

## Lady Darnley's Wardrobe – Edwardian Fashion Uncovered

Meridith Towne – 1<sup>st</sup> April 2014

On Wednesday, 1<sup>st</sup> April, the audience gathered for a very unusual talk in the medieval Bridge Chapel. Firstly, an afternoon cream tea was served on vintage china, with excellent service by the team from Mums and Darlings Cafe in Sidcup. Then the costume historian and dressmaker, Meridith Towne, gave a lecture with a difference entitled "Lady Darnley's Wardrobe – Edwardian Fashion Uncovered."



When the reconstruction of the Old Bridge at Rochester was completed in 1914, Lady Florence Darnley was invited to reopen the bridge to traffic. The Rochester Bridge Trust had provided Meridith with a photograph of Lady Darnley at the opening ceremony on 14<sup>th</sup> May 1914 and commissioned her to research and recreate the costume as part of the centenary exhibition.



Meridith began by exploring the underwear and foundation garments that would have been worn at this date by a lady of the Countess of Darnley's age (she was 54) and standing.



Meridith removed her dressing gown to reveal that she was wearing the combination underwear, stockings and corsets underneath! To gasps of sympathy from the audience, she tightened the corset strings, reducing her (already tiny) waist by a further 2 or 3 inches. Constrained by the corsets, the columnar silhouette favoured by Edwardian ladies was clearly visible. Over the foundation garments, a cotton petticoat and corset cover would have been worn.

Meridith explained that it had been particularly difficult to reconstruct Lady Darnley's costume, partly because there were no images of the outfit from the back, but also because the Countess had not followed the fashion of the date very closely. However, by examining fashion magazines and directories from the years running up to the opening ceremony as well as the archives of fashion collections and museums, Meridith was able to gather information about the construction and tailoring of the costume. She had concluded that Lady Darnley had certain personal preferences, probably influenced by the fashion of her younger days. For example, she clearly liked to have a profusion of delicate lace at the neckline and continued to favour a feather boa, an accessory which was not commonly in use by 1914.



Meridith had made a blouse using fine cotton lawn trimmed with lace. She explained that it was no longer possible to obtain lawn of the quality and fineness that Edwardian dressmakers would have had available, but that she had procured the best quality she could find. To the lace neckline of the blouse, a further fine lace fichu was added and secured with a brooch.

For the suit itself, the photograph clearly showed a dark colour, but black had fallen out of favour by the Edwardian period, except for mourning or practical work wear which would not have been worn by a lady in the Countess' social position. Navy blue did not become a popular colour until after the outbreak of the Great War. It is likely that Lady Darnley would have chosen either dark red or dark green.

Meridith had chosen a deep red silk taffeta fabric which would give the same effect as the photograph. It appeared that the costume comprised a skirt and jacket rather than a dress and jacket. The skirt was narrow in shape and full length; the jacket close-fitting with a ruffled hem and a belt at the waist. Padded tailoring at the shoulders had been added, as Meridith had found in other contemporary examples. Although not clear from the photographs, the audience was told that Lady Darnley would have worn shoes rather than boots and was shown some contemporary examples. Meridith put on the suit as she explained her research and added a grey feather boa, crocheted gloves, and a handbag.

It had been difficult to source a hat similar to the one shown in the photograph. Meridith had consulted a specialist millinery historian, and they had worked together to make a hat in matching red silk taffeta. This had red silk roses fixed to the side of the brim.

When Meridith put on the hat with a final flourish, we were transported back 100 years, and it seemed as though Lady Darnley were with us again in the Bridge Chapel, just as she had been at the Opening Ceremony on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

Everyone agreed that the talk had been enlightening and fascinating. Together with the afternoon tea we all had a very entertaining afternoon.

