SMOCK VALUE

The country life of the smock

Smocks are hardwearing 'overalls' that became common on English farms during the 18th and 19th centuries. As revealed by those that survive in museums of costume and rural life, these extraordinary garments combined linen, simple design, and intricate stitching. Cut from rectangular sections of cloth, they were hemmed and stitched by hand into one of three styles. Reversible smocks were identical front and back, often with one or two buttons at the neck. Shirt smocks featured longer openings, just at the front, and usually several buttons. These basic styles were then embellished, often lavishly so, with complex smocking designs comprising gathered folds, stitched to provide increased density in areas of most wear between shape and pattern. At once both rough and richly decorative, these contradictory artefacts still inspire to this day.

Their appearance in rural art and literature reveals that they were in common usage from the second half of the 18th century and well established by the beginning of the 19th. In William Pyne's 1805 *Costume of Great Britain*, a smock protects a water cart driver from filthy roadworks. Another plate shows a carter dressed in a long smock for warmth. Shepherd Holland stood proudly in his smock in the foreground of George Garrard's famous 1804 painting of the shearing at Woburn Abbey, and smocks adorned other jobbing stockmen in the crowd. Similar garb appeared in many livestock portraits of the early 19th century, offering a concise visual means for historians and curators of today to distinguish the painting's workers from its gentlemen.

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The use of smocks as workwear began to decline rapidly in the 1850s, a change lamented by Thomas Hardy in his 1895 preface to *Far From the Madding Crowd* where he noted that the "shearing-supper, the long smock-frocks, and the harvest-home" had "nearly disappeared" as part of a wider break of continuity in local traditions, history, folklore, and what he called "eccentric individualities". As smock use waned, popular characterisation of England's working people as simple and unlettered "folk" took off, and interest in examining the quirks of these lower social orders grew. Smocks were suddenly redolent not only of pastoral and practical value but seen to harbour in their stitches and pleats the essence of English tradition itself, a past deemed worthy of salvage by romantics and antiquarians.

The collecting of smocks gathered pace as they fell out of common use. The V&A began acquiring them as early as 1905. In 1914, folklorist E. Sidney Hartland presided over receipt of a smock on behalf of the Folklore Society, which housed a collection at the University of Cambridge that aimed to shed light on national customs. The example Hartland gifted was used by a working shepherd for 30 years or more who upon retirement passed it to a younger colleague, who then sold it to their master's daughter as a "curiosity". So it passed from one generation to the next and up the intellectual hierarchy of the day, blurring the lines between social classes. The decline of smocks bore silent witness to huge change in the English countryside and, by the start of World War One, they were an unfamiliar sight. ▸

For the working classes, however, such garments began to recast any remaining owners as yokels. It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that the earliest smocks to survive belonged to the elderly. During the interwar years the writer H. J. Massingham purposefully sought out a smock for his private collection, finally alighting on one that belonged at one time to Shepherd Wiggins of Gloucestershire, who died in around 1915 aged 93. Years later in *Country Relics,* Massingham wrote how the garment – known locally as a "fiddle-bag" – had been lovingly made for Wiggins by his daughter and how, in his later years, the old man would not leave home without it. He wore it to the village where he would sit "deep in talk of the sheep, the corn and the cider." In spite of the regressive stereotypes increasingly accompanying smocks, they endured amongst older generations where, perhaps fittingly for a fashion on the wane, they were often favoured as burial gowns.

People rarely save working clothes when they wear out and many smocks that survive are probably like Shepherd Wiggins' prized frock, of a kind never worn in the field but kept for Sunday best. These items may well be more highly decorated than their working equivalents were (an odd quirk of survival that has bolstered certain fanciful ideas about smocking). The rhetoric of revivalists like Hardy helped support the notion that people wore the symbols of their trade in the designs on their collars and cuffs. This myth stemmed partly from his 1884 description of old hiring fairs where he had seen "smock-frocks and gaiters, the shepherds with their crooks, the

carters with a zone of whipcord round their hats, thatchers with a straw tucked into the brim." Later collectors theorized that wheel or whip shapes represented waggoners and that crook or hurdle shapes were used to identify shepherds. As much as it helped to save some examples of the old ways of doing things, this invented tradition served to reinforce old social hierarchies and reinforced the sense that, like their peculiar practices, rural "folk" belonged to a bygone era.

Such negative connotations endured well into the 20th century. In 1950, recalling a trip to an open air museum in Sweden, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Reading, Sir Frank Stenton, revealed his dislike of the old rural costume. "My clearest memory… is of curators walking about in 17th century peasant costumes. I hope we shall not make our people dress in smocks and in clothes tied up at the sagging patches with wisps of straw."

In spite of this, when his university established its own Museum of English Rural Life the following year, Shepherd Wiggins' smock was amongst its earliest acquisitions: and throughout the 1950s staff routinely dressed in smocks and other rural clothing at public events, TV broadcasts and during agricultural shows, fortifying the smock's relationship with the countryside. ••• **Dr Oliver Douglas**

The MERL www.reading.ac.uk *Clothing and Landscape in Victorian England: Working-Class Dress and Rural Life* by Rachel Worth (I.B. Tauris, 2016) ISBN: 1784533963 £58. Learn Traditional Smocking with Ruth Singer, 24 June 11-5pm www.selvedge.org