Rediscovering Queen Alexandra's Wardrobe: The Challenges and Rewards of Object-Based Research.

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Alexandra, born a princess of Denmark, married Queen Victoria's eldest son Edward, Prince of Wales, in 1863. She became an iconic Princess of Wales whose position was central to the reinvigoration of the British monarchy in the second half of the nineteenth century. She was not permitted a public voice and so used dress instead as a means of controlling perceptions of her royal self. Aware of the growing influence of the media, Alexandra was able to maintain immense popularity, arguably through the positive image generated through her physical appearance. This article, part of a wider study into the clothing practices of Alexandra of Denmark, takes three prominent surviving garments from her wardrobe and applies an object-based methodology to life writing, offering a biography of both the person and the clothes she inhabited. This multi-disciplinarity between object and text creates a discourse that highlights both the value of material culture but also the challenges faced for the researcher in this context.

For over half a century, Alexandra of Denmark, Princess of Wales, and from 1902 Queen-Consort, reigned as one of the most stylish women in Britain. From her twenties to her matriarchal sixties, Alexandra's legacy has been defined through dress (Figure 6.1). This article examines how surviving garments associated with a single royal figure can be 'read' in a methodological sense and how object-based analysis can both enhance and debunk long accepted mythologies that might be associated with existing life writings concerning that figure. Traditionally, life writing has tended towards the textual, and surviving material culture is used aesthetically rather than

analytically. I shall map out this object-led methodology, using case studies of some of Queen Alexandra's most significant surviving garments as an exemplar of the merits of an approach that has arguably been neglected by historians.

Life Writing and Biography

There is no dearth of published biographies about Alexandra. Not only were there several accounts written in her lifetime, but others appeared soon after her death and more followed over the course of the twentieth century.[2] Whilst her appearance and often certain dresses that she wore to particular events are noted in each, there was never a detailed analysis of how she dressed, why she dressed as she did and the wider impact of her choice of dress. The chance to assess material objects alongside the rich textual record in what is very much a multi-disciplinary approach is still relatively new. In 1998 Valerie Steele wrote:

> 'Because intellectuals live by the word, many scholars tend to ignore the important role that objects can play in the creation of knowledge. Even many fashion historians spend little or no time examining actual garments, preferring to rely exclusively on written sources and visual representations.'[3]

The inclusion of the object can be a significant moment – one that Jill Lepore discovered when researching the life of the American scholar Noah Webster.

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[2] Sarah Tooley, *The Life of Queen Alexandra*, (Hodder & Stoughton 1902); Georgina Battiscombe, *Queen Alexandra*, (Sphere Books, 1972); David Duff, *Alexandra Princess and Queen*, (William Collins Sons & Co, 1980)

[3] Valerie Steele, 'A Museum of Fashion is More Than a Clothes Bag', *Fashion Theory*, Vol.2 Issue 4 (1998), p327.

Amongst his family papers in the Amherst College Library, she discovered an envelope containing a lock of Webster's hair: 'That lifeless, limp hair had spent decades in an envelope, in a folder, in a box, on a shelf, but holding it in the palm of my hand made me feel an eerie intimacy with Noah himself. And, against all logic, it made me feel as though I knew him – and, even less logically, *liked* him – just a bit better.'[4]

Researching Queen Alexandra's life through dress is biographical, although neither dress nor biography alone can cover the entirety of the life in question. In what follows, the extant garments guide the biographical framework so that it becomes simultaneously a biography of the objects themselves. A micro-historical analysis of the person and her clothing reveals the layers of social and cultural complexity involved in the managed appearance of a royal public figure.

Both during her lifetime, very shortly after her death and in more recent decades there have been volumes dedicated to Alexandra either as an individual or in partnership with Edward. The more carefree childhood that she enjoyed sits in stark contrast to the rigidity of Edward's upbringing, although her Danish roots were to be the subject of great anxiety to Queen Victoria who wrote to her eldest daughter: 'Your account of the family is certainly as bad as possible' whilst the marriage negotiations were underway.[5] Following their marriage she was to be subsumed by the British establishment, and expected to lay aside to some degree her own national identity.

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[4] Jill Lepore, 'Historians Who Love Too Much – Reflections on Microhistory and Biography', *The Journal of American History*, 88/1 (2001), p129
[5] Roger Fulford, *Dearest Mama: Letters Between Queen Victoria and the Crown Princess of Prussia 1861-1864*, (Evans 1968), p53

The early years of the royal marriage, so scrutinised by Queen Victoria, the British press and the public alike, lived up to expectations. In spite of the Queen's disquiet relating to the social whirl into which Edward and Alexandra threw themselves, the young couple quickly produced an heir and proceeded to enchant the nation with their own brand of visible, glittering monarchy which had been denied the British public following the death of the Prince Consort in 1861. However, Edward's propensity towards boredom and a desire to be constantly entertained in lieu of having to perform a more responsible role was to test both his marriage and his relationship with his subjects.[6] In particular, the scandals that dogged the Prince of Wales from the late 1860s onwards, along with the string of mistresses left in his wake, sufficiently dispelled the earlier myths of an enduring love match.

