

# Costume at Claydon

Think for a minute about the clothes you are wearing? What do they say about who you are? Your mood and even your class? Beyond that, think of the personal, or hidden details. For example, the scented insoles bought for you by your long suffering wife! Your favourite skirt, purchased in Paris, woven beautifully and lined with the finest silk, to be worn when you want to feel special!



*"Costly thy habit [dress] as thy purse can buy; But not expressed in fancy - rich, not gaudy. For the apparel oft proclaims the man."*

William Shakespeare (1564-1616), 'Hamlet,' Act I, Scene iii.

The National Trust cares for over 31,000 items of costume in more than 112 of its historic houses. Each is a gateway to the most intimate parts of their owners lives. The cut of the cloth and the materials used, as well as the way they were worn, tell us even more. They are unique to the time and the place they were made. If you think about it, every historical event in every era, apart from some of the very first Olympic games, costume has been present. The items that survive today are primary links to the past and they should be treasured forever.



The costumes at Claydon comprise 18 sets of historic garments, worn by members of the Verney family over the past 400 years. Items range from 19th century day wear to some of the rarest doublets and robes of the 1600s. The significance of the costumes at Claydon is amplified by the supporting evidence found within the private Verney archives. The original bill for ribbons on Edmund Verney's wedding outfit from the 1660s still survives today.



*"Good clothes open all doors"*  
Thomas Fuller  
(1705)



Over the course of the next 5 years we will be taking you on 5 journeys of discovery into the life and times of the Verney's of Claydon. Pirates, honeymooners, bigamists, lunatics and much, much more...



*"Naked people have little or no influence on society."*

Mark Twain (1835-1910)

# The Brown Dress

*"There is nothing touches our imagination so much as a beautiful woman in a plain dress."*

Joseph Addison

This exhibition tells the story of a soft brown velvet dress which was made to measure in about 1867. It is not a particularly expensive garment, in fact its relative cost has probably gone down over the past 140 years.

To start we would like you to take a good look at the dress. Go on! Turn around, get closer and spend a few seconds really looking at it. Do you like it? Does it unlock memories, or thoughts for you?

When you are done come back and read on.



Historic costumes and items of clothing are a primary link to our past. They are part of our story.

The panels in the room reveal some of the stories that surround this particular item of clothing. How was it made? Who wore it and when? Where was it worn? What does the dress say about the wearer?

Suddenly a single item can be a gateway into another era. In this case it rekindles thoughts of the 19th century at Claydon; a time when the Verney's first made these 18th century walls a family home; a time when women of courage were pushing the boundaries in a male dominated society.



*"Before you criticize someone, you should walk a mile in their shoes. That way, when you criticize them, you are a mile away from them and you have their shoes."*

Author Unknown

*"Clothes are never a frivolity: they always mean something."* James Laver

# The Woman in the Brown Dress

Margaret Maria Verney (1844-1930) was the eldest daughter of Sir John Hay Williams, the second Baronet of Bodelwyddan, county Flint. Margaret and her younger sister, Maude, often stayed in London at their aunt's home in Grosvenor Place.



It was there that they both met a handsome young naval officer called commander Edmund Verney.

In October 1867 Edmund Verney made an appointment to see Lady Sarah, the girls' mother. The young man was so nervous that he asked the butler to leave his bags in the hall until after the meeting, as he might not be staying.



Maude was by far the prettier of the two sisters, so it was with a certain amount of surprise that moments later Lady Sarah called for Margaret, as Edmund had requested Margaret's hand in marriage.

Margaret accepted and the couple were married in London on 14th January, 1868.

The newlyweds returned to Claydon in July 1868. Edmund's aunt, Lucy Calvert, captured the homecoming celebrations in a watercolour.



In the years to follow Lady Margaret Verney took an active interest in the community, especially in education and nursing. She was a staunch Liberal and actively supported her husband and son's election campaigns.

As a historian of Claydon, Lady Margaret completed the work of Frances Parthenope Verney on the 4 illustrated histories of the Verney family. Both volume 3 and 4 were published under Lady Margaret's name.



Lady Margaret's strong religious and political beliefs were reflected in her plain style of dress.



# Undergarments

At the turn of the 1800s the neoclassical style, inspired by Greek and Roman excavations, saw ladies adopt narrow, fitted dresses, similar to the flowing togas of these civilisations. As the century progressed the silhouette of a woman widened. By 1850 a very wide skirt was worn with many petticoats underneath. New undergarment inventions were required to construct and uphold these expanding garments.

At first petticoats of linen were layered to offer shape. Then petticoats were starched to give them extra support. However, they could not support the weighty velvet fabrics that gave texture and warmth.



By the 1850s crinolines had been developed. The word derives from the Latin; crinis = hair and linum = flax. The new hooped innovation added a stiff weave of horsehair into standard linen, which gave good rigidity. Soon these were replaced by crinolines made of steel, which were lighter and easier to move in.

## How Shape Evolved Over Time



As the century drew to a close the 'bell shape' gave way to the 'bustle'. Volume was lost at the front and sides of skirts, leaving the attention very much on the derriere! Our brown dress is from this transitional period, when crinolines became less round, whilst keeping volume at the back.

*Once in Victoria's golden age  
When crinolines were all the rage  
A dame in fashionable attire  
Would change her life for one up higher  
So up to Clifton Bridge she went  
And made a parachute descent  
But though, 'twas not the lady's wish  
A boatman hooked her like a fish  
And thus a slave to fashion's jaws  
Was snatched from out of Death's hungry jaws  
This story's true I'd have you know  
And thus it only goes to show*

William E Heasell on the story of Sarah Ann Henley 1885.



