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## Talking Textiles, Making Value: Catalysing Fashion, Dress, and Textiles Heritage in the Midlands

### Abstract

There are hundreds of small museums, archives, and collections in the English Midlands, United Kingdom (UK), many of which are the legacy of the region's rich industrial heritage. A surprising number of these include dress and textiles in various forms, from the costume collection of Charles Paget-Wade at Berrington Hall (Leominster) to intricately stitched smocks made by local needlewomen in Herefordshire, and the wealth of manufacturers' samples that comprise the silk ribbon trade archive at the Herbert Museum, Coventry. These are challenging times for many such organisations as they face cutbacks in staff and local authority funding. Yet they offer a unique and largely unexploited resource for staff, students, and researchers in art and design higher education (HE), not only for primary research but also as a catalyst for design innovation.

The discussion here, which takes the format of group research practitioner interview, builds on a Knowledge Exchange event that was held December 2017 at the Fashion Lab, University of Wolverhampton (UoW). The event brought together a diverse group of fashion and textiles professionals to talk, exchange ideas, take part in object handling sessions, mind-map, and brainstorm how to catalyse connections between heritage collections and higher education and build value. With seed funding from the Museum-University Partnership Initiative (MUPI) (see National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement - NCCPE 2019), the day built on a series of scoping visits to collections in the region undertaken by Professor Fiona Hackney and Dr Emily Baines. The group involved staff, students and museum professionals including those from UoW, De Montfort University (DMU), Hereford College of Arts (HCA), Nottingham Trent University (NTU), artist Ruth Singer who leads the Arts Council-funded Criminal Quilts project in association with Staffordshire Record Office (Singer 2019), and representatives from Herefordshire Museum Service, the Herbert Gallery (Coventry), Walsall Museums Service, the Lace Guild Stourbridge, and Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust. The following conversation reflects themes that emerged in the project including: the need to embed archival work and primary research in fashion and textiles curricula at all levels, the development of hubs to connect university research with museum practice, the added value of artist-led projects, and the significance of place-based textiles heritage as a catalyst for new business and sustainable design practice.

**Keywords:** Fashion, Heritage, Sustainability, Textiles, Higher Education

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## Introduction

This article presents a conversation between fashion and textiles educators, research practitioners, students and museum professionals, which took place as part of the Museum-University Partnership Initiative (MUPI) funded project, 'Dress and Textiles Network: Heritage and Creative Practice in the West Midlands' (DTN). MUPI ran from 2016-2018 and was designed to bring museums and universities together to work towards mutually beneficial aims. It ran workshops, brokered partnerships and provided seed-funding for small pilot projects and collaborative initiatives to explore different ways in which the higher education (HE) sector can be opened up to smaller and medium-sized museums whose collections and expertise are often undervalued resources. Partnering with HE, moreover, can bring added value to the work of museums and help build their long-term resilience. DTN defined its immediate aims and objectives as: a scoping project to identify and establish the potential for a mutually beneficial network of partnerships and initiatives linking dress and textile local heritage collections with contemporary practice, research, and arts education. A central identifying factor was the importance of face-to-face meetings and the value of building synergies through collaborative, and sometimes creative exchanges, endeavours and activities. Project activities took the form of a series of coordinated visits by researchers to find out more about small museum collections and resources, and identify their priority needs. This was followed by a knowledge exchange (KE) event in the Fashion Lab in the Fashion and Textiles Department at the University of Wolverhampton (UoW) on 15 December 2017, which brought together representatives from museums with invited researchers, designers, students and educators. The day comprised presentation, creative making and object handling as participants talked, brain-stormed, and exchanged ideas about how to catalyse the connections between heritage collections, HE and business. Deriving, in part, from the interests, specialisms, concerns and aspirations of those present at the KE event, a series of themes emerged, summarized as:

- the value of research centres for connecting museums and HE;
- everyday dress as a means of material engagement with social history through memory;
- the importance of embedding encounters with primary material in the HE curriculum at a time when the student experience tends to be dominated by digital media;
- teaching collections and 'pop up' archives as a means to stimulate student engagement;
- the importance of skill;
- the value of local heritage to connect with global networks of trade, taste and influence;
- archives as a conduit between place-based heritage and micro businesses;
- archives as knowledge resources for value creation in new design;
- the value of co-produced learning; interdisciplinary working;
- artist-led projects;
- heritage as a means of future-proofing in a digital age;
- archives and sustainable design thinking.

