

Queen Victoria: An Anatomy in Dress

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This object-based study of Victoria's surviving wardrobe uses dress as material evidence for the changes that took place to the Queen's physical body. Our exploration of the Queen's attitude towards clothing combined with her physical measurements as recorded in surviving items from her wardrobe allow us to nuance the conventional biographical narrative of a woman who consistently gained weight over her lifetime. We challenge the perception that she immediately became rotund after her husband's death as a consequence of grief and argue that her later-life mourning clothes were a distinctive, comfortable and rational response to her physical body and her status as a widow.

Keywords: Queen Victoria, dress, medical history, Royal history, mourning, widows' weeds, object-based research

INTRODUCTION

Despite the work of fashion historians Madeleine Ginsburg and Kay Staniland, Queen Victoria's (1819–1901) surviving wardrobe has rarely been taken seriously by her many biographers (Figure 1).¹ This has led to a widespread perception that Victoria was uninterested in dress, and an almost-blanket disparagement of her fashion sense. And yet the Queen took a particular interest in clothes, preserving, and indeed photographing, outfits that were important to her. She followed previous queens in spending significantly — around £3,000 a year — on dress, and employed a Mistress of the Robes, dressers and wardrobe maids to plan and manage her wardrobe. It certainly absorbed a good deal of her attention and time.

Items from the Queen's wardrobe have been on display at Kensington Palace for many years, where the reaction of visitors reveals a general perception that Victoria 'was fat'. Visitors are generally astonished by the tiny size of her

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Figure 1. After Heinrich von Angeli, *Queen Victoria*, mezzotint, 1874. Mezzotint, 63 × 41.5 cm. London: Historic Royal Palaces, 3006042. © Historic Royal Palaces.

Privy Council and wedding dresses, while their pre-existing views are confirmed by the larger dimensions of clothing from later in her life.

It is, however, too simple to assume that the Queen was slender when young, and heavier when old, in response to what is often seen as the great hinge of her life, the death of her beloved Prince Albert (1819–1861). She went through seven pregnancies while remaining at an entirely healthy and very steady weight. But a significant gain after the birth of her eighth child Leopold (1853–1884) allows us to posit here that she experienced an otherwise undocumented ventral hernia in 1853. Information about the Queen’s body is hard to come by for the twenty years following Albert’s death, when she also experienced the menopause, as very little dress survives. Following her serious illness of 1871 and an accident of 1883, the Queen suffered from mobility problems, using a wheelchair and becoming more like the larger figure of popular imagination. However, her plentiful clothing from this very late period, which survives because it was distributed to friends and servants after her death, did still shape her body, and was extremely, almost eccentrically, tailored to her taste. She also lost weight towards the very end of her life.

We have included a chart (Figure 2) recording the measurements of firmly datable surviving dress accessible in museum collections today and introduce

several items that were not available to Kay Staniland for her definitive study of the Queen's dress. Two dresses and a petticoat (Figures 3, 4, 7) are in the collection of Historic Royal Palaces, while two bodices from the Queen's early middle age, belonging respectively to Prairie Village Museum in Rugby, North Dakota (Figure 5) and the Wardown House Museum and Gallery in Luton (Figure 6) have likewise not been described in print before.

QUEEN VICTORIA'S BIOGRAPHERS ON HER WARDROBE

The established genre of object-based study by museum curators only rarely overlaps with the work of historians and biographers producing studies of Queen Victoria's life. This reflects a historical lack of connection, often structured along gender lines, between the object-based work of (often female) curators and collectors and the concerns of university-based academics. Lou Taylor identified this divide, and observed positive developments to break it down, in the late 1990s.² An exception is Yvonne Ward, who links Victoria's surviving child-nursing apron to the Queen's enjoyment (contrary to prevailing academic opinion) of early motherhood.³ But Ward's article takes the very existence of the apron as its starting point, rather than studying its special qualities. This article instead builds upon an object-centred methodology such as that used by Hilary Davidson in her study, 'Jane Austen's Silk Pelisse 1812–1814', in which she works outwards from the physical object to build assumptions about the wearer's build and medical history.⁴ This follows the methodological approach to object-based study outlined by Valerie Steele in the same issue of *Fashion Theory* in which Lou Taylor identified the divide between object-based practice and other academic disciplines. Steele, building on the work of Jules Prown and E. McClung Fleming, proposes describing the surviving object as the first stage of investigation, before stages of speculation and deduction growing out from this initial foundation.⁵

The Queen, of course, does make a notable appearance in the history of mourning dress, such as in Lou Taylor's key survey of the subject in 1983. The depth and length of Victoria's mourning served as an example to subjects who wished to emulate their social betters. Taylor notes that Queen Victoria did not follow fashion after 1861, wearing plainly cut garments until her death, equating her choice of the cut of clothing to her adoption of mourning dress.⁶ We have also considered the pattern of survival of the Queen's clothing, bearing in mind that absence and loss can also be significant.⁷

Her wardrobe usually merits a passing mention in Queen Victoria biographies, but they very often take as their starting point her published correspondence, and her *Journal*, which is now available online.⁸ However, substantial parts of the latter, a major source, survive only through the transcripts of the Queen's youngest daughter, Princess Beatrice (1857–1944). She eliminated many references to what she saw as the undignified side of Royal life: servants, the physical body and dress.⁹ This trend continued in the

early editorial work upon the Queen's correspondence undertaken by Arthur Christopher Benson (1862–1925) and Reginald Brett, second Viscount Esher (1852–1930) with the permission of King Edward VII (1841–1910). Their selection of which letters to publish shaped the lasting narrative of Victoria's life, yet they minimized the number of letters from the Queen to other women, finding them 'very tiresome'. As these were the letters most likely to mention dress and fashion, the consequence is that the most easily accessible portion of the millions of words she wrote in her lifetime say little about her wardrobe.¹⁰ Benson and Esher's selection also plays down the importance of the Queen's physical body. Ward points out, for example, that they 'bury' the news of the birth of the Queen's first child in a footnote, 'several pages after its chronological place'.¹¹

