

The Story of a Shirt: A Cautionary Tale with an Unexpected Ending

By SANTINA M. LEVEY

This article demonstrates how tracing the history of an altered garment can be as complex and unexpected as the plot of a good detective story.

INTRODUCTION

IN DECEMBER 1994 Anne-Marie Benson, Head of Textiles at Phillips, the London auction house, invited Janet Arnold to look at a linen shirt, which she rightly thought would be of interest and for which she needed advice about its date. Janet contacted me and I went to see it in January 1995. There was no doubt about the shirt's quality; the fine, closely-woven linen was embroidered with white linen thread along the shoulder line and at neck and wrists, where it helped to secure the tight gathers controlling the abundant fabric. The lighter linen of the collar with its bobbin lace border was not as fine, but its style and the pattern of the lace offered the best guide to its likely date. Having taken slides of the main pieces of bobbin lace, which suggested a date in the mid-seventeenth century, I looked for a similar use of lace on other garments. However, the need to join differently patterned pieces of lace to make the deep border of the collar bothered me, as did the fact that the lace was cut and joined to turn the front corners. I felt increasingly sure that it had been altered, probably for fancy dress. Meanwhile Janet had written her notes, taken her slides, made a drawing of the shirt, together with a detail, and measured everything she would need for a future pattern. We discussed the possibility that the shirt had been altered, but in the end let stand the date of *c.* 1640.

Despite the hopeful belief that it had belonged to King Charles I (1600–1649), the shirt had no provenance. It had arrived at Phillips as one of fourteen varied items and, by later word of mouth, it was said to have been wrapped round one of them. The shirt was auctioned on 28 March 1995, as lot 202, with a description based on Janet's notes and my tentative date of *c.* 1640. It was assumed to be English, and had an upper estimate of £1,500. Miles Lambert, Curator of Costume at the Gallery of Costume, Platt Hall, Manchester, attended the sale, hoping to acquire the shirt to increase the date-range of the collection, which he was able to do, despite a hammer price almost twice that of the estimate. The shirt was secured for Platt Hall, and there the matter rested for some time (Figure 1).

PATTERNS OF FASHION 4

Janet Arnold died on 2 November 1998, but she had already started to select and list the objects she wanted to include in her fourth book in the *Patterns of Fashion*



FIGURE 1. Janet Arnold, pencil drawing of the linen shirt before its auction at Phillips in 1994. It shows the cut and construction of the shirt, as well as all decorative features

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series, which was to be devoted to all forms of linen clothing worn by both men and women. However, before work on completing the book after her death could start, her executors and their solicitor had to deal with a complex will and Janet's many other stipulations concerning her estate. It was not until 2005 that Millie Jaffé and I, who had agreed with Janet that we would produce the book, actually began, only to come to a halt when Millie was asked to return to teaching in a job she dearly loved — something Janet would have understood. This coincided with the end of Mark Rylance's tenure as Artistic Director of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London. He and his company, eager to learn from Janet's deep knowledge of Elizabethan dress, had taken her to their hearts, echoing her own desire to teach and to share that knowledge with those who understood her work. Jenny Tiramani, Director of Theatre Design at the Globe, whom Janet had known and approved, seemed the ideal person to take over from Millie; and when I tentatively asked if she would, to my lasting delight she agreed, despite her many other commitments.

Work started late in 2006, when Janet's notes, slides, black-and-white photographs, drawings and patterns, accumulated over a twenty-year period, were finally assessed and, where possible, physically checked by Jenny and me.¹ Among the

shirts was the subject of this article, and, although the discussion held with Janet was replayed with Jenny, my reluctance to use the lace as a sound basis for dating the shirt was strengthened by another shirt on Janet's list, which had been altered in a similar but not identical manner, while the underlying shirt was totally different. Both shirts were removed from the list and do not feature in Janet's book, *Patterns of Fashion 4 The Cut and Construction of Linen Shirts, Smocks, Neckwear and Accessories for Men and Women c.1540–1660*, published by Macmillan in 2008.

THE PLATT HALL SHIRT

The shirts rejected for *Patterns of Fashion 4* continued to intrigue me: neither the one at Platt Hall (accession no. 1995.21) nor that in the Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester (T.8929) has a firm provenance. This is also true of a third example, not included on Janet's list, in the Museum of London (60.163). The Whitworth shirt was among their earliest acquisitions, having been given to the gallery in 1946 by the Chairman of the Trustees, Sir Thomas Barlow, with the information that he had bought it at an auction of the effects of Lord Grantley on 27 August 1942. To have the name of a family that can be traced back to the fifteenth century increased the chance of finding an event that might link all three shirts. In one sense it did, although not to any purpose.