From the 1870s, after her childbearing years were over, the Princess of Wales coped with loss frequently – loss of her hearing, loss of mobility following a debilitating bout of rheumatic fever. She suffered the loss of an idealized marriage. She suffered the loss of family members from whom she was geographically distant and then the loss of her son Albert Victor, only a month after his engagement to Princess Victoria Mary ('May') of Teck.[7] Throughout, she maintained her high profile public life, attending civic events, society entertainments, travelling in the United Kingdom and abroad. For the almost forty years that she was the Princess of Wales she coupled this loss and disappointment with a busy ca9lendar of social diversions and monarchical duty. Following Queen Victoria's death in 1901, the new Queen Alexandra largely continued to be both entertaining and dutiful but with a newly regal edge. Edward

[6] Jane Ridley, *Bertie A Life of Edward VII*, (Chatto & Windus 2012), pp58, 125, 134, 149
[7] David Duff, *Alexandra Princess and Queen*, (William Collins Sons & Co 1980), pp183-4

took to kingship in a surprisingly effective manner with Alexandra as his majestic companion. Their relationship had reached so amenable a place that Alexandra felt able not only to acknowledge but to joke about his mistresses.[8] We cannot know if such levity masked a continuing pain at his infidelity, but accounts do seem to support a mutual understanding by the early twentieth century.[9] Even in their sixties, the couple still maintained a relentless schedule, until Edward's death in 1910.

Although Alexandra did not play an important political or diplomatic role in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it could be argued that without her the republican movement that had been growing ever stronger in the early 1860s would have flourished and gained a greater foothold in Britain. In 1862 Queen Victoria was widely criticized for the perceived abandonment of her post. Plunkett asserts: 'With the growing dissent in the 1860s over Victoria's continued seclusion, Disraeli and Gladstone both emphasised the importance of monarchy continuing to have a public face.'[10] Alexandra's admittance into this inner circle of monarchy achieved this and breathed new life into the institution. As the epitome of a 'princess' her shrewd clothing choices meant that she was both regal as the event required, or through a general conformity of style she made herself more available as a public figure in a way that Victoria had ceased to be. In a sense Alexandra engaged with the artifice of dress as explored by Joanne Entwistle: 'Public roles as performances put a discreet distance between self and 'other' and between public and private life.'[11] She used her

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[8] David Duff, *Alexandra Princess and Queen*, (William Collins Sons & Co 1980) p202
[9] Richard Hough, *Edward and Alexandra*, (Hodder & Stoughton 1992), p225; Georgina Battiscombe, *Queen Alexandra*, (Sphere Books 1972), p198.
[10] John Plunkett, *Queen Victoria: First Media Monarch*, (Oxford University Press 2003), p55
[11] Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory*, (Polity Press 2000), p118

clothing, judged on the merits of any given event or time of day, to both fit into upper class Britain but to simultaneously stand out as a prominent public figure. It is easy now to be dismissive of so apparently passive a figure – but her role was arguably multi-faceted. Civic duties brought her to the people and served to enhance her popularity. Philanthropic work and charitable causes raised awareness of areas of need. Her role was not about challenging the status quo – her position did not allow hugely reformative acts – but she did support causes and thus make a contribution towards societal improvement.

Reading the Garments

Tensions within the field of dress history have, in the past, often been divided between those working with objects such as museum curators and the archive based historian working from texts. It was a gulf labelled 'The Great Divide' by Professor Lou Taylor at the seminal conference *Dress in History: Studies and Approaches*, held in Manchester in 1997: 'Surviving clothing provides researchers and collectors with a powerful tool for historical and contemporary socio-cultural investigation. Yet its use has been bedevilled by a divide of approach that has dogged the study of the history of dress since it emerged over four hundred years ago.'[12] She moves on to applaud the more recent emergence of multi-disciplinary approaches, witnessing a fusion of object and archive. Even many fashion historians spend little or no time examining actual garments, preferring to rely exclusively on written sources and visual representations. John Styles makes the important distinction between dress history and dress *in* history, what he terms: 'the difficulties, conceptual and methodological,

[12] Lou Taylor, 'Doing the Laundry? A Reassessment of Object-based Dress History', *Fashion Theory*, Vol 2 Issue 4, (1998), p. 338.

of reinserting dress into history.'[13] Styles asserts that the emergence of dress history into the academy only really took place from the 1970s: 'The reasons of this blossoming are many and various, but three important sources of intellectual nourishment stand out. First, the rise of feminist historical scholarship. Second the emergence of cultural studies, and third the shift in interest across the social sciences from production to consumption.'[14] Styles also makes a strong case for the diversity of historical study to embed the object into the methodologies of historians, thus reinstating dress into history.