The standard twentieth-century biographies of the Queen, by Lytton Strachey (1880–1932), Elizabeth Longford (1906–2002) and Stanley Weintraub (b. 1929), basically follow Benson and Esher's narrative arc of a difficult childhood, happy marriage and brave period of mourning as a widow. Her twenty-first-century biographers include A. N. Wilson, who has emphasized the Queen's increasing self-confidence in old age, which we certainly see reflected in idiosyncratic dress, while Julia Baird has taken a feminist standpoint to illustrate the ways in which Victoria's maternal role, a 'working mother' in today's terms, has been over-simplified.¹² However, Longford, Weintraub and Wilson all rely upon a strikingly quotable negative reaction to the Queen's wardrobe during her state visit of 1855 to Paris to summarize her personal style. 'The dowdiness of her wardrobe,' wrote Stanley Weintraub, 'especially her predilection for bonnets, would become legendary.'¹³ 'The Queen's dowdiness', repeats Wilson, and 'poor dress sense were more than outshone by the splendour of her jewels.'¹⁴ A study of the Queen's surviving clothes, then, if it can nuance this view of her wardrobe, or add detail to the story of her journey from slim princess to stout old lady, is a worthy undertaking.

QUEEN VICTORIA'S BIOGRAPHERS ON HER PHYSICAL BODY

Elizabeth Longford's 1964 biography still stands the test of time, not least because she does fully consider the medical and physical history of her subject's body, as evidenced in her secondary article on the Queen's doctors.¹⁵ Since the date of Weintraub's publication in 1987, historians have in general made a 'material turn' towards using physical objects as sources, thereby 'catching up' with fashion historians. Beginning with Madeleine Ginsburg in 1969, the Queen's dresses have been studied as part of their preservation and display.¹⁶ Kay Staniland, as curator at the Museum of London where the bulk of the Queen's most important dresses were kept in the 1990s, refined Ginsburg's work by measuring the items to which she had access, sketching out a timeline for the Queen's body, with a decrease in height from 1.5 m in her youth to 1.4 m or at most 1.42 m in extreme old age.¹⁷ Staniland also measured the waists of dresses, recording an expansion to 117 cm.

The Queen's teenage years, and her medical history within them, have attracted much more attention than her later life, with Cecil Woodham Smith and Monica Charlot opening up the documentary ground that was usefully analysed by art historians Marina Warner and Lynne Vallone.¹⁸ Vallone is typical of the way that more recent historians, reflecting a wider concern in modern society about eating disorders, have successfully mined the sources of the Princess Victoria's life for evidence that she used food as a means of exerting some influence over the powerful people who restricted her movements and attitudes in her adolescence.

Food historian Annie Gray has recently built on the work on Vallone's presentation of the Princess's disordered menstruation and posited some kind of teenage eating disorder, and has also examined the Queen's well-recorded concerns about her weight (too heavy) and her height (too short).¹⁹ The Queen's height at the time of her accession was clearly 'short [...] 5 feet 1 & $\frac{1}{4}$ of an inch', as recorded by the portraitist Thomas Sully (1783–1872), and his tape measure survives to prove it.²⁰ However, Gray points out that an inch was generally added onto public statements about her height, because of the contemporary clear height difference between well-fed (upper-class) and malnourished (working-class) children. If the Queen was short, then perhaps her mother and guardian the Duchess of Kent (1786–1861) could be criticized for not feeding her properly.²¹

But, while the teenage years have been examined in detail, the Queen's body in maturity has been neglected. Adrienne Munich, who has placed Victoria within the contemporary literature on the menopause, is a rare exception.²²

METHODOLOGY

Our methodology for the study of Queen Victoria's clothing was to identify, and then to measure, as many well-provenanced examples as we could (Figure 2).

We first took the opportunity to study examples that Historic Royal Palaces cares for as part of the Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection, including three garments that were not available to Staniland in 1997. As the organisation has displayed Victoria's wardrobe for many years, in particular through changing displays at Kensington Palace, there was a large institutional archive. Searches of the online catalogues of the Museum of London, the Royal Collection and the Victoria and Albert Museum were followed by an appeal to the Dress and Textiles Specialists' Network for information. We received thirty-three responses from UK collections, from the Scottish Highlands to Exeter, locating over 200 separate items, ranging from dresses to accessories and jewellery. We did not attempt to trace every piece of linen, or the numerous stockings, sold at auction over the years.

The selection of garments we studied in depth was based on two factors: clothing we were able to gain access to within the timeframe of the project, and items that would have been tailored to fit the Queen's body. We also attempted as broad a date range as the surviving clothing allowed. We then measured the

