

# The Four Georges

An Exhibition of Original Clothing and Accessories from 1714 – 1830

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When visiting any display of artefacts from the past, one always hopes for a revelation – an insight into the actual life styles and attitudes of people. Some disappointment is inevitable since only the "best" is generally saved. My own wedding dress, polythene wrapped, still hangs in the wardrobe, while everyday clothes are regularly cleared out for re-cycling.

This exhibition, selected from items belonging to the Kent Costumes Trust contained many ladies' gowns were of two main styles. Those of the earlier period were made from heavy fabrics, mostly heavy brocade, necessary to support the full skirt and tight bodice of an overdress. But there was evidence of re-cycling! The insert stomacher and petticoat or underskirt at the front could easily be changed. So different colours or fabrics would be adapted to accommodate an altering female figure or a subtle change in fashion. This process had taken place in many of these robes and spanned at least 100 years in one case; the original brocade dated from 1723 and the final version of the dress was worn at a family wedding in the mid 80's.

The later period showed quite a reaction. There was a comparatively plain cream silk dress from 1795 of "Jane Austen" style, high-waisted under the bust with low round neck and puffed sleeves. Now there was simplicity. Fabrics were fine cotton lawn or sprigged muslin, silk gauze or tulle and trimmings are dainty. Nevertheless, the task of the needlewoman, almost invisibly stitching such materials, must have been no less arduous. One's heart aches for Elizabeth Phillips in 1750, poring over her sampler design to show different darning techniques – so much labour for such a pedestrian result. Fortunately somebody treasured it.

Manufactured items, such as stoles and including a fabric piece woven in Canterbury around 1724, were extremely fine-spun and showed much foreign influence. Some excellent workmanship was demonstrated by the accessories on display. They were exquisitely embroidered gloves, hand-painted fans showing pastoral and mythological scenes and purses woven in silk or straw and decorated with beads. Ladies protected their faces from the heat of the fire – there is a hand-held fire guard – but mainly from the elements. There was a natural linen sun bonnet from 1790 contrasted with an enormous black calash from 1800. By what feat of will-power or engineering was this kept on the head? Such headpieces reflected status; the more elevated the hat, the more exalted the wearer!