In the 1990s Kay Staniland, then Curator of Costume and Textiles at the Museum of London, had involved me in cataloguing the lace and embroidery associated with Princess Charlotte of Wales (1796–1817) and Queen Victoria (1818–1901), for the exhibition and associated book, *In Royal Fashion*, which opened in 1997.² Although no men's shirts were included, I remembered that the young Queen Victoria and her Consort, Prince Albert, enjoyed fancy-dress balls. Returning to Kay's book, I found tempting descriptions of the balls held at Buckingham Palace in 1842 and 1851. From there I went to *The Illustrated London News* and other contemporary accounts; it was clear that the Restoration Ball, set in the period of Charles II and held on Friday, 13 June 1851, was most likely to throw light on the altered shirts. Authenticity was one of its goals, and the oil sketch by Franz Xaver Winterhalter (1805–1873) of the royal couple in their costumes, captures the care taken to get it right.³ The description of *The Great Bal Masqué*, published in *The Times* on 16 June 1851, emphasized another purpose, which was to boost British manufactures by having costumes made using British products. Quoting from the *Court Circular*, it noted that, 'Lord Overstone displayed some beautiful Honiton point lace in this way, made for the especial purpose'. Lace was fashionable in 1851 and the remodelling of old lace, which emerged from the attics of old-established families, was important in establishing a new-style antiques market akin to that of today. The lace merchants also collected abroad, bringing back lace and linens to build up their stock on which they drew to create shirts for the Restoration Ball.⁴ These were worn with coloured hose and long coats lavishly adorned with bunches of ribbon and, despite their cost, none was intended for further use.

The Platt Hall shirt would not have been cheap, but its wealthy owner is likely to have bought it in 1851, already converted for the ball using historical lace for the

collar and cuffs, but having lengths of narrow bobbin lace made especially for it. Its status as a memento of the ball is reason enough for its survival, being passed down within a family. By the time it arrived at Phillips, however, inherited memory, as so often, had associated the shirt with Charles I, while the Restoration Ball was quite forgotten. The underlying shirt was left with neither date nor provenance. I turned again to the slides that Janet and I took in 1994 and 1995, and to the fifteen shirts that were published in *Patterns of Fashion 4*, looking for any similarities or meaningful differences that would help to place this shirt in a convincing context.

Only the earliest shirt (no. 1 in the book), a boy's shirt dated 1535–50, in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (T.112-1972), provided any similarities. Both shirts are of superb quality, made of fine, closely woven linen, and both have under-arm gussets cut in one with the body of the shirt, rather than the more usual inserted square gussets. However, the V&A shirt is more important for highlighting their many differences. Most obvious is the use of coloured silk thread to work both decorative motifs and the open insertions by which the main panels are joined together. Details of its close-fitting neck are even more telling, with its front opening and deep neckband fastening with three pairs of band strings. Small ruffles are attached to the outer edges of the neck and wristbands, indicating areas of future development.

None of this threw any light on the Platt Hall shirt, which needed to be studied in its own right. Once the relatively few additions made in 1851 are mentally removed, namely the large collar and the wrists frills, which contain mostly historical lace, plus the narrow bobbin lace made to edge the whole shirt, it is clear that the shirt comes from a different culture, skilled in other forms of plain sewing and embroidery. Flanders and Italy were the most likely candidates, but it was the decorative motifs, typical of the High Renaissance, and effortlessly incorporated into the structure of the shirt, that made me decide on Italy. Having made that decision, I looked for matching portraits.

ITALIAN SHIRTS

In Italian Renaissance portraits I found a clear divide between sitters wearing relatively high-necked outer garments with only the narrow line of a loosely wrapped shirt edge visible, and those wearing low-necked voluminous shirts gathered into narrow neckbands. As a generalized statement, the second group was associated with the writers, painters and other craftsmen inspired by the art of ancient Rome. Raphael (1483–1520) illustrates the style in his self-portrait with an unknown friend, dated to *c.* 1515, which is now in the Louvre in Paris. Although both men have beards, their low-necked shirts, wide enough to slip over the head, are not obscured. The neckbands of the shirts differ slightly, that of the friend is absolutely plain, while Raphael's has a tiny outer edging. Neither matches the Platt Hall shirt, but other portraits, of a similarly early date and depicting sitters from both my divisions, illustrate differences dependent on their age, character or status, as well as changing fashions whereby details are taken from different styles of shirt.