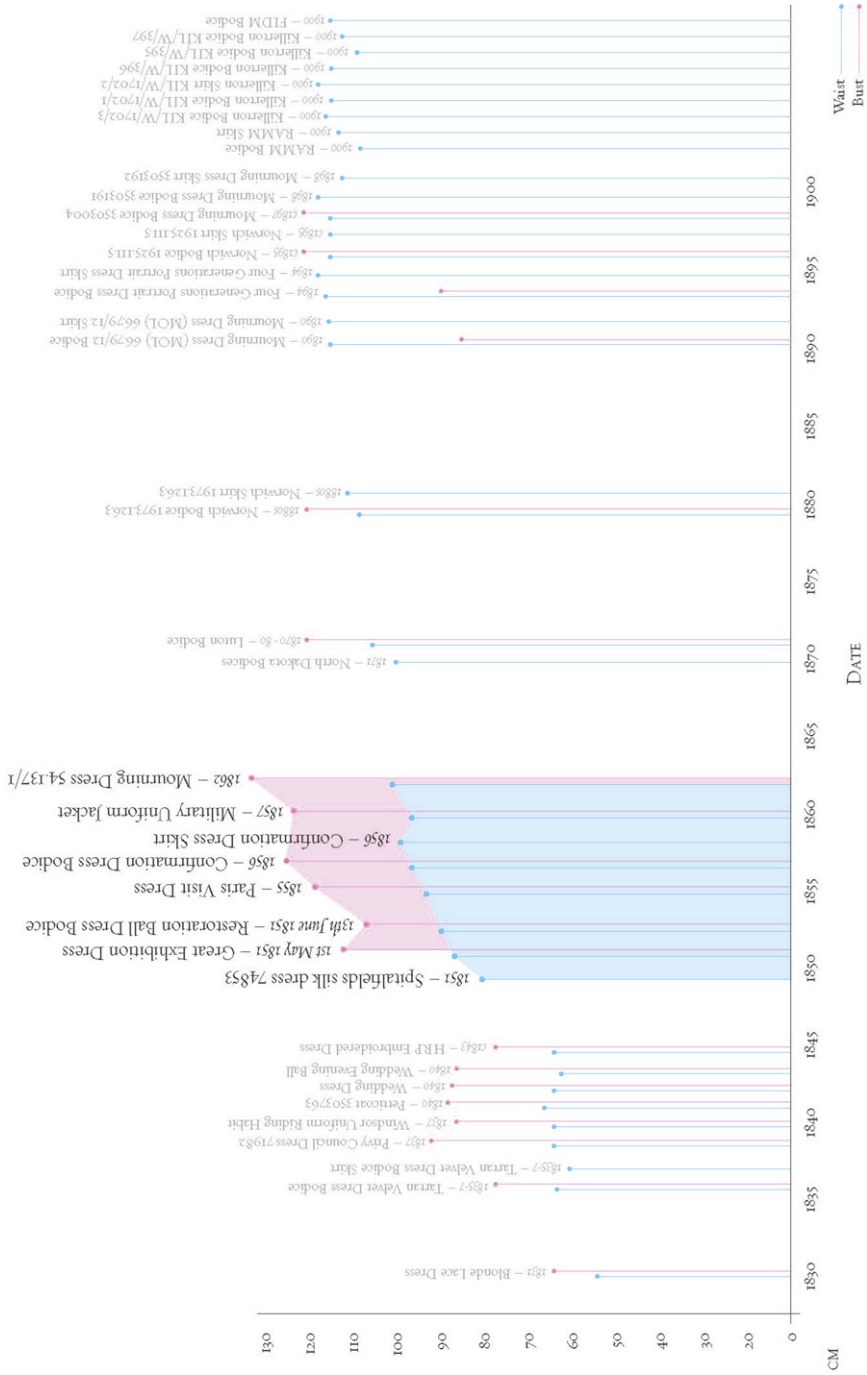


Figure 2. Chart collating the dimensions of Queen Victoria's clothing over time. The period of rapid increase in the waist and bust measurements of her clothing in the 1850s and early 1860s is highlighted.

items to which we had access, and created a database of measurements to allow us to compare dimensions from the different periods of her life.

When measuring the clothes, we took standard garment measurements such as skirt length, hem circumference or sleeve length, but also dimensions that would have related directly to the fit of the clothes on Victoria's body. Circumference at the waist was recorded, but with the knowledge that the waistline of clothing moved during her lifetime, and we took measurements from the shoulder seam to the waistband to account for this. Remarkably, most of the waistbands fall about 30 cm (12 in.) from the shoulder for her fashionable dress until her widowhood. Admittedly, her highly tailored riding and military jackets reveal quite sloping shoulders, but we are confident that in most cases we were measuring her natural waist. In addition, where possible, waist measurements were taken where there were fastening tapes present in bodices or waistbands in skirts, letting the garments show where their narrowest point was. Bust measurements, taken underarm, presented a more stable reference point across time, with the knowledge that the Queen's upper torso would have been determined by the shape of her stays or corsets. Sleeve length and width provided evidence for fit and comfort. We were also careful to observe the fit, construction and modification of clothes for evidence of the relationship of the surviving garments to the Queen's body. Measurements were taken in centimetres for easy modern usage, as well as in inches, as the unit for the construction of the clothes. Dimensions were often taken as though the garment were fastened, so from button to buttonhole, rather than from edge to edge. The measuring of clothes, which are, of course, designed to be worn on a three-dimensional and malleable body, is to some extent subjective. Fabric is flexible, and will change shape and size as it is moved or stretched. In addition, some measurements were taken from files, or by others, when we could not access the garments directly. Therefore the measurements taken can only be considered indicative, rather than definitive.

However, our research in 2017 confirmed Kay Staniland's picture in 1997 that there are some significant gaps in the chronological survival of Queen Victoria's clothes. Clothes survive for two reasons: if the Queen wanted them to survive, for reasons of personal recollection, or if they were given away to people who cherished them. The Queen attached great importance to clothes. An unauthorized but nevertheless well-informed member of her household, who spoke to the author of *The Private Life of Queen Victoria*, tells us that 'almost without exception, her wardrobe woman can produce the gown, bonnet, or mantle she wore on any particular occasion'.²³ Most of the surviving clothes were worn at occasions the Queen deemed personally significant: balls, accession, the opening of the Great Exhibition, the confirmation of a daughter. From the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s, there is a paucity of survival, followed by a glut of outfits from her old age with the dispersal of clothing to servants and household members after her death.

