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The Ghastly Garment: a knitted waistcoat associated with King Charles I

Introduction

A waistcoat (inventory number A27050) in the collection of the Museum of London said to have been worn by Charles I is the focus of a new study which will apply archaeological scientific methods to historical material. The waistcoat is currently catalogued as “knitted of fine, pale blue-green coloured silk”, and, despite its iconic status in the museum’s collection, it has not been the subject of much published systematic study (Staniland 1999). Its intriguing history includes the claim that the ill-fated monarch was wearing it when he was beheaded on 30 January 1649.

Sections of the waistcoat are patterned differently, with the sleeves and body in an arrangement of knitted abstract motifs, and the upper body part in a diamond pattern. The sections are divided by a horizontal border below the neck opening, with the sleeve cuffs and welt at the bottom of the garment similarly knitted. The neckline slit is faced with a woven fabric and fastened with thread-covered buttons.

When it was first sold in 1898, the waistcoat was described as “a relic at once authentic and ghastly” (Anon 1898, 5). The waistcoat has a series of stains down the front and there are two areas of damage, where the fabric is broken and fragments are loose. These could have been sustained when the waistcoat was “lent to different friends” by Mrs Hardy, a former owner, resulting in it being “soil’d and defac’d” as reported in correspondence by the Reverend John Leigh Bennett in February 1827 (Fellowes 1828).

Background to the project

The complex provenance of the waistcoat will be easier to substantiate than was the case in the past, using online resources which have become available in recent years. Interrogating this evidence via art

historical methods in tandem with scientific enquiry into its materials and construction will provide new insights into the waistcoat’s context and history. The project recognises the need for, and keen public interest in, more scholarly research into non-woven textiles of which this knitted garment is an excellent early survival. It is also an important example of men’s underwear from the Early Modern era, which is not well represented among extant garments.

The waistcoat was donated to the London Museum (now Museum of London) in 1924. The in-house documentation about it has grown over the years in an *ad hoc* fashion, offering an assortment of research materials for review. These include auction catalogue entries from its sale and purchase in the 19th and early 20th centuries, to reports on inconclusive analyses of the stains in 1959 and 1989, and their review by the Forensic Science Service at the Metropolitan Police in 2010.

There is little published literature about knitted waistcoats, and most relevant work concentrates on the fancier brocade or damask examples, usually interpreted as women’s dress, which are most numerous in Scandinavian collections (for example, Ringgaard 2014). Very few authors have written about this specific waistcoat, and those who have are cursory in their treatment (Thomas 1943; Rutt 1987; Staniland 1999).

Aims and objectives

The study will undertake a systematic examination and description of the waistcoat according to the *Knitting in Early Modern Europe* protocol (Malcolm-Davies et al. 2018) and a review of all the current documentation with appropriate follow up on biographical information about previous owners to establish links (if any) to Charles I. An interdisciplinary approach to

the waistcoat project will employ the expertise of the museum's curator of fashion and decorative arts, its textiles and dress conservator, a knitting historian, specialists in scientific analysis, and a team of skilled craftspeople. The waistcoat will be subjected to detailed examination and rigorous recording. The project has three main research questions: how was the waistcoat knitted; from what materials is it made and how were they processed; and how old is it?

How was it knitted?

The waistcoat has been laid flat on the same mounting board for about a decade, providing restricted access to the back of the garment. The relative fragility of the object, particularly the damage to the front, allows only limited access to the inside. New high-resolution digital photographs will be

commissioned to minimise the need for handling the garment and facilitate analysis of its structure.

The research will gather and interpret the evidence in the waistcoat for handknitting, frame knitting, or both. If all or some of the elements are handknitted, it will be necessary to identify whether it was knitted round, flat, or in a combination of the two.

Comparative material such as similar extant waistcoats has been identified, although several are fragmentary and/or their provenance is unclear. These will also be investigated to shed light on the potential construction methods.

