

A Victorian Wedding dress

This three-piece dress belonging to Ann Rogers doesn't exactly scream 'wedding dress' to a modern eye. Emily Connell, explains why this was the style of choice for someone of Ann's social standing.



Prior to Queen Victoria's wedding in 1840, white wedding dresses weren't typically the done thing.

Of course, there are extant dresses in various museums showing white wedding dresses dating as far back as the late 18th century, but they didn't hold the symbolism associated with white gowns today. Dresses were an investment and unless part of the elite and upper-class society, many families couldn't afford to have a dress made purely to be worn once. Given that Ann was both the daughter of a tenant farmer and set to marry one, it is safe to assume that she had a relatively low income and the pennies would have to be watched carefully.

The pattern alone for such a garment would cost around £40 in today's money on top of the yards of fabric and trim required, as well as the cost of actually making it so, the family had to ensure it was designed to reach its full practicality.

The dress, comprising of a cape, skirt, and bodice, is dyed a deep green which would have been perfect for concealing any dirt picked up from filthy Victorian streets as well as the farm where Ann lived. The three separate pieces meant that individual garments could be mixed and matched with other pieces in Ann's wardrobe, therefore allowing even more use out of them. Finally, the simplicity of the dress and lack of embellishment meant it could be worn for various occasions. It's likely that this dress would have been later worn as her 'Sunday best' and for any formal events should they arise.



The bodice comprises of 16 panels overall to create the 'fit and flare' waist look that the Victorians loved so much. The outer fabric is a green silk taffeta matching the skirt and cape.

What is interesting however, particularly from a curating perspective, is just how good quality the dress remains 140 years later. When inspecting the dress, none of the pieces seem to have substantial damage. The cape is almost perfect with only part of the stitching along the cord tie coming loose. The bodice has minor holes likely to have been the result of insects when previously stored and just general loose threads and the skirt has some slight tearing on the inside. So the question remains: if a dress has been made with the intention of being worn multiple times and to last for many years, how is it in such remarkable condition?



Henry Morgan was a draper with a shop in Broad St.

Victorian fashion changed roughly every decade, with the popular silhouettes gradually changing.

Throughout the 1870s, voluminous bustles and skirts

were incredibly popular but by the end of the decade a more 'natural' shape took over with less emphasis on volume and more on the length of the skirt. By around 1882 the 'natural' shape had fallen out of fashion and large bustles grew in popularity again, creating an almost shelf like shape on the lady's bottom. This of course means that Ann's dress would have been considered outdated just a year after it was made. In Victorian society it was imperative to look as presentable as possible and whilst many couldn't afford the luxurious fabrics like the aristocracy, they could at least mimic the desirable silhouette. This could be a possible reason explaining the condition of the dress. Bodies change over time and as Ann had children or got older it is likely that the dress would no longer fit her. By the time her children were old enough to wear the dress it would have fallen out of fashion completely, therefore resulting in it being left in storage as a potential family heirloom or just simply forgotten about.



The inside of the bodice is lined with a medium weight cotton to provide extra structure. There are 6 boning channels inside placed on the outer seams also helping to create a flared look and provide a smooth fit around the torso

Of course, we will never know for certain the exact history of the dress; how often it was worn, where and by whom. But with the brief information we have already, it's safe to say we've made a good start at learning more about the life of Ann Rodgers and her dress.



Left, Ann's cape in matching silk, and **right**, a detail of the horse-hair cord to tie it in place