Many of the garments that survive do so thanks to members of Alexandra's household. She gifted garments to the women in her service who handed them down to family members and ultimately these pieces were donated to museums by their descendants.

The primary aim of my research was to repopulate Alexandra's wardrobe, bringing together those garments to have survived from a number of institutions around the world.[16] Thus the primary thread of methodology connecting each section of the research was the central position of the material culture. Mida and Kim suggest that: 'Dress artifacts are unique, embodying the haptic qualities of cloth, the aesthetic and structural qualities unique to fashion, the traces of the person that used and wore the

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[13] John Styles, 'Dress in History: Reflections on a Contested Terrain' in *Fashion Theory*, Vol.2, Issue 4, (1998), p. 383.
[14] John Styles , p. 385.
[16] This doctoral project, completed in 2013, was published in 2017 as Kate Strasdin, *Inside the Royal Wardrobe - A Dress History of Queen Alexandra* (Bloomsbury, 2017).

garment, as well as aspects related to its production and distribution.'[17] The objects lay at the heart of the investigation. They informed the wider historiographical record in a way that no biography has attempted. This is, however, no easy process. The British monarchy did not begin to consciously collect royal clothing until the early twentieth century, when Queen Mary began to collaborate with the then London Museum, now the Museum of London.[18] The monarchy in Sweden, by contrast, kept garments associated with the monarch and the wider royal family from the seventeenth century; detailed records and garments demonstrating royal sartorial history thus survive in a single location, the Livrustkammer.[19]

From the very outset the intention to find and record the garments once associated with Queen Alexandra was beset with difficulty. To date I have found upwards of 130 surviving objects located in fifteen different museums in seven different countries.[20] Some garments are well recorded in collections such as the Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection, curated by Historic Royal Palaces, but there are many more in obscure locations. Whilst certain institutions had a clear and obvious royal association, other collections might only contain one or two pieces.[21] Studying Alexandra's surviving clothing differs from other object-based studies projects in that the objects are widely geographically dispersed. Rather than forming one, consciously collected group of

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[17] Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim, *The Dress Detective*, (Bloomsbury 2015), p22
[18] Kay Staniland, *In Royal Fashion*, (Museum of London 1997), p15
[19] Livrustkammer Museum, http://livrustkammaren.se/en/explore/collections
[20] The list is by no means definitive. I am certain there are other garments associated with Queen Alexandra that I have yet to discover, either in private collections or smaller institutions.
[21] The Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection based in Kensington Palace, London was an obvious place to start; the Museum of Fine Art in Boston, in contrast, was a less obvious location, and I only discovered they had a dress of Alexandra's after I made a general enquiry to many American collections that housed textiles and dress. [I would delete this footnote—it doesn't really add much—instead, a more relevant bit of info would be something like "the Kensington Collection has X number of dresses, while X has only X"]

garments, the items that have survived are random, accidental survivals with a variety of provenances ranging from auctions to gifts and from donors as diverse as the descendants of royal launderers and dressers to a 1950s band leader.[23]

If access is possible and the objects are available for study, a different challenge is encountered. Textiles, unlike many other material survivals, are subject to change, through decay or alteration, and therefore misinterpretation. It is vital to acknowledge that which is missing as well as the material culture that has survived. Only a fraction of what was a much more extensive working wardrobe has remained extant.[24] As Glenn Adamson points out: 'One of the key problems in the study of material culture is the phenomenon of loss. Indeed, when it comes to the material past, disappearance is the norm and preservation is the exception.'[25]

The 'reading' of a garment in the context of a dress collection is thus no easy feat. In the case of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century garments, size is often a consideration. The skirts of Victorian and Edwardian dresses, for example, are extremely large and not all museums can accommodate their study very easily, and in a number of cases the measuring and analysis of certain larger garments had to be undertaken whilst they remained partially in their storage box.[26] This was the case with both Alexandra's wedding dress and her coronation gown. The handling of

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[23] This last was the band leader Jack Hylton who sold one of Queen Alexandra's dresses at auction in the early 1940s to raise money for the war effort. How he came to be in possession of one of her court gowns remains a mystery

[24] =Few of Alexandra's garments have been properly mounted or photographed, hence the absence of photographed objects in this article.

