

Delhi Durbar Dress. In Derbyshire.

And so, with a final intense, some may say frantic, period of work, the prototype stage of our project has come to an end. All the archival work in London – such as at the British Film Institute, the National Portrait Gallery and nosing around inside Carlton House Terrace – is completed; the correspondence with American institutions, such as the Smithsonian and the Library of Congress, is over; the star-gazing at ‘celebrity’ authors and historians – step forward Owen Jones, Tristram Hunt and Kate Williams, all similarly beaver away in The British Library – is no more. All of which makes me a little sad. Following soon after that stage of the project, came the onset of the most recent editing phase, which has largely revolved around copy editing and proofing written texts for the app as well as audio/film scripts associated with it. However, in between hunter-gathering information and then giving it a bit of a polish (hopefully) came a rather jolly and extremely productive away-day, one that took me and Nicola away from this project’s more usual Exeter St. David’s-London Paddington axis, to the quiet foothills of the south-eastern corner of the Pennines, and, more specifically still, to Kedleston Hall, Derbyshire.



Kedleston Hall, National Trust. Photograph: Kevin Milburn

Built in the mid-18th century by renowned architect Robert Adam to be the country seat of the Curzon family, Kedleston Hall is now a popular National Trust property. And it was here, that a group of enthusiastic, good hearted, shivering and, initially, blurry eyed, people, gathered to film and photograph – courtesy of 360 degree SpinMe technology – the most famous outfit associated with the subject of our app, Mary Curzon: the Peacock Dress.

This remarkable and still frequently commented upon outfit, was made in Delhi and designed by Worth of Paris. It was made to order for Mary to wear at the State Ball, of the Delhi Durbar in 1903, a grand event held to commemorate the coronation of King Edward VII and designed to be the most lavish showpiece India had ever witnessed. Mary's appearance in this dress generated a considerable amount of press coverage at the time in India, Europe and North America, and, in fashion history circles, it has continued to be viewed as a significant statement of clothing ever since.

Aside from the very infrequent occasions when the dress is loaned to other institutions it is generally displayed in a large dedicated glass stand at Kedleston, in a wing of the house known as the Eastern Museum. Also housed in this part of the property are a wide array of artefacts, artworks and ephemera that Lord Curzon, shall we say, 'acquired' during his extensive travels throughout the Middle East, the Subcontinent and the Far East in the latter part of the 19th century and the early 20th century.



Peacock Dress, Kedleston Hall, National Trust.
Photograph: Kevin Milburn

The Peacock dress is very well cared for in this setting, but National Trust staff themselves would doubtless admit that it is only really when the dress is out of its case and, in particular, when placed under lights, that it reveals itself. For that it is when a quite dramatic change occurs and this, at first glance, a muted piece of apparel, is transformed into a garment that literally dazzles, the gold and silver metallic embroidery in the pattern of peacock feathers playing catch with the light. The striking effect caused by illumination of the dress was wholly intentional. An aspiration of the design was for it to have a particular impact when seen under electric lighting, an invention that, in 1903, was still something of a novelty. Thus, at the Durbar State Ball, the dress and the lights worked in tandem, jointly promoting a strong, elegant impression of imperial modernity.

At the same time, the Peacock Dress, spoke to older traditions, being, as it was, a clear example of the contemporary predilection of the British to present themselves as inheritors of an earlier imperial empire in India, namely that belonging to the Mughuls. Indeed, the idea for Mary wearing a peacock dress evolved from a desire to reference the famed Peacock Throne, a prized 17th century symbol of Mughal wealth and power housed in one Delhi's most revered buildings, the Red Fort, until its removal from the country in the 18th century by the head of another rival dynasty with expansionist ambitions, the Shah of Persia.

So, the Peacock Dress, which was only ever worn once, by Mary at the Durbar Ball, is a celebrated item of clothing with a rich and intriguing back story. Enshrined in its iridescent beetle wings, which replicate the role of peacock feather 'eyes', and threaded through its intricate metallic pattern, is a fascinating, multi-layered history that demands to be re-told in new ways. Many people were involved in making a wonderful day in Derbyshire happen; the National Trust staff, especially Liesl Barber, Ffion George and the Kedleston Hall NT staff; textile conservator, Melanie Leach; the SpinMe team led by Sean, Director of Photography; Charlie Quickenden at Bow; Jo Lansdowne at REACT and the documentary film-maker Greg Browning from Silicon 19. And hopefully through their efforts, and by how the Peacock Dress is being explored in our project via technologies such as SpinMe photography and the Android app, we can demonstrate how a renewed emphasis on objects and material culture allows not just for a re-examination of the past but also literally assists in illuminating connections across complex lives, historical sites and contemporary discourses.