Less significant items, however, such as body linen or stockings, appear to leave the Queen's possession throughout her reign. These items are harder to date, although the prominent laundry number and crowned 'VR' make them

easy to identify. We observed several cases of what appeared to be bloodstains, possibly menstrual blood in the case of the early petticoat at Historic Royal Palaces, possibly a nosebleed on a later nightshirt belonging to the Royal Albert Museum, Exeter. However, it is easy to mistake rust for blood, and we cannot be certain about this. The difficulty of dating body linen, combined with the looseness of its fit, meant that we soon excluded it from our study.

CONSTRUCTING THE QUEEN'S FIGURE

Measuring tailored items such as dresses and jackets, we had to be mindful of the way the Queen's flesh beneath her clothes would have been shaped by her undergarments. Along with the Queen's personal style, her figure has conventionally been denigrated: 'not a very good figure', wrote one witness in 1837, while another thought her in 1840 'ugly & enormously fat [...] Her figure now is most extraordinary'.²⁴ 'She is short, stout, and her face rather red', remembered one person who met the Queen in 1883, while ten years later Tsar Nicholas II thought her 'a big round ball on wobbly legs'.²⁵

This was not for want of good corsetry throughout her life. The mannequins used by Historic Royal Palaces over the years to mount the Queen's dresses from her childhood and married years only work when they feature the conical torso created by tight stays.²⁶ The Queen was slow to adopt the steel crinoline in the 1850s, but adopt it she did. Even in late life, when her dresses are usually described as 'shapeless', we do in fact see evidence that a bustle was worn, and that her late clothes were tailored to create a more defined silhouette. Her late mourning bodices are made to a standard cut, and typically feature sixteen flexible bones, with pleats or flaps at the lower back, and pleating at the rear of the skirt that could have accommodated a bustle. Textile conservators at Historic Royal Palaces familiar with mounting Victoria's clothes have noticed that, even while the underlying specially made mannequin form may appear shapeless, the structure of the clothes gives this 'body' a more tailored appearance.

This is in contrast to the well-known and widely quoted comment by a doctor during her first pregnancy which has led historians to assume that she was reluctant, or unable, to shape her body. 'She goes without stays or anything that keeps Her shape within bounds', this somewhat unpleasant gentleman wrote, '& that She is more like a barrel than anything else.'²⁷ However, his jocular views, circulated among the high society friends whose good opinion he courted for the sake of his well-paying medical practice, cannot be taken as a reliable indication of the Queen's usual habits. Likewise, a satirical article from *Punch* magazine, reporting the Queen's views that the steel crinoline was an 'indecicate, expensive, dangerous and hideous article', is all too often quoted as if literally true.²⁸

Like most young ladies, she cared most about her figure in her late teens and early twenties, telling her journal that she had 'a horror of being fat'.²⁹ On discovering, aged nineteen, that her weight was 8 stone 13 pounds, she made a

conscious effort to eat less, limiting her lunch to just ‘a little broth’.³⁰ A year later she had lost nearly two stones, weighing 7 stones 2 pounds.³¹

She did indeed wear stays during pregnancy, contrary to Locock’s views, and corresponded in detail with her own daughter about the correct way to wear them: ‘you must have the bone or busk stout enough to keep you up — & by lining them well & doubly — they won’t press’. She did not recommend side-lacing, ‘because when much open, it gives you no support’.³² The Queen’s own dresses from later life still contain boning, to give shape, and her corsetry was intended to create a smooth foundation for clothes, rather than to minimize flesh. The Queen was, however, against tight-lacing, and did not allow it among her younger Maids of Honour, and indeed asked her daughter to ‘Pray upon no acct. lace tightly round the waist or ever have your dresses too tight; it is very bad’.³³ And despite these concerns over corsetry, it is true that in later years the Queen controlled her eating with less care. After her marriage records of her weight disappear from her journals.

GIRL, WIFE AND MOTHER

The earliest dress with a strong association with a particular event is the Privy Council Dress.³⁴ The dress is believed to have been worn on the first day of her reign, 20 June 1837, when she had just turned eighteen. Its preservation suggests it had this important association for the Queen.³⁵ The dress has an internal waist circumference of 62 cm (24½ in.). The horizontal waistband must have been close to or on the natural waist, following the falling of the fashionable waistline in the 1830s. The centre of the waistband falls at about 30 cm (12 in.) from the shoulder seam. The bust measures 94 cm (37 in.), early evidence of the comparably large bust for which the Queen was known. From her teenage years, any comment on her lack of height was conventionally followed up with praise for the Queen’s bust. ‘Her size is below the middle,’ wrote one observer, ‘but her figure is finely proportioned, and a little embonpoint. Her bust, like most English-womens, is very good.’³⁶ Another found her ‘sufficiently en embonpoint to indicate health and good humour; her bust especially is remarkably fine’.³⁷ The Privy Council dress reveals that she otherwise had a slight build at this age, with the closely fitting cuffs at the wrist measuring only 17 cm (6⅞ in.) when fastened.

Victoria’s Windsor Uniform Riding Habit of about 1837 was closely tailored to her body. The shape confirms that she had a slender figure, with gently sloping shoulders, slim arms and wrists.³⁸ The jacket is remarkably slender, with a waist of 62 cm (24½ in.) and a bust of 84 cm (33 in.). As we could not directly access the garment, these measurements are based on records kept on file, and converted into inches, so may not be consistent with others in this article, but the waist is consistent with other garments at the time. The variation in bust measurements seen around these years could be attributed either to corsetry, or Victoria’s own eating patterns based on concerns about her weight.

