites were issued depicting Alexandra in loose clothing and with her hair worn down. It was a startlingly intimate image that sold in its millions. As she regained her strength a second photograph appeared; a playful princess carrying her young child on her back. This image alone sold more than any other popular photograph before, testament both to the esteem in which she was held by the British public but also her own astuteness in sharing such intimate portraits so widely.

On a daily basis she coped remarkably well Lord Esher remarking that in spite of her deafness ‘she says more original things and has more unexpected ideas than any other member of the family’. Large evening functions were a trial however. She wrote a grateful letter to her daughter in law after one such occasion: ‘You, my sweet May are always so dear and nice to me and whenever I am not quite au fait because of my beastly ears you always by a word or even a turn towards me make me understand.’ As the deafness worsened she adopted a practical strategy in her approach to these larger, formal occasions. The extensive photographic record shows that in private and during the day, Alexandra dressed relatively simply. The extant garments that largely fit into the category of formal, public dress reveal an altogether less subtle tactic. Without exception they glitter, profuse in metallic embellishment. Bound up within this chosen dress code are undoubtedly her own notions of majesty and regal splendour but more pragmatically the overt display of the dress deflected attention from her physical failings. Towards the very end of her life when her public appearances were few and far between, Alexandra extended the wear of these glittering garments into daytime engagements, a habit remarked upon by Cecil Beaton in his memoir Glass of Fashion. He wrote: ‘These were clothes which most women would have worn at night, but the fact that she wore them during the day removed her from reality and only helped to increase the aura of distance that one associates with the court.’ However, Alexandra’s motives arguably sprang from her desire to dazzle, to deflect the observer’s attention away from the vicissitudes of age, hiding that ‘ugly old woman’ as she described herself behind her spangled clothing.

The rheumatic fever of 1867 which had robbed Alexandra of her hearing, had caused yet more permanent impairment. She was left for a time with a completely stiff and painful knee, still only able to walk with two sticks nine months after the first attack. The stiffness remained and she was to walk with a limp thereafter. Briefly her gait became a social sensation as she developed a way to move that circumvented her disability. The Alexandra limp was copied by Society ladies for a time in the ball rooms of London and the Princess of Wales herself maintained her former activity – skating, riding and dancing. There were to be long term health implications to this early illness however which only came to light after close analysis of another of her garments. A court gown now in the collections of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto features a distinctive iris motif across both the bodice and skirt. Photographing the reverse of the bodice two of these iris motifs at the centre back appeared to sit incorrectly. They just did not match up. By chance an email the next day from an American curator revealed the reason. Many of Alexandra’s surviving evening gowns are now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and whilst mounting some of these dresses she made the following observation which she recalled to me in her message: ‘the dresses belonging to Alexandra at the MMA indicate that she had some curvature of the spine – the center back is not straight or symmetrical, as I recall, and there was much talk about it when we did "La Belle Epoque." Exhibition’. Based upon this new information, rather than demonstrating some failing on the part of the couturier, the iris motifs were actually cleverly placed so that once they were worn by the Queen the curve of her spine presumably ensured that the flowers sat symmetrically, thus disguising the deformity. This feature of her spine was never recorded by any of Alexandra’s biographers who presumably had no idea that the permanency of her limp had in all likelihood resulted in the damage to her spine. It is only through studying the material culture that such a significant aspect of her physicality is revealed.

At the end of her life, aged 80, Alexandra was partially blind, profoundly deaf and had retreated almost completely from public view. Her wardrobe accounts reveal that in the last years of her life she spent almost nothing on clothes, her inclination to present any kind of public persona long put aside. But for half a century at the heart of Society and the increasingly sophisticated media that followed it, she negotiated her way through sickness, permanent disability and sensory impairment. Her clothed body and the sartorial strategies she adopted were significant factors in maintaining her enormous popularity.