[25] Glenn Adamson, 'The Case of the Missing Footstool: Reading the Absent Object', Harvey (ed), *History and Material Culture*, (Routledge 2009), p192

[26] The handling of historic textiles is governed by a strict code of practice. ICOM – The International Council for Museums has a series of guidelines for the care and preservation of textile collections: http://network.icom.museum/fileadmin/user_upload/minisites/costume/pdf/guidelines_english.pdf [Accessed 14.5.19]

textiles is also very carefully monitored, so a garment cannot always be viewed from as many angles as the researcher may like. In a sense then, only a partial view of the garment is offered up for study in a flat, two dimensional context. Rarely are the garments in a position to be mounted onto a dress form, though the effect of such display can make an enormous difference to the interpretation of the object. Kaye Staniland reflected upon this when mounting an exhibition of royal dress: 'once the dresses were properly mounted on their specially sculpted figures for photography they sprang to life in the most remarkable way, transformed from limp garments on hangers into utterly distinct personalities with commanding presences.'[27] The researcher of dress in the museum setting does not often 'see' the clothes in this context.[28]

The recording of the object also requires care. Measurements are always taken if the condition of the textile allows, but fragility is a factor.[29] The idiosyncrasy of museum record keeping must also be negotiated – it is not always clear from records what the exact provenance or date of the garment is and so flounces, pleats, buttons and bows have an important part to play in the identification of a garment. In some cases the function of the garment itself is not always clear, making the task of the researcher more challenging still. Thus the information that may be locked within the material remains of the clothing does not yield itself easily.

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[27] Kay Staniland, *In Royal Fashion*, (Museum of London Publications 1997), p.7

[28] Only once throughout the course of this project was I able to view an object of Alexandra's at first hand both flat and then later mounted. This was a yachting jacket now in the collection of the Fashion Museum, Bath, which I first examined lying flat on a study table but which was later mounted for a sportswear exhibition. The difference was enormous, the shaping of the body beneath making a vast difference to the appearance of the object.

[29] Late Victorian silk for clothing was tin-weighted, a chemical treatment applied to the fabric in order to create a rustling texture but which subsequently causes shattering to the silk especially in areas of wear such as under the arm and at the waistband. The weight of embellishments can also jeopardise the integrity of the foundation and thus recording becomes problematic.

The rewards, however, are great. In addition to the very real value of a virtual reassembling of this wardrobe, an object-led study can yield significant results that other solely text based studies do not. There are examples amongst this collection of objects where the written biography of Alexandra has either delivered certain facts as incontrovertible, which an analysis of her clothing then refutes, or where the biography simply misses out on information only able to be envisioned through the material culture. Since so much of what can be visualized of Alexandra in images in existing biographies is in black and white, the garments offer the chance to experience her in glorious technicolour. The different hues of her clothing as well as the workmanship, manifestation of alterations and change over time cannot be experienced in any other way other than via the object itself. The corporeality of a garment thus reveals much about the physicality of its owner and in the case of so high profile a consumer, an analysis of taste, choice, colour preferences and style which no monochromatic image or written text can.

Case Studies: Wedding, Coronation and Court

The manifestation of this process and the successes that can result from this approach are exemplified here in the following case studies of three of Alexandra's surviving garments. Two of them – the wedding dress and the Coronation dress – were widely reported upon by both contemporary observers and subsequent biographers and yet in each instance, close interrogation of the garment revealed previously untold parts of the story, what we might call hidden moments in history. While all three garments are formal high status garments and so not reflective of the 'everyday' in Alexandra's

wardrobe, they were selected for this piece because of the more complete historical record that they inhabit, including written accounts, portraits and business records.

The Wedding Dress

Edward and Alexandra announced their engagement in November 1862, leaving only four months for the completing of Alexandra's trousseau and wedding dress. (Figure 6.2). Alexandra's wedding dress was contemporarily described by the usually waspish diarist Lady Geraldine Somerset as: '...très bon gout, light, young and royal...'.[33] Today its description is more problematic. Within days of the wedding, the dress was given over to the dressmaker Madame Elise to be made over into an evening dress – most probably as a means of enlarging the Princess's small trousseau. When William Frith, who had been commissioned to paint the official portrait of the ceremony asked to see the dress in order to paint it he was informed that it had already been cut up and altered. Mrs Bruce, Woman of the Bedchamber to the new Princess of Wales, reassured Frith that: 'Dresser promised to send you all she could.'[34]

In its current incarnation the wedding dress consists of a bodice and separate skirt.[35] Made from ivory silk, the fabric of both is woven with a silver weft and the original was covered in swathes of Honiton bobbin lace. The bodice still has flounces of the original Honiton lace attached to it but the skirt is plain, the large lace flounces having been removed and stored separately. The effect now, even after more than 150 years of tarnishing, is of sparkling splendour. This detail was impossible to see in the black and white photography of the nineteenth century or in the line drawings created for

[33] Geraldine Somerset, un-catalogued diary, The Royal Archive, Windsor
[34] Jeremy Maas, *The Prince of Wales's Wedding*, (Cameron & Taylor 1977), p64
[35] Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection, Historic Royal Palaces

the illustrated editions of the press although William Powell Frith's canvas commissioned by Queen Victoria did convey some of its impact (Figure 6.3). The shine remains, and when new, must have glittered. Small though this detail may seem, the fabric literally illuminated the young bride.