Although Victoria's coronation robes for the ceremony on 28 June 1838 survive, they were loose-fitting, and not tailored to her body. Her Supertunica was designed to be worn open at the front, secured with a thick braid at the waist, while the Dalmatica fitted loosely, resting on the shoulders.³⁹ Therefore, the next securely datable dress is her wedding dress, worn on her marriage on 10 February 1840, when she was twenty. Although we were unable to access the wedding dress during the project, Historic Royal Palaces retains measurements on file, taken in mm and here converted, from a previous loan.⁴⁰ The separate bodice measured 63 cm ($24\frac{3}{4}$ in.) at the waist and 87 cm ($34\frac{1}{4}$ in.) at the bust. Another surviving dress is also associated with her wedding day, a white watered-silk dress trimmed with lace, with records that suggest it was worn at a ball on the wedding day.⁴¹ Its measurements, slightly smaller than the wedding dress, led Kay Staniland to question this tradition that the dress could have been worn on the same day.⁴² And the Queen's own journal tells us that, far from attending a ball, she spent the evening of her marriage alone with Albert at Windsor Castle.⁴³ The bodice is fastened edge to edge with hooks and eyes at the back, and measures 61 cm (24 in.) at the waist and 86 cm (34 in.) at the bust, the waist falls 30.5 cm (12 in.) from the shoulder.

Another garment believed to date from this time is a unique survival of her early underwear. A petticoat acquired by Historic Royal Palaces in 2016, and not published before, is believed to date from about 1840 (Figure 3).⁴⁴ An unusual survival of this type of garment, it is more structured than a chemise, with the pointed waist of the dresses worn at this time, and would have been worn as a layer between her stays and her dress. The petticoat measures 67 cm ($26\frac{3}{8}$ in.) at the waist, and 89.5 cm ($35\frac{1}{4}$ in.) at the bust, with the waist falling 30.5 cm (12 in.) from the shoulder. However, the bodice shows signs that the buttons and eye fastenings may have been moved by an inch, increasing the size of the bodice, suggesting it could have fastened at 64.5 cm ($25\frac{3}{8}$ in.) at the waist, and 86.9 cm ($34\frac{1}{4}$ in.) at the bust.

Following her marriage, Victoria gave birth to nine children. Sir James Reid records that, after her death, when he was allowed for the first time in twenty years to examine her physical body, he discovered that she had a ventral hernia and prolapse of the uterus.⁴⁵ This painful condition of the lower abdomen, also experienced by Queen Caroline in the previous century as a result of numerous childbirths, would have made it uncomfortable to lace dresses tightly. Analysis of the Queen's dresses from the 1840s and 1850s allows us to suggest that this was a specific medical event occurring in her penultimate pregnancy, Prince Leopold, in 1853.

An evening dress with an embroidered organza overlay, acquired by Historic Royal Palaces in 2000, is dated to the early 1840s, based on style (Figure 4).⁴⁶ The dress was on display during the project, but measurements on file taken in mm and here converted show it has a waist of 63 cm ($24\frac{3}{4}$ in.) and a bust of 77.5 cm ($30\frac{1}{2}$ in.). Victoria experienced her first four pregnancies in the early 1840s: Princess Victoria, born 21 November 1840, Prince Albert Edward, born 9 November 1841, Princess Alice, born 25 April 1843 and Prince Alfred,



Figure 3. Petticoat, around 1840. Cotton. London: Historic Royal Palaces, 3503763.
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born 6 August 1844. The similarity of the measurements of this dress to others worn before her first pregnancy suggests this dress was made to be worn at a time between pregnancies.

Surprisingly, Victoria's waist and bust measurements remain fairly static across the decade of the 1840s. In 1840 the average waist measurement of her



Figure 4. Embroidered dress, about 1843. Silk satin and gauze with silk and metal thread embroidery. London: Historic Royal Palaces, 3502897.
© Historic Royal Palaces.

dresses was 63 cm (25 in.), while in 1851 it was, on average, 67.5 cm ($26\frac{1}{2}$ in.) Her bust had an average measurement of 86.8 cm ($34\frac{1}{4}$ in.) between 1837 and the early 1840s, while in 1851 it was 90 cm ($35\frac{1}{2}$ in.).

In the 1850s, the picture changes. The Queen preserved several dresses worn in 1851. The dress of Spitalfields silk measures 63 cm (25 in.) at the waist.⁴⁷ The dress worn to the opening of the Great Exhibition on 1 May 1851 measures 69 cm (27 in.) at the waist and 90 cm ($35\frac{1}{2}$ in.) at the bust.⁴⁸ Staniland notes that the dress may have been worn again on a subsequent occasion, when the large bows not shown in paintings of Victoria at the Exhibition may have been added.⁴⁹ We found no evidence that the fit of the dress had been altered for later wearings, suggesting her figure remained a similar size for at least a while. The fancy dress worn to the Restoration Ball at Buckingham Palace on 13 June 1851 is a similar

size, at 71 cm (28 in.) at the waist, and 86.5 cm (34 in.) at the bust. The bodice is heavily boned, as it was intended to create an impression of the rigid bodices of the seventeenth century.⁵⁰ We can see that, compared to the Great Exhibition Dress, worn a few weeks earlier, it slightly flattened her bust and was wider at the waist, to create the desired outline, suggesting it may not be the most accurate reflection of her figure beneath the dress.