These themes are discussed more fully in the project report submitted to MUPI. This article reproduces verbatim a conversation between seven network participants (all of whom are named as authors), as they reflect on the central themes of collaboration and engagement, unpack some of the benefits and challenges of university-museum partnership working. While this process can not be described as a methodology as such, it does signal the importance of impromptu, informal conversation between like-minded individuals from different and discrete disciplines in order to build trust, empathy and understanding. The group conversation, which includes input from designers, curators, researchers, and a research student, is representative of the perspectives, ideas and the challenges identified throughout DTN and, as such, provides insight into the feel and timbre

of the relationships developed. Individual contributions are signalled by author initials: Althea McKenzie (AM), Emily Baines (EB), Jo Bloodworth (JB), Claire Anderson (CA), Fiona Hackney (FH), Ali Wells (AW), Catherine Howard (CH).

### **Practitioner Group Interview**

FH: ...we are here today to talk about fashion, textiles and dress collections in the Midlands, and how designers and researchers can work together with museums and archives in mutually beneficial ways.

CH: I am particularly interested in the silk ribbon collection at the Herbert [Art Gallery & Museum] (Figure 1, Figure 2). It seems strange that weaving silk was such an important part of Coventry life when just a few miles away in Birmingham the emphasis was on heavy industry.

[Figures 1 and 2]

AW: ...we have 320,000 objects here [at the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum] and the silk ribbons are a small but very important part of that. The industry had great significance in Coventry, and drew on weaving silks which had been part of the city's economy since medieval times when wool manufacture was important.

AM: Unlike Coventry, Herefordshire never developed industrial production of textiles, in spite of being renowned for the quality of its wool production. Leominster was the centre for trade of Ryeland wool (also called Leominster Ore), said to be the finest wool in the Elizabethan period - Queen Elizabeth vowed to wear nothing but Ryeland wool next to her skin. Lacking fast flowing water, Herefordshire was passed by in terms of the industrial revolution so textile production was very much local and Herefordshire remained predominantly agricultural and rural.

CH: I am doing some intensive research in the coming months working on the ribbon collection. I hope to find out about the impact of the ribbon trade on life in Coventry, and the way things changed when it went from a domestic industry to a mechanised one. There was also the impact on the art and design world [primarily in the UK] as art schools opened in the nineteenth century in response to the expansion of production and to improve design standards and provide designers for industry. The design development side is really interesting and then there's the dyes that were used: natural dyes to start with perhaps, and then I should see a difference in colours when synthetic processes were introduced.

AW: Usually researchers focus on the process of making, the weaving techniques and machinery but actually the collection has more value than that. The social history aspect shows how the industry shaped people's lives and the city, for instance, when we think about the types of housing that developed.

CH: The lives of working women might be another strand, you'd imagine it was less hard work than the Birmingham iron foundries, or the Black Country women chain makers but it must have had its own challenges. How did they make enough money to keep their families going, especially during lean times? Some families seem to have been involved for generations, more than 150 years.

AW: Absolutely. [As] Curators [we] would love to explore these things ourselves. There is so much unique material in local collections. The engagement with colleagues through the MUPI network gives us a chance to unlock that potential. I think there are several PhD projects in the ribbon collection at Coventry alone never mind the material in other collections in the region.

EB: Museum collections are an incredible knowledge resource – they reflect the industry clusters and local skills in the region, relating to the social history but also the specialised knowledge particular to those industries (Porter 1980; Hakansan 2005). Those competences are implicit in the end products, the artefacts. They can tell us about those industries and the knowledge can then be helpful in other contexts. The collections can also tell us about fashion trends and consumption at the time, about what was personally significant to the people who bought, used or made these objects or about their daily lives.

AM: The Herefordshire Museum Service Collection, which is housed in Herefordshire, spans from the seventeenth century to the present day, including examples of men's, women's and children's clothing (Figure 3, Figure 4), and accessories (Figure 5), uniforms, occupational clothing, flat textiles, embroideries (Figure 6) and much more. Having very little display space, it is stored in a way to make it easily accessible by individuals, groups and specialists.