None the less, as Jenny Tiramani reminded me, I was looking for as close a match as possible for the Platt Hall shirt. A move in the right direction is illustrated by another double portrait by Raphael, of Andrea Navagero and Agostino Beazzano, dated to *c.* 1516, in which Beazzano wears a shirt cut in a different style (Figure 2). The narrow neckband lies further up his plump neck, and the centre-front opening is fastened with a single pair of thin band strings tied in a bow; it also creates a long enough shoulder for a panel of embroidery to be worked at either end. This helps to create the strange bulge of linen visible in the portrait, which is increased by a concentration of gathers on the sleeve panels where they join the shoulder; a similar puff of linen can be seen in the *Portrait of a Young Man* by Andrea del Sarto (1486–1531) in the National Gallery, London, probably painted in 1517.

But, before looking for further developments, I looked again at the slides, and at Janet's measurements of the shirt, because alterations in the area of the neck and shoulders, including the join between the sleeve head and the shoulder, seemed a good way of recording change.⁵ I compared the Platt Hall shirt with the V&A boy's shirt (no. 1 in *Patterns of Fashion 4*), and a much later, but relevant, Italian man's shirt (no. 11 in *Patterns of Fashion 4*) at the Museo del Tessuto in Prato, Italy (76-01-19). Both the V&A boy's shirt and Platt Hall's have shoulder widths narrower than the fabric width below the gusset cut in one with the body of the shirt. For the boy it is 21½ inches, with an opening left for the neck of 13½ inches, which is gathered at the back and to either side of the front opening, to give a neck measurement of 10½ inches. For the remaining lengths along the shoulders, the front and back are joined together by open insertion seams, as are the joins between the sleeves and the shoulders; they fit without any gathers. The Platt Hall shirt is cut to a similar pattern and the sleeves are also joined to the body of the shirt without any gathers, it has a shoulder measurement of 35 inches with 25 inches left open for the neck. The gathers are divided between back and front as on the boy's shirt, creating a neck measurement of 14 inches, but the remaining length at either end of the shoulders is embroidered with white linen thread, as described below. The Prato shirt, dated to *c.* 1600–30, looks very different; it is made of thicker linen and contains much less fabric, being only 24 inches wide. However, the 14-inch slit for the neck is gathered, as in the other two shirts, and secured in a narrow neckband, which fastens with a button and buttonhole, to give a neck measurement of 16 inches. In addition, the remaining length of the shoulder is embroidered, while the head of the sleeves are tightly gathered where they join the shoulder in a manner reminiscent of the bulge on Beazzano's shirt (Figure 2). Looking only at the neck measurements, the Platt Hall shirt fits neatly between the boy's shirt and that of the Italian man, while in other respects it suggests both earlier and later developments taking place in Italy.

CONSTRUCTION AND DECORATION

All the seams of the Platt Hall shirt are made like French seams, but with a width of only one-sixteenth of an inch, and the double row of back stitches visible on the



FIGURE 2. Raphael, detail of Agostino Beazzano from *Double portrait of Andrea Navagero and Agostino Beazzano*, c. 1516. Oil on canvas, 77 × 111 cm. Rome, Galleria Doria Pamphilj
Arti Doria Pamphilj srl

front have a decorative effect to equal embroidery. The hems and other edges have rolled turnings pressed flat, one-eighth of an inch wide, and hemmed in a continuous process to form a double line of pulled-fabric work, one-sixteenth of an inch wide. All points of weakness are strengthened by firmly secured loops of plaited braid also one-sixteenth of an inch wide. At the base of the front neck opening, the braid outlines a more complex heart-shaped motif, using folded and twisted loops to imitate ornaments on its outer edge, and the true love's knot in the centre (Figure 1). These motifs are loosely sewn down; probably the result of being lifted and replaced in 1851 when the edging lace was added.

The skill to produce a shirt, as perfect inside as out, is epitomized by the securing of the fabric at wrists and neck (Figure 3). The gathered areas have a vertical depth of about one inch tightly worked, like smocking, with linen thread in a dense overlapping chevron pattern to form heart shapes. A single piece of linen is used to make the narrow neckband, being embroidered on the front with linen thread in a zigzag chevron, decorated with raised knots, while the lower edge is turned in and hemmed. The remaining plain linen is taken over to the back, where it covers the thick line of the gathers, and its lower edge is neatly hemmed in place. To complete the front, the similar line of hemming is hidden by rows of detached stitches worked out from its edge, anticipating later developments. The finished width of the band is three-sixteenths of an inch. Given such attention to detail, it seems impossible that the buttonholes visible at wrists and neck are original, rather than the result of additions made in 1851.⁶ The embroidery at either end of the shoulder is defined by two lines of hem stitches, about one inch apart, with scalloped edges and containing another chevron formed by diagonal leaves that meet in the centre. It is delicately worked with linen thread and within each small scallop is a minute eyelet hole with a raised knot at its centre.