Then, in the latter half of the 1850s, her weight appears to have increased. Her eighth labour, Prince Leopold, born 7 April 1853 is most often discussed in terms of her use, for the first time, of chloroform, administered by a GP, Dr John Snow. She 'appeared very cheerful and well, expressing herself much gratified with the effect', but the labour was not without its problems. Her regular obstetrician, Dr Locock, was much less satisfied with the intervention, feeling it had 'prolonged the intervals between the pains and retarded the labour somewhat'. During her next labour, with Princess Beatrice, also under the influence of chloroform, the drug certainly resulted in delay: 'Dr Locock wished the patient to make a bearing down effect [...] The Queen, however, when not unconscious of what was said, complained that she could not make an effort'.⁵¹ Despite his painless birth, Leopold, who suffered from haemophilia and epilepsy, became a particular worry to the Queen. She felt 'terrible anxiety' for him, an emotion which could 'unfit her for her duties at home and might undermine her health'.⁵²

If, as the evidence of the sudden leap in her waist measurement may suggest, the delivery of Prince Leopold resulted in some kind of lasting injury that her doctors either dismissed or did not notice, it would explain her extreme reluctance to bear any more children. 'The Queen felt sure', her doctor Sir James Clark reported, 'that if she had another child she would sink under it'.⁵³

An unusually slow recovery from Leopold's birth may also be hinted at in the evidence of changes made to the dress for her state visit to Paris in August 1855, worn after the birth of Leopold but before the birth of Beatrice. It has a waist of 74 cm (29 in.) and a bust of 94 cm (37 in.), which has been let out at both side seams and the two back seams, with the silk retaining marks of the previous lines of stitches. The seams have been let out by between 0.9 cm ($\frac{3}{8}$ in.) and 2.5 cm (1 in.), totalling about 8 cm ($3\frac{1}{4}$ in.). These radical alterations to the back and side seams suggest that the Queen's makers had been taken by surprise by her changing body shape.

This larger waist size also appears in her dress worn at a daughter's confirmation in 1856, which has a waist of 75.5 cm ($29\frac{3}{4}$ in.) and a bust of 99 cm (39 in.), while the separate skirt has a waist measuring 77 cm ($30\frac{3}{8}$ in.). These are the largest measurements of any garment before her widowhood.

While we lack clothing worn during her pregnancy before Princess Beatrice's birth on 14 April 1857, we do have closely tailored garments likely to have been worn soon before and afterwards. The end of the Crimean War in 1856 required Victoria to wear clothing suitable for military reviews, for the purpose of welcoming and thanking the homecoming troops. The Queen first appearing in a scarlet tunic based on a woman's tailored riding habit and a British general's

tunic on the 16 June 1856.⁵⁴ Staniland published two of these surviving tunics, noting that the version with the ‘V’ neck was smaller than one that buttoned to the neck, suggesting an earlier and a later version.⁵⁵ We were able to measure the later high-necked version for this project, which probably dates to 1857 or later.⁵⁶ The close tailoring of this garment gives a good insight into the shape of her body, and corsetry, beneath it. The shoulders show a similar slope to that of the 1837 riding habit, while she would have required a corset to create the smooth line from a large bust to the shaped waist. The jacket measures 74 cm (29 $\frac{1}{8}$ in.) at the waist, and 94 cm (37 in.) at the bust, suggesting her figure had become slightly smaller than it was when she wore the Confirmation Dress in 1856, or just that this tailored garment constrained it more. The decade of the Queen’s final two pregnancies saw her waist increase by more than 12 cm (5 in.) and her bust by 17 cm (6 $\frac{5}{8}$ in.), a much greater increase than she experienced in the decade of her first seven pregnancies in the 1840s.

THE QUEEN IN MOURNING

The only dress to survive from Queen Victoria’s early widowhood, a black mourning dress of about 1862–1863 (MOL 54.137/1), shows that the Queen’s figure continued to grow from the later 1850s into the early 1860s. The dress measures 80 cm (31 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.) at the waist and 107 cm (42 in.) at the bust, although at 16.5 cm (6 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.) the circumference of her wrists had not changed since 1837.

After she became a widow, the Queen adopted her characteristic black for life: ‘My dress is always the same,’ she explained to her daughter in Germany, ‘it is the dress which I have adopted for ever, for mine’.⁵⁷ While Victoria never adopted the mauve appropriate to half-mourning, her clothing did not remain in the first stage of deep mourning. Instead, she maintained a regal version of the third or ordinary stage mourning, while retaining crape, for the remainder of her life.⁵⁸ The dress of 1862–1863 shows the restraint and simplicity, with the large quantity of crape, appropriate for early mourning. Her later black mourning dresses give the superficial appearance of modesty and restraint, but close examination reveals that they are rich and rare.

She never had a reputation for extravagance. ‘I could have cried’, said the woman who ran Caley’s department store in Windsor, ‘to see Her Majesty start for the Jubilee in her second-best “mantle” — after all the beautiful things I had sent her.’⁵⁹ In fact, though, examining the outfit that she wore on the day of the Jubilee up-close would reveal that it really was rather splendid, her cape embroidered with swirling silver sequins, huge pearls hung from each ear, and upon the dress itself ‘panels of grey satin veiled with black net & steel embroideries, & some black lace’.⁶⁰ Modern historians have concluded that the Queen’s clothes in old age were indeed more distinctive, more self-confident than those of her youth. Victoria’s ‘mourning dresses suited her far better than had her earlier attempts at haute couture’, says biographer Greg King.⁶¹