[Figures 3, 4, 5 and 6]

FH: The 'Museums on the Move' initiative by Herefordshire, Shropshire and Worcestershire Museum Services was an interesting way of opening the archive up for engagement opportunities throughout the region and with local communities.

AM: ...these were themed exhibitions (Culture 24) that we ran around the county. It gave us the flexibility to take our collections to all kinds of venues but unfortunately the funding dried up. We examined a whole range of themes including the history of wool, the history of medicine, and slavery.

CA: How did the exhibition elements work in practice and where did you go?

AM: The van was a flexible space that could be fitted with drawers and panels and for the 'History of Medicine' we even had a small bed, which we used to demonstrate issues about health and the treatment of and recovery from tuberculosis, for instance. It was a mini exhibition unit.

JB: Where did you go? It would be great for schools and colleges, and a really good way to involve students that we could write into briefs in advance.

AM: Schools, care and retirement homes, and special events. We used it for a number of events at Berrington Hall, near Leominster in Herefordshire, for instance. We were able to draw on and extend the value of our in-house expertise. It was all about the funding, I'm afraid [the project life was restricted by funding limitations].

CA: It's a great idea. We're doing something similar, taking a weaving workshop to the Hay Festival, Hay-on-Wye, to work with young people (Figure 7). There are so many festivals in the region which we don't target or make the most of.

[Figure 7]

FH: It's also something that we should be thinking of from the perspective of HE and access to textile collections. We really want to get these [collections] embedded in our learning and teaching, and developing a working relationship with high quality collections such as the one at Hereford would provide a significant resource for students.

AM: We tended to focus on school groups and teenagers, developing a model for access to museums for younger people, so important when arts subjects are being dropped from the national curriculum. It's also essential with textiles to be able to get up close and demonstrate textiles

techniques and the quality of fabrics. Because of the lack of environmental controls on the ['Museums on the Move'] van we used reproductions.

CA: Working with textiles has a hands-on capability that is so important in workshops and design teaching.

AM: Yes, stitching and the teaching of stitchery has greater meaning to older than younger generations. We were taught to stitch at school and it was a fantastic model for learning, even in primary schools. Hands on experience that really captures how something is produced.

FH: We see the interest in this today with the popularity of T.V. programmes such as BBC 4's 'A Stitch in Time' with fashion historian Ambert Butchart (Butchart 2019) where they recreate garments from paintings, for instance. It's fascinating. I remember doing an embroidery sampler at primary school in the 1970s, I just found it recently! And also, a cross-stitch needle case and a raffia mat. I always wanted to do rug hooking, but never progressed that far up the class!

JB: I have been doing some 'pop up' shops at the moment in House of Fraser and other outlets in Shrewsbury, making kaftans from scarves, and they have been enormously successful. People can buy the scarves as they are or developed into Kaftans, or order a bespoke piece. They love meeting the maker and appreciate that these pieces are hand-made. It resonates with our current research project with Fashion Revolution (2019) where we are running workshops to help people develop their making skills and design ideas to creatively repair, upcycle, remake, embellish and mend – so they can make their own clothes. It is something we do with students and an approach we are developing in our new Fashion BA at UoW. We are working with students and community groups to develop a set of co-created resources along the lines of the Needlework Development Scheme (NDS) (Victoria and Albert Museum 2019), but up-dated for current needs and requirements, and also for social media.

CA: There are interesting cross-overs with what colleges and universities are doing with their own brands: Made in Wolves (2019), Made in Arts London (MIAL) (2019) etc. We are working on something similar at the moment at Herefordshire College of Art with a shop attached to the College.

JB: ...Made in Wolves (2019) sells work made by students and staff from the School of Art, made in-house.

AM: The exhibition/art gallery space/shop provides good areas for collaboration between archives, collections and HE. Such venues are a nice way of encouraging contemporary makers and designers and it could be a way of developing closer links around fashion, making and sustainable thinking.

FH: ...there are parallels with the original aim of the department store which was designed to reference luxurious homes with different services on each floor, including an art gallery, so that you could visualise items in your home. The department store was conceived as a dream space for consumption. Perhaps we need to reclaim that idea today, but as a dream space for imagining sustainable living.

AM: The revolution in awareness about sustainability and fashion and textiles in the current show 'Fashioned from Nature' at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (Ehrman 2018) is fascinating. It looks at the morality of fashion throughout history to the present day. It's about looking at the clothes we are living and working in and asking searching questions about them.