1800



1820



1850



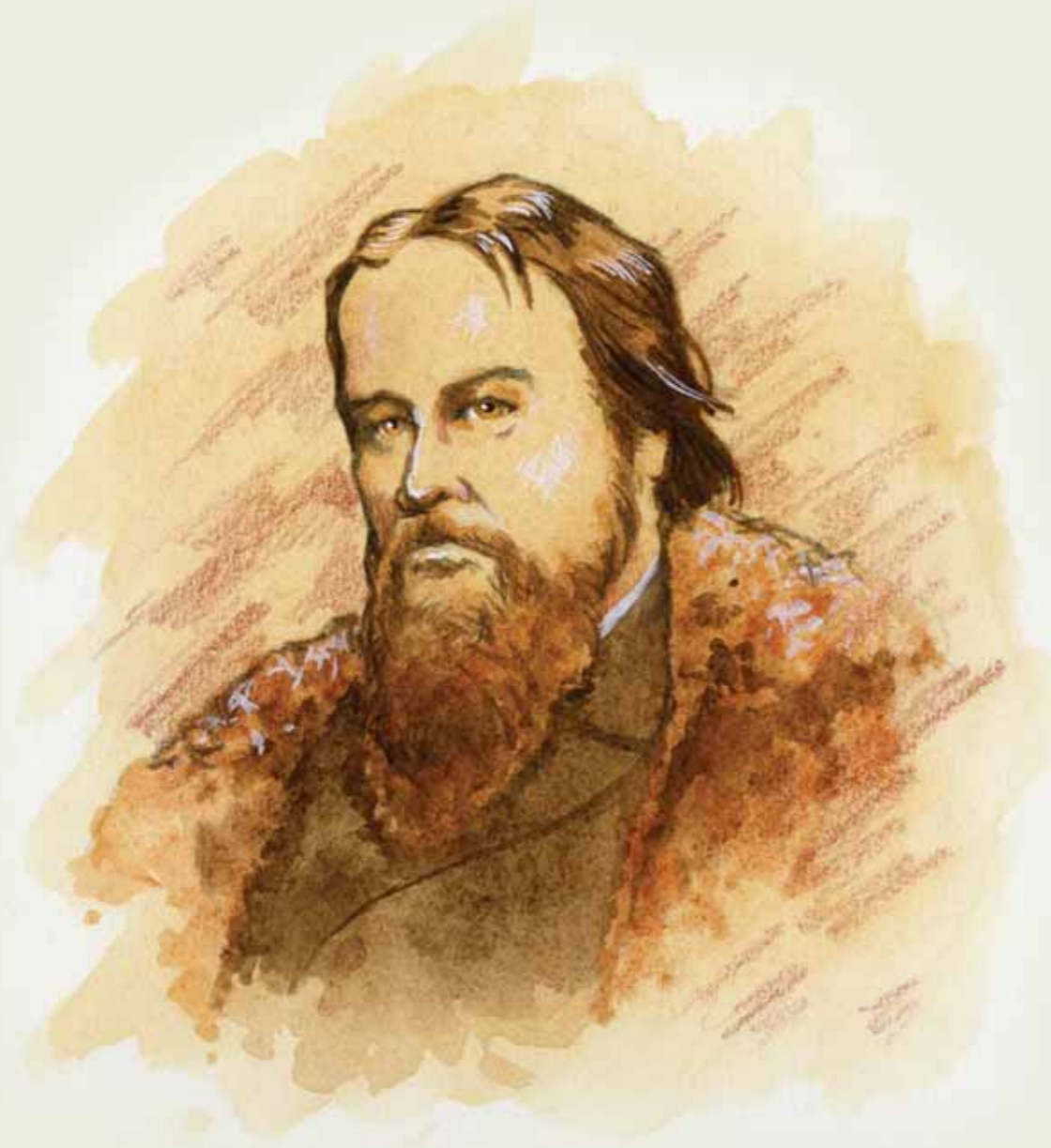
1860



1880

# “When in Rome ...”

Sir William Blake Richmond KCB (1842–1921), was an artist and a decorator. He trained and worked in London and entered the Royal Academy at the age of 14. In 1859, he travelled to Italy to study the old masters.



Richmond headed back to London in 1869 to exhibit his work at the Royal Academy. By now the couples were firm friends and he agreed to visit Claydon to finish off the honeymoon portrait of Margaret.

At Claydon, Richmond was struck by the beauty and splendour of the fine wooden staircase and immediately decided to alter the composition of his work. He painted over the white marble stairs and reset the scene here at Claydon.



The warm ochres and browns of the inlay complimented perfectly the brown velvet dress.

In 1865, William Blake Richmond returned to Italy. He remained on the continent for 4 years, based mainly in Rome. In 1868 he married, and coincidentally he met Edmund Hope Verney and Margaret who had also chosen to honeymoon in Rome.

The couples already mixed in the same social circles. George Richmond RA, William Blake's father, was himself a fine portrait painter, who produced the study of Sir Harry Verney which you can see in this room.

Richmond offered to paint Margaret on the fine white marble steps of a Roman palace, to commemorate their honeymoon. She is depicted wearing the brown silk velvet dress, holding a black velvet hat and sporting a plume of ostrich feathers.



During his visit, Richmond also undertook to paint the other family members who had made Claydon their home. Sir Harry Verney and Lady Parthenope Verney, currently displayed in the Library, Florence Nightingale, seen above the fireplace in this room and Lady Lucy Calvert, which you will find displayed in the Gothic Room.

