

History Wardrobe Newsletter

March 2010

Gillian and I are writing this newsletter in the Jacobean Long Gallery at Gray's Court, York – a gorgeous historic building by the Minster & well worth a visit, especially if you like chocolate torte. Which we do. We're camped on a squishy sofa with lots of cushions reviewing 2009 and looking ahead to the coming year.

We're pleased and relieved to report that 2009 was a glorious year in terms of bookings and sheer work satisfaction. When a recession bites there's a lot to be said for entertainment and escapism. Or, as Gillian says, "It's alright if you like laughing." It works for us, and you seem to agree. So - many thanks for your support, past present and continuing. We couldn't do it without you. Well, we could, but there wouldn't be any clapping.

Winter Review

On the road with the History Wardrobe...

****STOP PRESS**** We're sad to report the demise of the little red Fiesta that has clocked up so many miles in the service of Costume History. Enough to say – snow, ice, steep hill and penitent driver. No one was hurt. The search has been on for the new History Wardrobe-mobile. Gillian would have liked a converted ice-cream van. My heart was set on a helicopter gunship. We've settled on a silver Ford Fusion. It can be crammed with as many boxes and bags as humanly possible, which is good since our collection is bursting at the seams.

On the travel front, Gillian reports success and satisfaction with her *Jane Austen's Christmas World Tour of the UK*. It was a very intense festive season for her, fuelled by endless Christmas dinners with clients. When asked, 'How do you keep it so fresh every time?' Gillian replies, 'It *feels* fresh every time.' Details of the Austen family treats and some jolly Regency party games make this a very merry presentation indeed.

No two venues have been the same this winter. One day over December we were cavorting round a public library in woolly combinations and red lipstick (*Wartime Wedding*) the next we were exploring the secret passages of a medieval venue, launching ourselves out of doors hidden in wood paneling for *Frills and Frivolity*. Boxing Day was spent in a very chic hotel near Windsor, preparing to perform *Portrait of a Lady* – oh boy did we need corsets after gorging on mince pies and Christmas chocolates. The "too solid flesh" does not melt. It has to be subdued somehow.

For the longest time Gillian has been claiming that far fiercer than *Portrait's* 18th-Century stays are the trappings of 1950s underwear. Naturally I ridiculed this idea until one day compelled to don the bullet bra and girdle myself. This was when Gillian took it upon herself to be a tad ill just before a performance (okay okay, so she was rushed to hospital). While Gillian slipped into a comfortable backless hospital gown I strapped myself into the girdle ready for the show, and yes, I can now say, hand on bullet-bra'd heart, it is an evil device. Gillian agreed to recover from her illness on condition that she could have new foundation garments as a treat. Look out for these in *Fabulous Fifties*.

Having been so rushed off our (elegantly shod) feet, it came as some surprise to be told the

following by a gentleman waiting to watch *Votes for Women* – “I’ve had a look at your little website. You don’t seem to do very much.” We could only raise eyebrows in reply to this... and blast him with all the rousing politics of the Suffragette era.

Setting aside such absurd comments, we prefer to dwell on the feedback of a lady who spoke with Ian Stapleton following his performance in *Undressing Mr Darcy*. She told him, “You are my Mr Darcy, the one I’ve imagined for over fifty years.” That’s brilliant.

The Well-Dressed Governess

We like to feature a different talk in each newsletter, and this month sees the spotlight on a book that regularly tops polls of favourite reads, or at least ties with Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. Gillian tells me that in Japan this novel is given by mothers to daughters, to teach them surreptitiously about the values of an independent life. It is, of course, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*.

“There was no possibility of taking a walk that day...”

Jane Eyre, the Well-Dressed Governess is possibly Gillian's favourite talk. She says she first read the book when she was 12 and has been interested in the Brontë sisters ever since, particularly Charlotte because she seems the most complex of the three. Is there any particular reason why it's relevant to focus on clothes in the book? Gillian says that Charlotte, like her contemporary Elizabeth Gaskell, was a minute observer of life, fashion included. Clothes mean a great deal to the people who wear them and those who observe them. For this talk Gillian decided to focus on clothes that both Jane and Charlotte would have worn. The audience are treated to recreations of Jane’s school uniform and embroidered workbag, her best dress of silver grey silk, as featured in the book, and her ill-fated wedding dress. These replicas were inspired by original items belonging to the Brontës, curated by the Parsonage Museum at Haworth. Audiences can also be tempted by quotations from the novel and from Charlotte’s letters. It also touches on the wonderful romance between Jane and Rochester.

“Reader, I married him...”

New Talk

The premiere of *Story of the White Wedding* has already been booked by the North Yorkshire (West) Federation WI, which means we’re merrily collection wedding ephemera, and Gillian is sourcing fabric for the gorgeous new bridal gowns she’ll be creating – and I get to wear them! We’ll showcase full replica ensembles from the 1810s, 1870s & 1960s, as well as displaying original items from the 19th and 20th centuries. We even have a black wedding dress from the late 1800s.

I’m glad we now have an excuse for presenting a beautiful 1930s wedding dress and shoes donated by a most excellent lady at Kiplin Hall. The matching bridesmaid dress and bolero jacket will also be on show – they’re divine. We’ve just been donated a wonderful original dress from the sixties complete with fantastic paraphernalia. Thank you!

We’ll be creating a display of photos from every decade. One of the best sources for these is actually the York car boot sale at the racecourse most Saturdays. I buy whatever photographs I can, hating to see them neglected. Elsie Walton has been another stalwart, providing marvellous magazines that feature bridal trousseaus, as well as some fantastic sources of information about weddings.

Our Repertoire

If you've made it this far into the Newsletter, you've found the full list of History Wardrobe talks.

The following shows have two presenters.

The fee for each one is £380 (2010) + travel expenses currently calculated at 35p per mile.

Portrait of a Lady
Frills and Frivolity
Story of the White Wedding
Undressing Mr Darcy
Elegant Economy – the Clothes of Cranford
Dressing Queen Victoria
Votes for Women!
Wartime Wedding
Fabulous Fifties!

The solo talks listed below cost £200 (2009) + travel expenses currently calculated at 35p per mile.

Fashioning the Past – Secrets of a Historical Seamstress
Jane Austen's Christmas
Jane Eyre – the Well-dressed Governess
Family History through Fashion and Photographs
Florence Nightingale – the Respectable Rebel
Oh My Poor Nerves! Health and Hypochondria in Jane Austen's England

Each talk lasts for about an hour with plenty of time afterwards for audience members to come and chat, and examine the lovely costume items in greater detail. We only require a medium-sized table and smart chair; also somewhere private to change and store items.

We charge £45 per person per night for accommodation, where necessary.

If we have two or more performances in the same area on consecutive days we are happy to combine travel/accommodation expenses.

For all booking enquiries tel. Lucy Adlington (01904) 620805
For all costume history enquiries tel. Gillian Stapleton (07799) 818868

If you'd like to know where we're performing look on the website diary:

<http://www.historywardrobe.com/events.html>

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