

# Factsheet

## The Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection: Court Dress

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 18<sup>th</sup> to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

- Court dress was worn by those attending the more formal assemblies and gatherings held by the king or queen. These events were a very important part of the social calendar and for many years attendance at them was vital for politicians as well as socialites.
- From the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the most significant event for ladies was known as the 'Drawing Room'. At this ceremony a young girl just out of the schoolroom was presented to the king and queen by a female relation who had previously been presented. This came to mark, symbolically, her entrance into the adult world.
- The 'Drawing Room' was generally held at Buckingham Palace. In 1902, King Edward VII changed the time of this event to the evening. Gentlemen were presented at a ceremony called a Levée which took place at St James's Palace.
- During the early 18<sup>th</sup> century the mantua and petticoat came to be the accepted wear for ladies at court. This was a fashionable style of the late 17th century and comprised of a petticoat worn over side hoops and a bodice with train.
- At the 18<sup>th</sup>-century court, the hoops developed to an extraordinary size and remained exclusively a court style of dress long after the fashion moved on. This style of dress with its wide skirts and train provided a wonderful opportunity to show off fine silks and elaborate embroidery. One lady went to such lengths in 1738 that the commentator Mrs Delany declared the pattern much proper for a stucco staircase than the apparel of a lady'.
- Gentlemen attending the 18<sup>th</sup> century court would wear a suit comprising of a coat, waistcoat and knee breeches made out of the finest fashionable silks, often

in vivid colours and covered with embroidery. Their shoe buckles and sword belts were often decorated with jewels, cut steel or glass paste.

- On his accession in 1820, King George IV announced that ladies were no longer required to wear the cumbersome court hoop. However, the train, ostrich feather headdress and lace lappets, or a veil, remained distinctive components of court dress until as late as 1939.
- George IV also promoted styles of court uniform to replace the colourful court suits worn by 18<sup>th</sup>-century gentlemen. These uniforms, made of fine wool, were elaborately embroidered with gold and silver wire. The colour of the cloth and the style and position of the embroidery were used to distinguish the office and rank of the wearer.
- Each uniform reflected military styles of the period in which it was introduced. However, as with ladies' dress, the styles immediately fossilised and remained unchanged for years after the fashion had moved on. Even though court uniform is rarely seen today, many of the styles still have their origins in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- The 1920s saw changes in ladies' court dress. The elaborate trains were reduced in length and skirts became fashionably short. The last occasion ladies had to dress up in this splendid attire was in 1939. After the Second World War court occasions changed their character and this distinctive style of dress was no longer worn.