

Meetings are held at the National History Museum, St. Fagans.  
Located in the Committee Room of the Office Block unless otherwise advertised.  
Doors open 10.30am for coffee. 11am Morning Lecture 2pm Afternoon Lecture

**21 February 2009**

11.00 am **Megan Davies Ngoumtsa** : *'The Relationship between Women and the Needle'*  
2.00 pm **Elen Phillips**: *The new Costume Store at the National History Museum, St Fagans*

**4 April 2009**

11.00 am Coffee  
11.30 am AGM  
followed by a brief talk by **Gaye Evans**: *Landscape, Costume and Colour in Ladakh and Kashmir*  
2.00pm **Elizabeth Friendship**: *'Pattern Cutting for Men's Costume 'a new text for costume makers. Tracing the path from conception to publication.*

Whilst travelling around in the mountains of Ladakh and Kashmir I was mindful that I would miss the September meeting, but the landscape was so stunning and the people remarkable that maybe I could share the experience with you as a slide show. So it was upsetting to hear that the meeting on **20th September** did not proceed as planned, there were equipment problems and our first speaker **Megan Davies Ngoumtsa** was unable to access the illustrations for her lecture through our computer. Rather than spoiling the integrity of her talk it was reluctantly decided to abandon the attempt with the hope that it would be postponed rather than cancelled altogether. Our members were very understanding and went off to examine the newly refurbished galleries and to wander around the Museum grounds. I am pleased to tell you that **Megan Davies Ngoumtsa** has agreed to return in February to give her talk on *The Relationship between Women and the Needle*.

We had more success in the afternoon when **Dr Elinor Kapp** gave her talk on

*Ruffians and Loose Women* - unpicking words we derive from textiles



**Dr Elinor Kapp dressed to impress**

Tof Dr Kapp's talk was 'the way English weaves the threads of our past into today's figures of speech, bringing richly

layered meaning to our lives'. This is a quotation taken from the Introduction to her book *Rigmaroles & Ragamuffins*, which contains a collection of words and phrases relating to textiles and their construction.

Elinor wears many hats as a storyteller, a poet and a textile artist who practised professionally as a psychiatrist and psychotherapist. A love of the English language and the way it has developed might have inspired Elinor to write her book, but I am sure that the power of the spoken word and the thrill of weaving a tale to a captivated audience impelled her to become a storyteller. Having taken a degree in Embroidered Textiles she has used her skills as a needlewoman to create decorated boxes and props, to illustrate her stories of which alas I have no pictures, but the embroidered and beaded purse which Elinor carried might give a hint of her style.



The book is amusing, tempting one to dip into it again and again to find a new word or re examine a familiar phrase. We all love stories and I think Elinor enchanted her audience on Saturday afternoon.

Despite the rugby crowds in Cardiff on **8th November**, our two speakers arrived without incident to deliver individual and contrasting talks about textile creation and historical costume.

**Jane Meredith** piled the tables high with a vibrant array of fleece, yarn and pieces of her work to illustrate the talk *Dyed in the Wool – the Alchemy of Plant Dyes*. With a gesture towards the baskets of wool she emphasised the importance of colour as the inspiration for her work. Preferring to use natural rather than synthetic dye materials Jane started her exploration of the subject when she and her family moved to a smallholding at Byford about 25 years ago. She started to build a garden on the banks of the Wye and filled it with plants traditionally used by dyers. Combining experiments in the Alchemy of plant dyes and inspired by the Brown Scottish sheep bred locally and by gifts of rare breed fleeces she began to create a range of dyed wool, the raw material for further craft projects.

Jane now runs regular summer workshops at her home which combine her interests as a dyer, maker and gardener sharing her skills with others keen to learn an ancient craft. She discussed the various properties of the fleeces she has used, a Cotswold fleece is lustrous and shows the dye beautifully, a Wensleydale has a long staple and can be woven into a soft rug, while Merino is very fine and felts well. During a typical class sample pieces are made using different fleeces to illustrate how they will take dye and to show how each will felt. These pieces have not been wasted and Jane has made up patchwork from such colourful scraps. Peg Looms have also proved to be a fast and easy method of weaving up samples of dyed and carded fleece and other yarns such as silk that may have come from the dye pots.

And so to the world of colour, with pictures of her garden Jane described the plants she uses to obtain the dyer's colour palette. Buddleia flowers give a yellowish brown, achillea a golden colour while pomegranate gives a wonderful yellow which is important in Indian textiles. Different parts of a plant will yield up different tints; walnut leaves in summer give a russet brown, while the nut husks soaked in water give a leafy brown.

