

Understanding an Edwardian Blouse through Remaking and Suffragette Re-enactment

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Dress historian James Laver described the Edwardian blouse as ‘an extremely elaborate confection’ which delightfully captures both its essence and complexities.¹ This example from Worthing Museum, with loose sleeves and pouched front waist, appears attractive, light and easy to wear. Through my experience of remaking and then wearing a copy of the Museum’s blouse, however, a rather different story emerged concerning the practical challenges of protesting in fashionable dress.



Figure 1. Edwardian blouse, c.1906. Cotton and machine-made lace. Worthing Museum, accession number 54/529. Personal photograph by the author.

¹ James Laver, *Costume and Fashion a concise history*. (London: Thames & Hudson [1969] 1986) 220.

The Blouse

Worthing Museum holds a large and varied collection of blouses from the Edwardian period (1901-1910). Many have been donated by members of the local community, with others arriving from a local wardrobe collection. All have pouched front waists in keeping with the fashionable Edwardian 'S' shaped silhouette. This particular blouse (Figure 1) fastens down the centre back with fifteen metal snap fasteners fixed to a readymade tape. Dressing at this time was a complicated affair for middle and upper-class women and required the help of a lady's maid.

The blouse is an example of what was known as 'medium class' work. The classification was in common use and relates to the quality of fabric and trimmings rather than the standard of sewing. It is made from lightweight cotton lawn (also known as batiste), with insertions of machine-made cotton lace and a machine embroidered, cut-work panel running down the centre front of the blouse. These machine-made processes contrast with hand sewn rows of tucks and pintucks (also called pinch tucks) which run down the sides of the bodice and sleeves. Machines sewing up to 7 parallel rows of pintucks were used in factories at this time, so the use of handsewn tucks suggests this blouse was made at home by an outworker. Rather than being a one-off dressmaker-made commission, a small square size label at the sewn to the waist of the blouse, shows that it was made to be sold in a shop or department store. The blouse was made by skilled maker, but sadly, as social surveys by campaigners like Clementina Black show, blouse makers for the retail trade were often poorly paid.² Although it was possible to make a dozen simple blouses a day, workers were paid as little as 2d per blouse, with home workers also having to provide their own sewing machine, sewing threads, and pay bus fares to collect and deliver work.

The blouse has three-quarter length sleeves which were the height of fashion around 1905-06, dating the museum's blouse to this period. The sleeves are finished with cuffs made from three rows of lace to mirror the collar. The high fitted collar was kept taut by two satin-covered removable collar supports made from whalebone. The covering must have been a bonus to the wearer. She might equally have had collar supports made from celluloid, a brittle form of plastic, or metal rods, which can be seen in other blouses in the

² Clementina Black. *Married Women's Work* (London: Virago, [1915] 1983) 69.

Worthing collection. Cynthia Asquith, daughter-in-law of the Prime Minister, wrote of the misery of wearing boned collars in her memoir *Remember and be Glad*, 'I couldn't endure the high choking collars with boned supports that dug red dints into my neck.'³



Figure 2. Reproduction of the original blouse made by the author. Photograph Benjamin Rowland.

Reproduction

In 2015, through my experience as a costume maker for film and theatre, I was commissioned to write a book called *Making Edwardian Costumes for Women*, and the museum's blouse became one of my first reproduction projects (Figure 2).⁴ To make the blouse I took a set of detailed measurements in inches, the standard used at the time.⁵

³ Cynthia Asquith, *Remember and be Glad* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952) 77.

⁴ Suzanne Rowland, *Making Edwardian Costumes for Women* (Marlborough: The Crowood Press, 2016).

⁵ Janet Arnold, *Patterns of Fashion 2 English Women's Dresses and their construction, c. 1860 – 1940*. London: Macmillan, 1966,1977. Janet Arnold set the standard for the reproduction of museum dress through her careful observations and detailed sketches. Arnold's legacy continues under Jenny Tiramani's direction at The School of Historical Dress, London. <http://theschoolofhistoricaldress.org.uk/>

Using these measurements, costume maker Karen Cunningham made an accurate paper pattern and I tested the shape by making a toile. As Jenny Tiramani explains, ‘Making a ‘toile’ or mock-up of the item in a cheap fabric such as cotton calico, muslin or mull is a practical exercise that is the only way to be sure all the pieces fit together as they did on the original garment.’⁷ The pattern making process revealed that although the blouse looks complicated to reproduce, it is in fact made from four basic shapes – front, back, sleeve and collar. Through trial and error, I discovered that all decorative sections of the blouse were applied by working outwards from the central cut-work panel. This involved sewing the first row of lace insertion around the cut-work panel, followed by the tucked panels. The sheer fabric and loosely-woven lace meant that the blouse could be placed on top of the pattern to continually check the size (Figure 3). My reproduction blouse was machine stitched to save time, even though close examination of the original blouse revealed tiny, irregular running stitches made by hand rather than machine.



