

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Flower Cottage Discovery.

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

This 1600 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 and Julie Edwards, Senior Archaeologist of Chester Council, were very helpful with positive advice on seeing the photographs of the jacket and nails. Elizabeth gave me essential 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. Mrs Dorothy Smith and Nick Smith were kind enough to supply the freezer and keep an eye on the garment!

Dan Garner, 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, suggested I contact Dinah Eastop, a Fellow of the National Archives, Kew, and Consultant in Conservation & Material Culture.

After reading the various emails 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 and offered to give an illustrated talk to the society about hidden garments. I put her in touch with Betty Wakefield (Programme Secretary) who booked her for the 2016 season.

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, became very dirty indeed. However, he added more to our knowledge by pointing out similar styles in his Costume 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 and 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.'

Several months later, I was given a conducted tour of the newly renovated cottage which was delightful and most welcome. It was all there - the past, the present and the future of a Frodsham cottage.

Update.

The coat and nails are stored in the Archive Room, carefully wrapped in acid free tissue. They have been displayed five times so far and I became concerned about the fragility of the coat. I contacted Ann French, the Textile Conservation Specialist at the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester and emailed all the information I had about the coat and conditions in which it was stored. I was relieved to know, that apart from regularly checking its state for possible infestation or mould, the coat would be relatively safe.

The Nails.

I have spent a long time trying to date the nails more accurately by asking locally if anyone had knowledge of old carpenters' or blacksmiths' techniques and also by contacting the London Museum and the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum for their help - all without success. So that is on-going.



My grateful thanks go to the contractors, Michael Connor and John Davies of Ascent Building Solutions of Warrington, for their enthusiasm and interest. They gave their time and expertise - and placed the nails and coat with the History Society Archives for safe keeping.

Kath Hewitt