Some plants like lichen (due to its slow growth its use is now prohibited) yield a wonderful pink substantive dye which does not need a mordant. However a chemical mordant is usually required to fix the dye to a fibre and by experimental combination of different mordents and dye plants a wide range of colours can be created. Jane listed some of the mordents available to the dyer, these include alum, copper sulphate, chromium sulphate and oxalic acid, most of which are poisonous and require careful handling in the dye vat. She stressed that this part of the process is hazardous and that the dye liquid should be exhausted before disposal at the end of a dyeing session.

The next colour in the dyers pallet is blue, obtained from Indigoiferous plants. Jane is unable to grow *Indigofera tinctoria*, the chief source of indigo, in her garden as it is a tropical and subtropical plant so she uses the dry dyestuff extracted from the leaves to start her indigo dye vats. Wet pastes are traditionally used in the country of origin but dry concentrated indigo matter is more durable for trade and Jane had some dried fibrous indigo balls in a basket.

*Isatis tinctoria* or woad is native to the Mediterranean introduced to Britain and used as a dye since pre-Roman times. It is a biennial plant from which dyestuff is obtained only during its first year. Jane does grow this plant and she explained that

it requires strong sunlight to produce a good blue dye. However if the summer is wet and overcast as it was last year the colours will be muted producing a subtle range of pinks and green blues. Madder, the root of which gives a red dye, also requires lots of sun to produce a strong colour.

The combination of gardening skills and the Alchemy of plant dyes have filled Jane's life for the past 25 years, but she has still found the energy to weave and make beautiful textiles from the yarns she has dyed, as well as sharing her knowledge with others during the workshops she runs at The Forge. I was not the only one to seriously consider treating myself and enrolling on a course in the summer of 2009, watch this space! A colourful and inspiring talk.

In the afternoon our second speaker was **Moira Thunder**, who works as a Curator in the Department of Designs, Word and Image at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Her talk on '*The Story of an Eighteenth Century Silk Gown*' was based upon work that she had undertaken with Alison Carter and Sarah Howard on a gown purchased by Hampshire County Council Museum Services in 1971.

The subject of Moira's essay is a silk gown, dating from the 1730's. Photographs showed that it has a fitted bodice with four pleats at centre back and looped buttons in front, with elbow length sleeves. The bodice is attached to a long skirt opening at the front. At one time the gown probably had long bands sewn to the front opening to frame an underskirt and a sack back, but it had been remodelled in the 1770's or 1780's. Moira explained that 'things have a biography' and the purpose of her study was to 'render conspicuous what otherwise might be obscure'.

The gown is made of brocaded silk *tissue* which because of the considerable complexity of its manufacture would have been very expensive to purchase. The cream ground has a pattern of blue and green and pink and purple flowers which repeat at 13 inch intervals and have a width of 10 inches across the fabric, the different colours in the repeat make the design look more complex. Moira had examined silk pattern books from Spitalfields in the City of London and found a similar design dated to 1734. She discussed the evolution of designs and the way that fruit and plants had been depicted and used in elaborate asymmetrical patterns. The introduction of new plants from abroad and the existence of large plots cultivated as market gardens around Spitalfields could well have influenced the designers. Giant fruit often occur in the patterns of Anna Marie Garthenwaite, who produced over 874 designs during her career as a freelance designer for the Huguenot weavers. Once completed the silk tissue would have been displayed in a mercers shop to await a purchaser and the next stage in its biography. Daniel Defoe, in his letters exclaimed at the price of silks and the competition between English and French weavers to supply the customer's insatiable demand for these expensive textiles. The gown has been traced back to the Graham family, who lived near Glasgow and were thought to be involved in business. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Glasgow was a flourishing centre of trade and industry and Scotland imported a wide variety of luxury goods. Silk might have been purchased from a local Scottish merchant or direct from London and the narrow lengths would have been made up by a dressmaker into the fashionable sack back style of the 1730's. This costly gown would have been worn out in society and as fashions changed so alterations were made, the sack back was

removed and bodice adapted to a more figure hugging style. The Graham family were invited to the Eglington Tournament in 1839 when it seems the gown was worn again; probably the bodice was altered again to be worn over a corset. Evidence documented during conservation revealed machine stitching in the bodice lining indicating 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century alterations possibly for use as fancy dress, a popular activity amongst Upper and Middle class families at that time. Thus Moira revealed how much data could be collected from a single object, how its fabric and construction could 'render conspicuous' numerous details of social history, weaving technology and commerce. Created in 1730's, the gown had been altered over the years, worn by successive family members and become an heirloom. As the Scottish Grahams dispersed it was sold and is now cared for in Hampshire, conserved, documented and admired to start a new life as an educational resource.

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