CONCLUSION

Feeling confident about the shirt's Italian origins and believing it could be fitted into a sequence of rapidly changing styles, I had a final look at the portraits: those cited above form a series datable to *c.* 1515, 1516 and 1517, to which can be added two early portraits by Tiziano Vecellio, commonly known as Titian (*c.* 1490–1576). In a *Portrait of a Young Man*, on loan to the National Gallery in London from the collection of Lord Halifax, the sitter's shirt just covers his collarbones, and there is a tiny ruffle on its outer edge. The neckband opens at the front and fastens with a single button; it is dated to *c.* 1515–1520. In the second portrait, *Youth with a Glove* (Louvre, Paris), the shirt of the sitter fits close to his neck, with a neckband that fastens with a pair of thin band-strings, and there are well-developed ruffles at neck and wrists. It is clearly later than the Platt Hall shirt and is dated to *c.* 1525.⁷ It helps to confirm that the Platt Hall shirt dates from *c.* 1520, while its quality, including the true love's knot within a heart, suggests it was a betrothal or wedding gift (Figure 4).



FIGURE 3. Detail of the front neck of the shirt showing the tight gathers below the narrow embroidered neckband, with detached stitches worked out from its lower edge. The groups of triple insertion stitches on the top edge date from 1851, when the collar was added

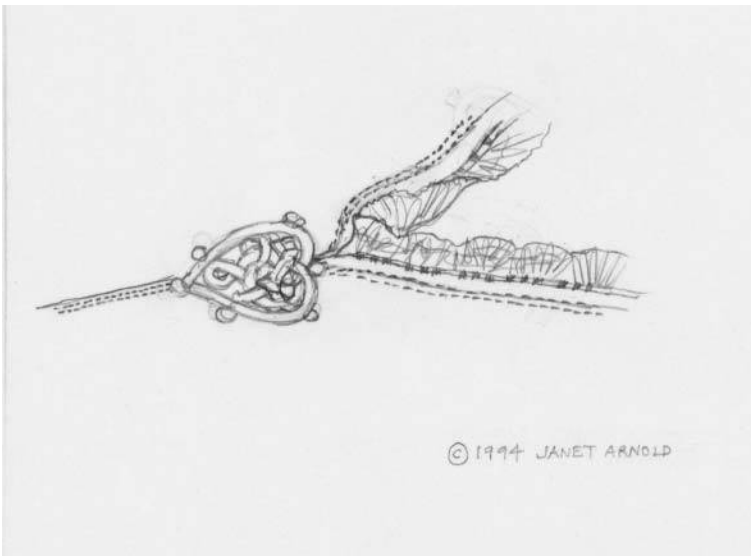


FIGURE 4.
A separate drawing by Janet Arnold of the heart-shaped motif which clearly fascinated her
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REFERENCES

- ¹After the auction, Janet had no opportunity to study the Platt Hall shirt again.
- ²Kay Staniland, *In Royal Fashion: The Clothes of Princess Charlotte of Wales and Queen Victoria 1796–1901* (London: Museum of London, 1997).
- ³*Ibid.*, p. 148, fig. 163.
- ⁴All three shirts must have been worn at the Restoration Ball, but only one can be linked to a family, that of Norton: in 1851 the third Lord Grantley was seventy-five and his nephew and heir, John Brinsley Norton, a more lively twenty.
- ⁵Only imperial measurements are given. Janet Arnold used them to record the Platt Hall shirt and because, when converted to metric equivalents, most are rounded up or down, several such numbers added together will not match the original imperial ones.
- ⁶In 1851, the collar and cuffs were sewn to the original plain-edged bands using open insertion stitches in groups of three, clearly visible in Figure 1 along the back neck edge.
- ⁷Only one portrait is illustrated here, but locations of the others are given in the text. Both double portraits by Raphael can be seen on the internet and *Self Portrait with Friend* (Louvre, Paris) can be downloaded. Titian's *Youth with a Glove* (Louvre) is less easy to find, but growing interest in Titian's early portraits is likely to rectify this. Titian's *Portrait of a Young Man* (L611) is not to be confused with Andrea del Sarto's portrait of the same name (also in the National Gallery, NG 690), mentioned above.

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