The path to the creation of Alexandra's lace covered wedding dress was not without issue. Arch and Marschner note: 'Princess Alexandra, who had been given a beautiful dress of Brussels lace by King Leopold of the Belgians as a wedding present, found it was considered quite inappropriate for use as a wedding dress.'[36] Whilst Alexandra very much favoured the dress of European lace, it was Queen Victoria's decision that the dress should be of British manufacture and so Leopold's dress was not the wedding gown which Alexandra wore on 10 March 1863. Instead, the dress of English silk was made by the popular dressmaker Mrs James of Hanover Square, and the yards of handmade lace originated from the workshops of the Tucker family in east Devon. Honiton lace was the finest English equivalent of Brussels bobbin lace and was constructed in small 'sprigs, in the cottages of lacemakers.[37] These sprigs were then joined together and bleached to form the large white flounces that were so sought after in the mid-nineteenth century. The designer of Alexandra's wedding lace was a young woman named Mary Tucker, daughter of the same prominent lace dealer in Devon. On 28 February Mary's cousin William, agent for the family business in London, wrote: 'I have yours of the 27th inst and the box with Royal Lace in to hand and I think looking most beautiful and I hope with you will give satisfaction indeed I

[36] Nigel Arch and Joanna Marschner, *Royal Wedding Dresses*, (Historic Royal Palaces 2003), p. 10.
[37] Margaret Tomlinson, *Three Generations in the Honiton Lace Trade: A Family History*, self – published, 1983.

do not see how it can do otherwise.'[38] The lace was to be the most decorative and obvious feature of the dress as it appeared in St George's Chapel on the wedding day, the motifs incorporating symbols of national identity, roses, shamrocks and thistles woven into intricate cornucopias. Its silhouette deviated from convention, rejecting the large bell shaped skirts of the mid-1860s and opting instead for a slimmer shape, albeit one covered in a profusion of lace. This then, was the dress so promptly remodelled after the ceremony, much to Mr Frith's frustration.

The opportunity to study the garment in detail, taking a forensic approach to its analysis, generated some unexpected results. One of the most interesting features of the remodelled skirt as it exists now was found hidden, surreptitiously it seemed, attached to the lining. A broad band of roughly cut lace had been attached to the centre front interior lining of the skirt. It was not a length of the Honiton lace which was so profuse elsewhere on the dress, but was rather a band of fine Brussels lace, distinct by its stylised flower motifs. Its position means that it serves no functional purpose and is hidden from view. It is tempting to speculate that this lace may be associated with the sumptuous lace dress given to Alexandra as a wedding present from Leopold, but forbidden as a wedding gown in her new home. If so, its inclusion here concealed from sight might hint at a little subversiveness, that hidden beneath the tiers of British lace there lay a piece of mainland Europe – not Danish but certainly not British either - and so possibly a very attractive detail to the young Princess as a means of asserting her own agency, entirely private through that act was.[39] It is

[38] Letter from W Wills to Mary Tucker, Devon Record Office, 1037M/F2/1
[39] These subtle acts acknowledging her Danish identity might include her forty-year correspondence with her sister Dagmar, Tsarina Maria Feodorovna of Russia, which is written entirely in Danish. Whenever the two sisters met in the 1870s, they dressed entirely alike. [citation needed]

impossible to verify that the case of the hidden lace was a subversive act on Alexandra's part. But, it is one interpretation only made available through a close engagement with the material culture itself. Neither contemporary descriptions nor wedding photographs or portraits could reveal so small, yet so interesting a detail. Thus, in spite of the many familiar images of the wedding day and the dress itself and the extent to which the garment was already 'known', its analysis at first hand 'told' more.

