

The Flower Cottage Discovery.

In the spring of 2014 building contractors began restoring and modernising Flower Cottage, 56 Hillside Road, Overton, Frodsham.

This c1600 Grade 2 listed cruck built cottage had fallen into disrepair over the years.

While stripping the corrugated iron roof and removing the rotten beams, the contractors recovered a variety of hand-made iron thatching and builders' nails.

Then, hidden in the chimney recess at the right hand end of the cottage, they found a filthy worn out jacket. Just how old and why it was there was a puzzle.

The interested contractors asked if more could be found out about its history before giving the jacket and the nails to the History Society Archives for safe keeping. So began weeks of contacting specialist people for possible answers.

Elizabeth Royles, Collector & Interpretation Officer of the Grosvenor Museum, Chester, was very helpful with positive suggestions on seeing the photographs of the jacket and nails.. She also gave me advice on how to de-bug the garment by putting it in and out of a freezer over 11 days, making it safe to handle.

Dan Garner, a Cheshire archaeologist, was intrigued by the nails especially, commenting that they 'were remarkable' and possibly much older than 1600, which coincided with English Heritage's views about the age of the cottage that they had given to the contractors.

Dr Miles Lambert, Senior Curator of the Costume Museum at Platt Hall, Manchester, put me in touch with Dinah Eastop, a Fellow of the National Archives, Kew, and Consultant in Conservation & Material Culture.

After reading the various emailed notes and seeing the photographs sent to her, Dinah confirmed that in her opinion the garment was deliberately hidden, and therefore recorded it in her 'Deliberately Concealed Garments Project' files. She was extremely interested in this discovery.

To find out more about the jacket, an appointment was made to visit Dr. Miles Lambert at the superb and elegant Platt Hall Costume Museum.

History Society members were later emailed the following summary of that meeting:-

Richard and I had an hour with Dr Miles Lambert at the Platt Hall Costume Museum in Manchester yesterday. Looking at every inch of the moth eaten and smoke damaged jacket he, like us, ended up very dirty indeed. However, he added more to our knowledge by pointing out similar styles in his reference books

He believes that it was a slight young man or youth's garment of the 1800-1830s era and that it would have been called a 'coat' as the word 'jacket' would not have been in use at that time. It is a mid C15th French term not then used in England.

It probably began life as a respectable day coat of typical local fashion, finely stitched, of good strong wool (not mole skin as he first thought) and a cotton lining with heavier linen or cotton in the shoulder pads. It would have been handed down and heavy woollen patches added with increasingly poor stitching until it eventually became a workman's garment.

The placing of the patches on the lower underside of each forearm was puzzling as to the kind of work our youth might have been involved in, thus raising speculative ideas.

One cuff had been turned and the other seems to have been added. The collar would have been turned down with reverses (not upstanding as first thought) and appeared to be lined with hessian or a heavy linen. The back of the jacket was flared in a fashionable manner. The remaining buttons showed it had been a good quality garment when first made.

Because of its location in the rafters and chimney recess in Flower Cottage, Dr.Lambert felt that it was a deliberately concealed coat but for what purpose he had no idea. He quoted old local customs for hiding various objects e.g. protection against witch craft. He also agreed with Dan Garner's view that the nails were remarkable and older than 1600, the estimated date of the cottage.

This is as much as we know so far and the coat and nails are now stored in the Archive Room.

A conducted tour of the renovated cottage was delightful and most welcome. It was all there - the past, the present and the future of a Frodsham cottage.

Our grateful thanks go to the contractors, Michael Connor and John Davies of Ascent Building Solutions Warrington, for their enthusiasm and interest. They gave their time, expertise and the nails and coat to the History Society and Frodsham.

Kath Hewitt.