

Factsheet

The Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection: Royal Dressmaking

The Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection at Kensington Palace comprises dress worn by members of the Royal Family, dress worn by officials and dignitaries undertaking ceremonial roles, such as heralds or members of the Orders of Knighthood and court dress. The collection dates from the 18th to the late 20th century.

To service the court, tailors and dressmakers in London and many other fashionable centres specialised in the production of these distinctive clothes. Visitors to Kensington Palace can view a tailor's workroom and dressmaker's workshop.

- The work of a court dressmaker was important and profitable. However, as the court business was concentrated into a very short season each year, the seamstresses often had to work very long hours, in poor conditions and for little pay.
- During the 19th century there were two major Government enquiries which looked into the women's' working conditions and endeavoured to improve them.
- Most London tailors were based in Savile Row or the City. They would have to be aware of all the details of gentlemen's court uniform as they styles became ever more complex and numerous.
- From the end of the 19th century, the Lord Chamberlain periodically issued a set of dress regulations to explain what should be worn by each official of every office and rank.
- The 20th century saw the rise of the couturier. All would compete for commissions as the spectacular court events proved an excellent opportunity to show off the quality of their dress design. Aspiring young couturiers made their reputation by securing an important client who would wear their dresses.

One such couturier was Norman Hartnell who designed a great number of outfits worn by Queen Elizabeth II, including her wedding dress.

- The tailors who supplied court dress were also called upon to make up dress for other kinds of ceremonies. Many great occasions of state, such as coronations or state funerals, have particular costume and textile requirements. For example, the small black spots applied to the white fur capes (imitating ermine) on the coronation robes worn by members of the nobility would be very carefully counted and positioned as this device indicates the seniority of the wearer.