From the outset, Queen Victoria forbade any Danish distractions for Alexandra. She was not allowed a Danish lady-in-waiting and from a sartorial perspective she was expected to buy and wear British goods at every possible opportunity.[40] Victoria feared that Paris would turn her daughter-in-law's head when she stressed in a letter of 1869 prior to her visit to France with the Prince of Wales: 'Pray, dear children, let it be your earnest desire not to vie in dear Alix's dressing with the fine London Ladies, but rather to be as *different as possible by great simplicity* which is more elegant.'[41] It was widely reported throughout Alexandra's married life, that she acquired her garments in Britain, eschewing the fashions of France.[42] However, a survey of Alexandra's surviving gowns reveal that this was far from the case. As the nineteen-year-old bride grew into a more confident wife and mother, she bought all of her occasion wear in Paris, whilst sourcing her tailoring from Britain. This was a detail only revealed by examining the waist tapes of the garments with their elaborate calligraphy giving the name and address of the couture house from which the garment

[40] Jane Ridley, *Bertie: Alife of Edward VII*, (Chatto & Windus 2012), p118
[41] Letter from Queen Alexandra to her son Edward, Royal Archive, Windsor, RA/Z/449/51
[42] Valerie Cumming, *Royal Dress*, (Batsford 1989), p132; Anon, *The Woman and Home*, (1895), p16.

originated, fashion houses such as Morin Blossier, Douillet, Madame Duboc, and Henriette Favre This is a fact that was not acknowledged by either the contemporary press or Alexandra's biographers, all of whom attested to her patriotic consumerism of British dress.[43]

The Coronation Gown

Where Alexandra's wedding dress shimmered in silver, so the coronation gown almost forty years later dazzled in gold (Figure 6.4). It is, in a sense, less complex as a garment compared to the wedding dress, in so much that it is unaltered and so its composition now is just as it featured in the many contemporary photographs capturing the occasion and the appearance of the new Queen. The most dazzling contemporary depiction of it exists in the form of the Luke Fildes portrait, commissioned by King Edward VII following his coronation (Figure 6.5). The dress is now part of the Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection[44]. It is unable to be exhibited owing to its current fragility and this makes its analysis problematic. I studied the dress within its large archive box and moving it was not permitted. Owing to its fragility there are no photographs in the public domain of the garment on display or even lying flat, so it is impossible to offer an image here for comparison. This is another of the challenges faced when using large textiles as a resource.

Consisting of a separate bodice and skirt, the dress is made from a heavy and plain gold silk gauze. This is overlaid with a layer of silk net, across which are sewn

[43] It is possible that Alexandra's patterns of consumption may have been influenced by the worsening relations between Britain and Denmark during the 1860s but there is no actual written evidence I have found to support this theory.
[44] Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection, Historic Royal Palaces, 1994.212/1-2

thousands of round gold spangles at regular intervals. Close scrutiny of the coronation gown suggests again conclusions that would otherwise be impossible were it not for the survival of the garment itself. Whilst photography progressed enormously in the years between Alexandra's wedding and her coronation, still the black and white images, detailed and numerous though they are, fail to convey the garment and its impact. Three elements of the gown most immediately apparent are the long oversleeves, the wired collar and the colour. The overarching effect of each of these elements is pure drama. The sheer abundance of gold from the gold spangles, embroidery and lace trim on the overdress and the more sombre gold of the underdress is impressive even now, lying flat and two dimensional in a garment box over a hundred years after the event.

The profusion of gold was no accident, since Alexandra and Edward had arranged for elements of the ceremony, imbued with all the traditions of monarchy, to also reflect a flash of modernity. Electric lighting was installed in Westminster Abbey for the first time in its history, so that these lights could be switched on over her golden ensemble at the moment of her entry. A journalist recording his observations for the New York Times wrote: '...when the tottering Primate, who almost fainted in the act, placed the diadem on the head of him whom he had just anointed in the name of the Lord...electric lights suddenly blazed in the sanctuary behind which the bones of St Edward repose.'[45]

[45] EAD, New York Times, 10 August 1902, np

In 1902 Alexandra was in her mid-sixties, a detail that has been studiously ignored by both Luke Fildes in his celebratory canvas and eradicated by the studio photographers. Professional retouchers were employed by studios who worked on the original negative plates using either chemical solutions or pencils to smooth skin tones and enhance silhouettes. By the 1880s Linkman notes: 'The majority of commercial operators, unencumbered by any concern for their artistic reputations, embraced retouching with enthusiasm.'[46] No longer the youthful Princess, she chose her ensemble carefully to create a diversion from the realities of age. Commentators variously described her as a fairy queen and an illuminated princess – descriptions that are rooted in the sparkle of the garment, aided, no doubt, by the electric lighting.[47] Alexandra was also, by this point, profoundly deaf and such a dramatic garment must have provided a measure of deflection from her physicality – a sartorial armour protecting her from the inquisitive public gaze.

Whilst her deafness was known amongst her peers, she nonetheless dreaded public occasions, writing to her daughter-in-law Mary: 'You my sweet May are always so dear & nice to me - & whenever I am not quite au fait on account of my beastly ears you always by a word or even by a turn towards me make me understand.'[48] A detailed study of all of Alexandra's surviving court gowns that date to the Coronation and afterwards demonstrate a marked shift in aesthetic to those pre-1901 – all are heavily embellished and it is possible to speculate that the overall aesthetic did offer her a regal protection from unwanted conversation.