Staniland observed that all the late bodices have a little watch pocket on the proper left at waist level, and again on the proper right, a shallow pocket with a cord across it, for the attachment of a cord to secure either spectacles or keys, which would have been kept in large patch pockets on the skirt below.⁶² We have also noticed that many of the bodices also have a small pocket concealed behind the buttonholes on the proper right at chest level. This arrangement was clearly created specifically at the Queen's request, showing how she placed comfort above fashion in later life. The cut and construction of the Queen's clothes from late in her life is distinctive and consistent, and Staniland felt this was to minimize the inconvenience of fittings for the elderly Queen.⁶³ Instead, variety is created by changing the shape of the neckline, the shape and construction of the sleeves, and above all in the variety of embellishment and adornment. When Queen Victoria does describe her clothes in her journals in the last four decades of her life, they are described in terms of this embellishment, or the jewels she wore with them, and usually only in relation to important events. She mentions wearing 'a black Marie antique dress, interwoven with silver' for Princess Helena's wedding on 5 July 1866.⁶⁴ She was 'dressed in a black velvet square cut dress, trimmed with miniver' for the State Opening of Parliament on 8 February 1876.⁶⁵ She describes 'wearing a dress & bonnet, trimmed with white Point d'Alencon, diamond ornaments in my bonnet, & pearls round my neck' on 21 June 1887 for her Golden Jubilee, and most remarkably 'a dress of which the whole front was embroidered in gold, which had been specially worked in India, diamonds in my cap, & a diamond necklace, &c.' on 21 June 1897, for a dinner to celebrate her Diamond Jubilee.⁶⁶

Writing in 1997, Kay Staniland was not aware of several dresses preserved by Victoria in the decades immediately following her widowhood.⁶⁷ We believe we have identified several items that may date to the 1870s and 1880s. Of these, we have identified three garments that would have been designed to fit closely to her body and might give us an insight into her health at this time. A remarkable survival is now in the care of the Prairie Village Museum in Rugby, North Dakota (Figure 5), and was previously on display in the Rolla Public Library, in Rolla, North Dakota. The dress consists of two bodices and a skirt, and all have white embroidered foliage on the black fabric. Local provenance states that the dress went to North America with Marie or Mary Downing Williams (1853–1933), the Queen's dresser, who left for North America with her husband in 1886. The dress was apparently worn for a ceremony in 1870 when Hugh Grosvenor, first Duke of Westminster (1825–1899), was invested with the Order of the Garter.⁶⁸ Both bodices measure 100 cm (39½ in.) at the waist.⁶⁹

While we were not able to investigate the North Dakota bodice in person, we were able to examine a similar bodice in the Wardown House Museum and Gallery in Luton (Figure 6).⁷⁰ This bodice is similar in style to the North Dakota bodices with the front tailored, with the hem angled to more of a point at the front than later bodices. It has the Queen's distinctive small pockets, one with a cord, at the front of the bodice, which are set at an angle in line with the angled hem, a feature not seen later when, like the hem, they are horizontal. It measures 105 cm



Figure 5. Mourning dress, late 1860s–early 1870s. Silk, with embroidery and embellishment. Rugby, North Dakota: Prairie Village Museum.
© *Prairie Village Museum.*

(41½ in.) inches at the waist and 120 cm (47¼ in.) at the bust. Unfortunately, the provenance cannot be traced earlier than 1950, when it was accessioned by the Luton museum. The bodice is tailored to a body shape with a distinct waist and a full bust, and, although boned at the front, is not boned at the back, suggesting



Figure 6. Mourning bodice, 1870s. Silk, crape and embellishment.
Luton: Wardown House, Museum and Gallery, LTNMG 63/50.
© Historic Royal Palaces, image courtesy of Luton Culture.

the wearer wore stays to create the smooth outline to her clothes necessary in Victorian fashion.

The North Dakota and Luton bodices differ significantly in size and fit from the clothes securely dated to the last years of Victoria's life, suggesting they do provide a 'missing link' in the story of her surviving wardrobe. We were able to investigate twelve bodices and seven skirts from dresses dated by their collections from the 1880s to her death. We also received information on others in collections we did not visit. Measuring these bodices is facilitated by the presence of a waist tie in many of them, which allows a stable point to measure her natural waistline. Where this is missing sometimes stitching threads remain, and the similarity of cut and construction of these bodices allows us to determine the waistline on bodices where it is absent.

The bodices we measured of the style and cut typical of the last period of her life had a variety of waist measurements. An example in the Norfolk Museums Service collection dated to the 1880s has a waist of 107 cm (42 in.) and a bust of 120 cm (47 in.).⁷¹ Another in the Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection of Historic Royal Palaces, dated to 1897 (Figure 7), with a waist of 115 cm (45½ in.) and a bust of 120.5 cm (47½ in.), suggesting that the Queen gained weight on her stomach during these years.⁷² As already noted, however, when mounted and therefore when worn by Queen Victoria, these dresses through their cut and construction give the impression of more structure and shape than the underlying form.

The separate skirts of these late garments suggest that accommodation was made for comfort, and for an increasing waistline. The waist tapes of the skirts would have been concealed by the bodices over them, and all are of a relatively simple construction, slightly lower at the front than the back, and fastened at the back with a hook and the option of two eyes, about 2 cm apart, with a tie to close the back opening. As Kay Staniland noted, these would have 'rested loosely on the hips rather than having nipped into the waist flesh'.⁷³ In most cases the measurement of the waistband of the skirt is slightly larger than the accompanying bodice, suggesting they sat slightly lower on the body. As you might expect, some of the waistbands of the skirts have been adjusted, with the eye for a smaller setting moved to the farthest end of the waistband. On the skirt in the National Trust Collection at Killerton, Devon, this would have increased the maximum circumference of the skirt by 2.7 cm (1⅛ in.), taking it to a circumference of 117.5 cm (46¼ in.),⁷⁴ while on the black and white dress in the Museum of London, the adjustment is 1.3 cm or ½ in., taking it to a 115 cm (45¼ in.).⁷⁵ While not large increases, these modifications suggest that the clothes needed to be adjusted for comfort, possibly because the Queen's body was growing.