Figure 3. Making the reproduction blouse. Joining sections on the bodice. Personal photograph by the author.

⁷ Jenny Tiramani “Janet Arnold’s Patterns of Fashion,” *Costume* 49:2 (2015): 193.



Figure 4. The replica blouse worn by the author during re-enactment at Lewes Bonfire, 2017. Blouse and Votes for Women sash worn with a copy of an original velvet toque from Worthing Museum, made by milliner Jojo Lance. Photograph Chris Rowland.

Re-enactment

I made a second version of the blouse for myself, to wear as part of a Suffragette costume during Lewes Bonfire in 2017 (Figure 4). Marching in November necessitates the wearing of thermal underwear rather than an Edwardian corset, so my complete outfit of a blouse and skirt was not worn over authentic underpinnings. Inspired by the Suffragette colours of purple, white and green, I sourced a small floral cotton print for the re-enactment blouse. I used the same basic blouse shape but made some modifications to the decoration and lengthened the sleeves. When the blouse was finished, my first and most obvious realisation was that I could no longer dress myself; I needed help to fasten the poppers down the back. Along with Cynthia Asquith, I did not think I could endure a boned and fitted collar, but this historical inaccuracy meant that I was unhappy with the inevitable creases across the neck. Like the original, my reproduction blouse was fitted across the shoulders and front and back yokes. Also, in keeping with the original, my blouse was tight around the armholes. This was a common feature of Edwardian blouses, as I have discovered through measuring many blouses in museum collections. The restricted arm movements caused by my tight armholes

made carrying a reproduction Suffragette placard uncomfortable. Through wearing the blouse, I also discovered that my fabric was not fine enough and felt bulky and uncomfortable when tucked into the waistband of my long and heavy Edwardian skirt, also a reproduction of an original museum skirt.

When I lifted my arm in the air to carry a protest placard, or torch, the blouse pulled out of the skirt and I began to understand why several patents were taken out for 'blouse retainers'. These devices, worn under a skirt, fitted around the hips and gripped the blouse in place (Figure 5). This helped to maintain the respectable façade so essential for Edwardian women to move out of the home into the exterior world of commerce, education and politics. The practice of wearing respectable yet fashionable yet clothes was an important means of visual communication and community kinship for women involved in the suffrage movement. As Wendy Parkins explains, 'Through the use of fashion and specific colours the suffragettes forged a public identity for themselves in the public spaces of the city and introduced themselves and their cause into the sphere of political communication.'⁸

Conclusion

Through remaking Worthing Museum's Edwardian blouse, I discovered the shape of its original pattern pieces, and its hand and machine-made method of construction. The inclusion of hand work at first suggested a one-off dressmaker commission, but the size label proved that it was made to be sold in a retail establishment. Hand sewn pintucks on the museum's blouse indicated that the blouse was made by an outworker, sewing at home. As home workers were not subject to employment legislation there were liable to receive low pay, no matter what the quality of their work.

Wearing the blouse as part of an outfit for re-enactment helped me to understand something of the practice of protesting as a suffragette in fashionable dress. The blouse required structuring devices including collar supports and a blouse retainer to maintain formality and respectability. I also needed a dresser to help fasten the blouse, all of which seemed in opposition to the rights for women called for through protest. Imagining the museum's blouse worn by a protesting Suffragette revealed a glimpse into the restricted

⁸ Wendy Parkins. " 'The Epidemic of Purple, White and Green': Fashion and the Suffragette Movement in Britain 1908-14," *Fashioning the Body Politic* Oxford and New York: Berg, 2002. 99.

dress practices of women who nevertheless risked and endured a great deal more to campaign for the right to vote.

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Figure 5: Example of a blouse retainer, a patented device for holding a blouse neatly inside a skirt. *The Drapers' Record*, 1909. EMap and the London College of Fashion Archive. S. Rowland. *Making Edwardian Costumes for Women* (Marlborough: The Crowood Press, 2016) 119. Print.

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