READING MUSEUM SERVICE

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

FANCY DRESS H277

Fancy dress was extremely popular from the nineteenth century onwards, but its heyday was between the wars. All the costumes in this box are believed to date from this inter-war period.

Fancy dress parties were enjoyed by all kinds of people. Children's birthday parties often took the form of fancy dress. People at sophisticated gatherings might be seen dressed in exotic or comic costume. Shipboard entertainment invariably included a fancy dress party or dance. Costumes ranged from commissioned works created by fashion designers to home-made items.



In the days before television people actively made their own entertainment and a whole range of activities would provide amusement for family and friends. At the same time, one of the most important influences on fancy dress styles was the cinema. The heroes and heroines of the screen and the characters they portrayed were often imitated. Charlie Chaplin with his stick and bowler hat, Mary Pickford (right) with her ribbon tied ringlets, Tom Mix with his cowboy hat, Douglas Fairbanks as Zorro, Robin Hood or a Pirate. Characters from history were also depicted on the screen, with the result that Cleopatra, Madame Pompadour, Napoleon and others were often seen at fancy dress balls.



Children's fancy dress sometimes reflected these adult characters, but it also drew on nursery rhymes and fairy tales for inspiration. Children's literature was also important - Peter Pan, Wendy and Captain Hook, for example, or the Mad Hatter or Alice from *Alice in Wonderland*. Fancy dress competitions for children were popular at church fetes, or at celebrations for the Coronation or VE Day. The photograph to the right shows a children's fancy dress competition which was held as part of the VE celebrations. Which characters can you recognise?

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Patchwork

Dating from the late 1920s, this costume has been created from scraps of material, costing nothing but the effort of making it up. It has long sleeves and would be quite suitable for a woman of any age.

It would be possible to add accessories to this costume - a rag-bag could be carried to hold a dance card and handkerchief. A bangle made up of sewing accessories such as thimbles and small scissors might also have been worn.

Right: A photograph taken in the early 1950s from the Reading Chronicle. It shows the prize giving at a fancy dress organised by SLY - Society of Local Yokels. SLY organised social events and charity activities in the 1940s and 1950s.



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Mystery

This costume for a young person is made in black with yellow trim, including a question mark. It would probably have been worn with a black domino mask, which would also provide a mystery of who the wearer was.

One of Batman's enemies is called The Riddler and is often shown wearing a costume decorated with question marks. Riddles often end with the phrase 'Who (or what) am I?' This costume invites the viewer to ask this question and the person who is disguised to respond with a riddling reply. Another possibility is that it could be used as a costume for someone dressed up as Rumplestiltskin. In the famous folk tale Rumplestiltskin helps the imprisoned heroine provided that, unless she could guess his name, her baby would be forfeited to him. Fortunately, the heroine finds out the creature's name in time.



Left: A Christmas Fancy Dress party, 1952

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Pixie

A young child might have worn this costume to a fancy dress birthday party in the 1930s. It is parti-coloured in red and yellow cheap sateen and consists of a tunic and knickers. The yellow and blue hat is a modern addition. A matching hat would probably have been included in the original outfit.

The bells which are attached to the tunic and cap suggest that the outfit could also have been used as a jester's costume.



A nineteenth century cartoon from Punch Satirising Fancy Dress parties.