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[46] Audrey Linkman, *The Victorians: Photographic Portraits* (Tauris Parks, 1993) p. 81
[47] Consuelo Vanderbilt Balsan, *The Glitter and the Gold*, (George Mann, 1973), p132; Lady Mary Meynell, *Sunshine and Shadows*, (John Murrary, 1933), p119
[48] Cited in James Pope-Hennessy, *Queen Mary* (George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1959) p328

It was this choice of gown and robes which would mark the significance of the Coronation day, both in the eyes of Alexandra herself and those of the many spectators expecting all of the pageantry and splendour. Highly ritualistic garments were traditionally worn by the monarch only, clothing invested with meaning for different parts of the ceremony leading up to the anointing. From the simplicity of the linen colobium sindonis to the more ornate dalmatica and supertunica, these represented the sartorial evolution of the coronation ceremony over centuries.[49] Edward wore all of these at the appropriate point in the ceremony, though for his Coronation portrait by Luke Fildes, he wore the scarlet tunic of a British General. Although traditionally the clothes worn by the consort were not supposed to make a ceremonial contribution to the occasion, Alexandra intended to ensure that her own appearance mirrored in splendour that of her husband. It is through the detailed planning of these garments – the velvet coronation robe and the gown – that the degree of Alexandra's agency was revealed. The velvet robe was composed of a variety of structural elements. The maker is given as Ede & Ravenscroft and they did indeed conduct the making up of the robe, but this belies the more complex story behind the hand stitching.

The design, incorporating nationally symbolic emblems was conceived, at the request of Alexandra, by Frederick Vigers, a designer prominent in the arts and crafts movement who occasionally drew textile designs for Warners in Braintree, the same

[49] See Kay Staniland, in *Royal Fashion* (Museum of London, 1997) for a more detailed analysis of garments from the previous Coronation, that of Queen Victoria in 1837 and Roy Strong, *Coronation*, (Harper Perennial 2006)

firm responsible for the weaving of the gold borders appliqued to Queen Alexandra's velvet robe.[50] The design itself was not uncontroversial. Zillah Halls points out:

> As Queen Consort, not Queen of England in her own right, the Queen was not strictly speaking supposed to have all the Royal emblems on her robe – for instance the Crown and the Star: she desired them however and the design incorporating them all was drawn by Mr Frederick Vigers, and executed by the Ladies' Work Society.'[51]

The liberal scattering of gold embroidered crowns across the surface of the robe, which are more ornate than other coronation robes in the Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection, bear more than a passing resemblance to the decorative tradition of Danish coronation robes. Stylistically this meant embellishment with many crowns, the lavishness of which becomes apparent when the garment is studied at first hand. The Danish custom was to wear: 'velours de soie rouge, entièrement brodé de motifs de couronnes d'or' [red silk velvet covered entirely with embroidered gold crowns].[52] Perhaps for the first time now that her position had changed, Alexandra felt able to incorporate an element of her own cultural heritage into the garments which held such spiritual significance for her, the chance to openly pay her respects to the country of her birth and acknowledge her cultural antecedents through dress.

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[50] Zillah Halls, *Coronation Costume 1685-1953*, (London Museum 1973), p53
[51] Zillah Halls, *Coronation Costume 1685-1953*, (London Museum 1973), p53
[52] Katia Johansen, 'Magnificence des Rois Danois: Costumes de Couronnement et Habits de Chevaliers', Pierre Arizzoli-Clémentel & Pascale Gorguet Ballesteros, *Fastes de Cour et Ceremonies Royales*, (Musées Nationaux 2009), p140

Alexandra had made very few overt sartorial statements pertaining to her nationality for as long as Queen Victoria was alive. Victoria's expectation from the start appears to have been that the new Princess of Wales would be subsumed by British culture, something which, outwardly at least, Alexandra appeared to do. She did wear a red and white dress for the wedding of her brother-in-law Prince Alfred in Russia in 1874, but this was worn at some distance from the Queen.[53] After years of outwardly championing British wares, and bearing British emblems, the decorative influences on the robe of her Coronation could at last celebrate Denmark.