Elements of the waistcoat will be reconstructed to explore its original construction in collaboration with craftspeople, including spinners and knitters who work with contemporary fibres, with the aim of reflecting early modern era materials as closely as



Fig 1: Front of the knitted waistcoat (inventory number A27050) said to have been worn by Charles I at his execution in 1649 (Image: © Museum of London)

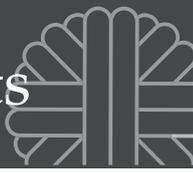


Fig 2: The waistcoat (inventory number A27050) thought to have been photographed in the 1980s (Image: © Museum of London)

possible.

What are the materials?

The second research question concerns the materials with which the waistcoat is made: the fibre in the knitted body and sleeves, the woven fabric facing at the neck opening, the thread and structural support of the buttons in the same location, and the sewing thread used to work the buttonholes. Knowing more about these will suggest avenues of research about the origin of the raw materials used in knitted garments of this type in the 17th century.

Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR) will ascertain the main material. It is presumed to be silk but no investigative work has yet been undertaken to confirm this; if so, further study will determine whether it is reeled or spun. An analysis of the thread will determine whether it is plied or single yarn. FTIR will also identify any anachronistic materials or contaminants in the waistcoat.

Permission has been requested to sample the waistcoat with a view to undertaking dye analysis and microfading tests. Dye analysis will explore the likelihood that the current faded blue colour is original by identifying the dyestuffs and any mordants

present. This will confirm or contradict its agreement with reports of the king's "sky-coloured" waistcoat, which he wore to prevent him from shivering with cold and appearing afraid of his fate on the scaffold. These observations of the king's clothing come from contemporary accounts by William Sanderson in 1658 and Thomas Herbert in 1678 but it is not known whether both men were reporting what they observed with their own eyes or repeating second hand accounts.

A thorough analysis of the garment's condition will be undertaken and recommendations drawn up for its long-term storage, display, and access. Microfading will provide guidance on the lighting exposure.

How old is it?

One way in which historical dress and textiles are dated takes into account their shape, style, and technique. While this art historical approach can be helpful, it is not a perfect solution and often poses more questions than it answers. Radiocarbon dating has the advantage of providing a calendar age range, which will either corroborate the historical assessment of the waistcoat or open new lines of enquiry. Dating the waistcoat in this way will help establish whether it is 17th century and potentially whether it dates to the time of Charles I's execution.

Other aspects of the waistcoat yet to be thoroughly researched will suggest the likelihood of its association with the king. An accurate record of its dimensions will permit comparison with what is known about Charles I's physique.

Contextual evidence will be collected from the royal wardrobe accounts of the 17th century, other household accounts of the time, and import and export records. This will determine the extent to which similar garments existed and whether they match this example.

Further research

This project is intended as an exploratory phase in a longer study which aims to understand this unusual survival of men's early modern underwear. Even if it is not a royal garment (and this may never be established with certainty), it is potentially more interesting as a previously undocumented item of ordinary men's dress. Such functional knitted clothing is mentioned (but not numerous) in documentary sources and occasionally seen in pictorial evidence. The waistcoat is also an important item in the corpus of extant knitted garments, known as *nettrøje* in Scandinavian collections (Ringgaard 2014), which are characteristically decorative, and usually interpreted as women's clothing. Other examples of patterned or



Fig 3: Detail of the neck opening of the waistcoat (inventory number A27050) (Image: © Museum of London)

plain but otherwise unembellished garments knitted in a single fibre and colour are recorded, although some only as archaeological fragments. They offer useful points of comparison with the Museum of London's example. Future investigation will consider the appropriateness of archaeological analyses such as isotope testing and proteomics. These may reveal more about the knitted waistcoat's provenance – both the raw materials and its manufacture.

Conclusion

The aim of this project is to deepen knowledge of the waistcoat said to have been worn by King Charles I on the scaffold in 1649. There are currently many outstanding questions about the attribution, dating and production of this "ghastly" object. This project will exploit recent developments in textile research methodology and new ways of communicating the results to a wide audience. Publication of the

waistcoat and a methodology for recording others will be disseminated via traditional academic publications, the craft press, and social media. The project will also inform improved interpretation for the object's display and further research opportunities at the Museum of London. The more we can discover about the waistcoat's physical and material properties, the more its history and purpose are likely to be revealed. The waistcoat is on display at the Museum of London's Docklands site as part of the *Executions!* exhibition until April 2023.

Acknowledgements

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