Madeleine Ginsburg puts the Queen's largest size in 1894, with a waist measurement of 48 in. or 122 cm. We believe we have been looking at the same garment, in the Museum of London 'The Four Generations Portrait Dress', but have been unable to replicate her measurement.⁷⁶ We made the waist of that skirt to be 46 in., or 115 cm, significantly smaller. In fact, the bodice of that dress has



Figure 7. Mourning dress, 1898. Silk, crape, silk chiffon and netting.
London: Historic Royal Palaces, 3503763.
© Historic Royal Palaces.

the significantly smaller measurements of 115.5 cm (43 in.) at the waist and 88 cm (35 in.) at the bust. Ginsburg suggested that the Queen lost weight in the very final years of her life, and our observations and documentary sources support this. ‘The greatest change had taken place,’ wrote someone who was shocked to find her losing weight as well as spirits in extreme old age, ‘the Queen had lost much flesh and had shrunk so as to appear about one half the person she

had been.⁷⁷ She now ate just ‘a tiny slice of boiled chicken’, or ‘a cut from the sirloin, which is sent from London every day’.⁷⁸ We see in the garments that the upper part of the torso decreases in size, while the waist remains a similar size. In the bodice for the black and white dress in the Museum of London the waist is 114 cm (45 in.), while her bust is 81 cm (32 in.).⁷⁹ This could have contributed to the impression that she was ‘shrinking’.

Further evidence for a loss of weight in her final years lies in the fact that the buttons have been moved, to tighten the fit to accommodate a body decreasing in size. A bodice at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter has the first five buttons on the proper right side of the central bone, then two on the left side at around the level of the waist tie, before the lowest one returns to the right.⁸⁰ When fastened, this would have curved the front of the garment in at the waist. A similar effect can be seen in bodices at Killerton, with the centre two buttons, one, KIL/W/1702/3, on the proper left side of the central bone, again, at a similar height to the waist tie, while on KIL/W/1702/1 there is a distinct curve to the buttons, with most on the proper right, and the lowest on the left of the bone. These bodices have comparatively plainer decorative embellishment than ones we observed that did not have evidence of adjustment to the buttons, suggesting that more ‘everyday’ dresses were subject to alterations and changes to prolong their life than dresses with elaborate embellishment worn for the special occasions the Queen recorded in her diary.

The Queen’s wardrobe staff had changed completely by the end of her life, and seem to have adopted a cleaning practice not seen before 1861. We have observed four dresses with squares of white or cream twilled satin inserted inside the bodice at the back and shoulders. Doris Langley Moore, a highly experienced collector, argues that this device had the purpose of ‘letting the dressers know when cleaning was desirable’.⁸¹

Throughout her life, Victoria’s clothes were designed to fit her body, and we observed that one bodice in Killerton has, when laid flat on the table, a very pronounced area for a ‘hump’, an osteoarthritic stoop.⁸² A similar feature was observed in the bodice in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, where not only is there a pronounced area for a stoop, but the lining appears to have been removed in this area.⁸³ The ‘Four Generations Portrait’ dress bodice also appears to have had the upper lining removed in this area.⁸⁴ Perhaps this, too, was to ease the tightness of the back of the bodice as the stoop grew more pronounced.

CONCLUSION

Twenty years on from Staniland’s definitive study of Queen Victoria’s wardrobe, we have followed in some of her footsteps, and have found items that were unavailable to her, which only confirm her conclusions.

In addition, our study of the Queen’s dresses from the years of her motherhood has revealed the possibility of an unsuspected difficult delivery of her eighth child Leopold, possibly leading to lasting medical damage. Meanwhile, new additions to our record of her wardrobe from her mourning

years shows a strong evidence of a person who knew what she wanted, and who dressed with particular attention to her age, status and health. Queen Victoria's biographers have conventionally denigrated her 'taste' in clothes, whereas we believe she had a strong sense of style of her own, which grew only stronger as the years went on. She may not have dressed like a Parisian; she always dressed as herself.

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his work on the Great Exhibition of 1851. Historic Royal Palaces acquired a provenance note with the dress, kept in the object information file, dated Autumn 1948, signed by Mabyn D. Collingham, a former owner:

This Autumn (1948) my cousin, Ulrica Dolling, gave into my keeping a dress which had belonged to Queen Victoria, with this history:-

After a Committee Meeting at Buckingham Palace concerning the 1851 Exhibition my Grandfather, J.G.Crace, was presented (amongst others) to the Queen by the Prince Consort, who mentioned that his young wife was about the Queen's age etc: Later this dress was brought to my Grandfather with a message from the Queen that perhaps Mrs. Crace would like to have one of her dresses as a souvenir. Originally the dress had a Honiton Lace berthe.

Signed Ulrica R.Dolling

13.11.40

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71. Norwich Museums Service collections, acc. no. 1973.126.3. The dress was given to the museum with other garments worn by Queen Victoria. According to the accession records they were given to the donor's mother during Victoria's lifetime by her relative, who was a personal attendant to the Queen at Windsor Castle.
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note is acc. no. 3503005 and is from F. Rathbone of 27 Evelyn Gardens, to Mrs Fussell of 23 Clifton Terrace, Brighton:

March 9th/ Dear Mrs Fussell/ Many thanks/ for your note, kindly/ enclosing stamps which/ I regret you should/ have troubled to send./ I am glad you / received the dress/ safely. It came/ straight up to me/ from Osborne, having/ been obtained thro' / a lady from one of/ the Queen's 'dressers',./ whose perquisites the/ gowns become after they/ have been worn about/ three months by the Queen/ I thought you might/ like to know the history/ of the dress, and that it/ is an absolutely bona/ - fide article -/ With kind regards,/ Yrs v. sincerely/
F. Wlm Rathbone

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