

**Listening to the Costume Collection:  
Oral history recordings at Worthing Museum and Art Gallery**

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Worthing Museum and Art Gallery holds a collection of nineteen audio recordings on cassette tapes consisting of interviews with local dressmakers and department store employees who worked in Worthing during the early to mid-twentieth century. The tapes are kept in a drawer of the Costume Collection index card cabinet, which also contains the location of each individual garment amongst the array of boxes that neatly line the museum store shelves.

The origins of these oral history recordings go back to the early 1990s when the assistant Costume Curator at the time, Ann Wise, conducted the interviews. They included one with the town's most prominent dressmaker in the 1930s-1950s, Esther Rothstein, shortly before she died. By the time the interview was recorded, Rothstein was in a nursing home and, having suffered a stroke, her speech and memory were not so sharp.<sup>1</sup> The rather loud background voices that are heard towards the end of the recording negatively affect its quality as they distract from Rothstein's recorded voice. However, the content of the recordings remains valuable as a source of oral history from the era.

Rothstein, originally from London, started dressmaking just after the First World War at the age of fourteen when she was awarded a trade scholarship and attended a two-year training course at technical college. After working as an apprentice in the West End, Rothstein's experience and college training helped her to advance to the level of dressmaker's assistant for a court dressmaking establishment, which was a much sought-after position at this time. Her experience of this is described in the following extract:

*Most of the workrooms were divided into three sections – bodice hands, skirt hands, and sleeve hands - each having their own assistant and improver. I was placed under sleeve hand. We had to make only the sleeves of the dress... this seemed to me much too fiddly and boring.*<sup>2</sup>

Rothstein explains that since there was no opportunity for quick advancement at this establishment, she only worked there for a short time before landing another

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Wise, "Dressmakers in Worthing, 1920-1950." *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society* 32 (1998): 82.

<sup>2</sup> Wise, "Dressmakers in Worthing," 83.

position as a dressmaker's assistant; this time she was able to work on the complete garment. By the time she was eighteen, Rothstein had started her own dressmaking business in London with financial assistance from her aunt and uncle. She continued the business even after she was married and up to the birth of her second child in the early 1930s.

It was at this time that the Rothstein and her family left London for Worthing and she continued her business at 5 Bath Place. Over time she managed to build up a clientele equivalent to that which she had given up in London.<sup>3</sup> By the beginning of the 1950s, Rothstein noticed that her clients were increasingly likely to purchase ready-to-wear garments, as she observes in the following extract:

*After the war it seemed more and more people were changing to buying ready-to-wear clothing, as there was much improvement in this field by then. Indeed I was rather taken aback on one occasion when one of my clients, on seeing the dress I had just finished for her, remarked 'my goodness, it is just like a ready-made!' I hardly knew whether to take it as a compliment or otherwise.<sup>4</sup>*

It was this realisation that prompted Rothstein to open a retail shop in Richmond Place, Worthing, in 1951. However, as her workroom staff were now beginning to make more alterations than new garments, it had become apparent to Rothstein that dressmaking was gradually dying out.<sup>5</sup>

Listen to Esther's story here:



Another interview in the oral history collection comes from May Potts who, at fourteen years old, worked as a junior shop assistant in the glove department at Hubbard's department store in Worthing from 1955-1958. Hubbard's was located on South Street and is now the current site of Debenhams. In the recording, Potts describes how the department store catered to an upper middle-class clientele and in the following testimony describes the sartorial elegance of a pair of gloves and the particular ceremony that went into assisting a customer with their purchase:

*You would pamper them really, you'd even put their gloves on when they were trying them on, cos they'd have their elbows on the red velvet cushion, and sit like that, and you'd put them on, you see. You would always turn an*

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<sup>3</sup> Wise, "Dressmakers in Worthing," 83.

<sup>4</sup> Wise, "Dressmakers in Worthing," 83.

<sup>5</sup> Wise, "Dressmakers in Worthing," 83-4.

*unlined pair of gloves, you would turn the cuff end of it back up like that, so that when you pulled it on, you didn't have just one piece of leather, you see, and you'd put their fingers through first and then put it on over their hand... each time they tried on a glove. You'd always put their gloves on for them.*<sup>6</sup>

Listen to May here:



Potts describes very well this outmoded shopping practice of purchasing gloves and also reveals the extraordinary level of customer service provided by department stores like Hubbard's during the 1950s. Her interview not only provides rich visual imagery, which is a real treat to listen to, but her testimony also captures a bygone era, as she describes here:

*The décor was beautiful, it was all carpeted. You felt like a somebody when you walked into it. Yes, Hubbard's was the shop of Worthing. Things were always packed away in a parcel, we had our own packaging department across the road and everything, no matter the size of the parcel, was delivered free – it would all go out on the van. Even the lift man wore a maroon uniform, and although the lift is still there now, when we were there, there was all brass, but they've painted over all the brass now. And the layout now is totally, totally different.*<sup>7</sup>

Recording the voices of 'ordinary people', that is, those without public office, wealth or fame, provides a new perspective on historical experience that is both immediate and engaging.<sup>8</sup> However, when oral history is evaluated as a form of historical evidence, the fallibility of memory is often debated. Dress historian Lou Taylor believes that since clothing is such 'a fundamental factor within everyday life and human experience, memories of dress should be able to make a significant contribution to the field of oral history.'<sup>9</sup> For example, memories of the gloves Potts sold at Hubbard's are articulated here:

*At the back of the counter were all the trays, and it went size six, six and a half, seven; seven was the most popular glove size and they would all be in their own trays. Underneath the counter, that would also be lit up, there was a big display in the centre, and then pull-out trays along the rest...which would have the evening gloves in. And there was a vast range of evening gloves, of course,*

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<sup>6</sup> Wise, "Dressmakers in Worthing," 83.

<sup>7</sup> Ann Wise Interview with May Potts, 1990s.

<sup>8</sup> Clare Lomas, "I know nothing about fashion. There's no point in interviewing me," *Fashion Cultures: theories, explorations and analysis*, ed. Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson (London: Routledge, 2000) 368.

<sup>9</sup> Lou Taylor, *The Study of Dress History* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002) 242.

*because people always wore them. You'd have riding gloves...and then fabric came in you'd have fabric gloves for the summer, which was lovely. They were like a light dress material but they would come in all different colours.*<sup>10</sup>

Hubbard's memories show what was meaningful to her at the time, but her memories of particular elements, such as her reference to lit display counters, also helps illuminate for the listener an interior that not only brought glamour to the display of gloves but also provided a selling technique to highlight merchandise and draw the attention of customers.

Listening to Potts's memories of the department store allows the listener to visualise places and to evoke experiences in a way that reading a transcript alone could not. Oral historian Alessandro Portelli points out that 'tone and volume range and rhythm of popular speech ... carry implicit meaning and social connotations, which are not reproducible in writing.'<sup>11</sup> Since a speaker's voice can alter throughout an interview, as their attitude towards a particular topic changes, 'this can only be comprehended through listening and not by reading.'<sup>12</sup> Potts' local accent, and the intonation and pauses that communicate her emotions provides insightful information that only an oral recording can reveal. Together with the content, these help paint a picture of a different time and its idiosyncrasies, from the ritual of trying on gloves and their use as a fashionable accessory, to their many varieties and their retail display.

Potts's recollections of working at Hubbard's and Rothstein's recollections of life as a dressmaker have both been captured on cassette tape, with each interviewee speaking of their life and experiences in the fashion industry. They reveal not only mid-century working and shopping practices that are now radically transformed but also a cultural geography particular to Worthing.

The dress collection at Worthing Museum and Art Gallery is extensive; it is one of the largest in the UK. A particular specialism is in twentieth-century everyday garments that are either homemade or store-bought. As a museum collection that reflects mainly 'ordinary' people's everyday clothes, oral history recordings that feature the voices of local working people like Rothstein and Potts are of enormous benefit to the museum's historical costume collection. Interestingly, sometime during the last decade, a former curator was unsure of the cassette tapes' content and ownership; it was suggested that they might be disposed of. However, Gerry

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<sup>10</sup> Ann Wise interview with May Potts, 1990s.

<sup>11</sup> Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different." *Oral History Reader*. Ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson. London.: Routledge, 1998. 33-4.

<sup>12</sup> Portelli, "What makes oral history different," 34.



Connolly, now Museum Manager, remembers at the time being aware of their valuable content and insisted they remain as part of the collection.

In recognition of the unique contribution the oral history collection makes to the dress collection at Worthing Museum and Art Gallery, as a volunteer project I am currently in the process of transferring all nineteen of the recordings into digital formats. I feel we should acknowledge their value as oral additions to the Costume Collection's rich visual and material culture. As such, for their first-hand accounts of lives in dressmaking and fashion retail that has now changed beyond recognition, we should secure and preserve their place within the museum collection. Through digital restoration, we can enhance their quality and accessibility and ensure their continued availability for public as well as academic research.

### **October 2018**

Lomas, Clare. "I know nothing about fashion. There's no point in interviewing me." *Fashion Cultures: theories, explorations and analysis*. Ed. Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson. London: Routledge, 2000.

Portelli, Alessandro. "What Makes Oral History Different." *Oral History Reader*. Ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson. London.: Routledge, 1998.

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