Court Gown

There was a duality to Alexandra's public appearance that suggests different sartorial motives were at play, certainly later in her royal career. At the same time as displaying her royal self in body conscious ensembles such as the early twentieth-century court gown shown in Figure 6.6, she had also to conceal it as the evidence from another particular dress reveals. A serious bout of rheumatic fever Alexandra had suffered in 1867 not only robbed her of her hearing but caused a more significant impairment. She was left for the rest of her life with a 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.[54] The Alexandra limp was copied for a time by society ladies in the ball rooms of London although the Princess of Wales herself was able to maintain her former activity – skating, riding and dancing. There were to be even longer-term health implications for this early

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[53] Full length sketch of Alexandra Princess of Wales by Nicholas Chevalier shows this garment of Danish colours, Royal Collection Trust, RCIN 926235

[54] Georgina Battiscombe, *Queen Alexandra*, (Sphere Books, 1972), p92

illness, however, which only comes to light after close analysis of another of her garments.

A court gown, now in the collections of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto[55], features a distinctive iris motif across both the bodice and skirt. During photography of the bodice it was noticed that two of these iris motifs at the centre back appeared to sit incorrectly. They did not align symmetrically as it seemed they ought to have done. A communication from the American curator, Jean Druesedow, in answer to my enquiry, revealed the reason. Many of Alexandra's surviving evening gowns are now in the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and whilst mounting some of these dresses in the 1970s Druesedow recalled some of her observations at that time in her message to me:

> 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.'[56]

This new information suggested that, rather than demonstrating some failing on the part of the couturier, the iris motifs were cleverly placed so that the flowers sat symmetrically once they were worn by the Queen, thus disguising her shape. A spinal curvature has not been mentioned by any of Alexandra's biographers, presumably unaware of the possibility of it resulting from her permanent limp. It is only through

[55] Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, 942.12.3.A-B
[56] Jean Druesdow, e-mail 02.11.11

studying material culture that such a significant aspect of her physicality is revealed although, conversely, the intention was to disguise her physique through clever workmanship. She normalized her silhouette through structural changes to her dress and so avoided unwanted speculation about her health and well-being, a recognizably modern phenomenon which Jean Spence described as: 'part of the landscape of every woman's efforts to clothe herself in a manner which reflects her own self-perceptions and desires but which must be ever alert to the ascription of feminine identity in the public world.'[57]

Conclusion

Queen Alexandra was a complex figure whose role, historically, has often been reduced to that of long suffering wife to a less than consistent husband. Historians and biographers writing about Alexandra have in part acknowledged the importance of dress in her public life, but a systematic analysis of the garments in order to metaphorically unpick the secrets they might reveal had never been undertaken. However, reading those objects that survive from her working royal wardrobe reveals the complexity behind her decision making – the negotiation of her public face and her private wishes; herself as both British Queen and Danish Princess and her shrewd analysis of her public image-making in an increasingly visual, media driven world.

An object-led approach to research is one that can serve to unlock previously hidden aspects to a subject's life in relation to the clothed body and what that might say about the wearer. It is a methodology that is gaining recognition in some recent publications

[57] Jean Spence, 'Flying on One Wing', Alison Guy & Maura Banim, *Through the Wardrobe – Women's Relationship With Their Clothes*, (Berg 2001), p186

– as Davies-Strodder, Lister and Taylor write in their conclusion to the volume cataloguing the life in dress of society lady Heather Firbank:

> This more personal approach is evident in the proliferation of fashion exhibitions over the last decade dedicated to showing one woman's wardrobe. Whether these showcase the fashion choices of a well known individual such as Queen Maud or Jackie Kennedy or of somebody less well known such as Jill Ritblat and Mrs Tinne, the intention is that through these more personal displays histories and memories will meet and that a more emotive experience will ultimately be achieved, leading to a deeper understanding of the past.[58]

For a figure like Alexandra of Denmark, whose appearance was so central to her public life, seriously considering her dress is vital to a clearer understanding both of her private self but also the institution of monarchy during her lifetime. Far from being an ephemeral, superficial concern, clothing offered Alexandra a way to both conform and transgress; to build herself a popular public persona without the luxury of a public voice and conversely to create a regal royal body which, in her later years, protected her from the attention that her ailing private body resisted.

Figures

Figure 6.1 – HM Queen Alexandra, carte de visite c1905, author's own collection.

Figure 6.2 – The Wedding 10 March 1863, Mayall & Co photographers, author's own collection.

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[58] Cassie Davies-Strodder, Jenny Lister & Lou Taylor, *London Society Fashion 1905-1925: The Wardrobe of Heather Firbank*, (V&A 2015), p149

Figure 6.3 – The Marriage of the Prince of Wales with Princess Alexandra of Denmark, oil on canvas, William Powell Frith, 1863, Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019

Figure 6.4 – HM Queen Alexandra in coronation robes, carte de visite 1902, author's own collection.

Figure 6.5 – HM Queen Alexandra, oil on canvas, Luke Fildes, 1902, Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019

Figure 6.6 – Alexandra Princess of Wales in Court Dress, carte de visite, W D Downey, author's own collection.

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