CA: I'm interested in the model of working that someone like Molly Goddard (2018) demonstrates. She sold her clothes in Dover Street Market. They are made of tulle and all hand-stitched and this is a real selling point. They sell alongside Comme de Garçons and other high-end brands.

AM: The key difference is, it's not fast fashion but rather to invest in something that lasts. It's about the quality of production, but also the quality of an idea. But of course, this is not easy or even possible for everyone.

JB: This is where repair and remaking comes in, the up-cycling and sustainable thinking that we are exploring in the (AHRC-funded) Designing a Sensibility for Sustainable Clothing (S4S) (2018-19) project (Figure 8). Textile and clothing archives are a fantastic resource, a knowledge bank of ideas about clothing that can help us think about how to upcycle, remake and modify, learning about fabrics and stitch, and also for ideas about how to design your own patterns and embellishment.

[Figure 8]

AM: I think we are at a moment of important change, a shift in cultural values, when more people are realising that we have to do something about what we are doing to the planet. It is a bit of a revolution and the skills, knowledge and ideas embedded in our archives have a role to play in this.

FH: I was in Brighton recently at the University there and talking to Lou Taylor the fashion historian, who is leading an interesting initiative: a dress teaching collection that she has assembled over many years - a life in fashion, in fact! Teaching collections, which enable students to encounter and engage with artefacts, are something that many arts and crafts colleges had in the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries: the 'Camberwell ILEA Collection', for instance, [teaching collection, Camberwell College of Arts, University of the Arts London (UAL)], and the costume collection recently discovered in the Fashion department at Birmingham City [a chance discovery by Louise Elizabeth Penn Chapman consisting of 170 items of principally feminine dress (1775-1927) donated by the Pre-Raphaelite artist and poet Kate Elizabeth Bunce] (Penn Chapman 2019), as well as the heritage lace archive at Nottingham Trent University (NTU) (Lace Heritage research group 2019). It is important that universities recognise the value that these collections bring, but it's always a question of space and resources, of course. That's why links between organisations are so important. UoW are currently linking up with Black Country Living Museum (BCLM) to launch a research centre, which is great news. We are currently running a series of dress-making workshops with a Second World War theme, with Claire Dolman who runs the sewing room (Figure 9). Claire has devised a coupon scheme based on the ration allowance for one year in the early 1940s, to help her reduce her clothes purchases. It's a clever idea.

[Figure 9]

CH: A really attractive angle is the opportunity to engage with an object or a variety of objects – it just makes the whole process more real. There's a thing to touch and examine and visualise in a setting. I am interested in seeing what I can find out about the Coventry ribbons in literature and in paintings of the time – that contemporaneous information about ordinary people is another way of bringing it all to life. From what I know, women used these ribbons to personalise their clothing and to make them different from others – and there is a sort of upcycling there too, I suppose.

FH: Yes, fashion plates and advice in contemporary magazines is another rich research resource (Clay *et al.* 2018). They were always a rich source of information about how to make, customise and update garments. Many of the West Midlands museums do have examples of contemporary magazines in their archive collections.



AW: What really interests me about Catherine's [CH] approach is that she is very open to discovery.

CH: I'd like to think so, coming to something I am not at all familiar with, I have to go with it – to see where it can take me, to go on that journey with it. I wouldn't do it justice if I based the work on the little bit of knowledge I have currently. I hope there will be an opportunity for both an academic and a creative response. I have been working with Ruth Singer on her Criminal Quilts project (Singer 2019) and it has been interesting exploring creative ways to communicate numerical archive data through stitch, so I might be able to apply those skills to this material (Figure 12).

[Figure 12]

JB: I recently had a conversation with a woman from Kenya who was talking about all the garments that are imported over there, causing problems for local producers, disrupting local markets, and undermining ideas about quality and value. Vivienne Westwood's Ethical Africa bag collection touches on this, working with local producers, and also films such as *The True Cost* (Morgan 2019). We did a link up with Oxfam in Wolverhampton recently. They collected damaged garments and denim for us and students transformed them, and they were sold through the shop. It's hard to get students thinking about long lasting garments, classic items for the wardrobe, rather than thinking about what is on-trend.

CA: That was a nice link with Fashion Revolution Week. It is really good because it's an immediate and doable way of getting students involved in wider questions and debates about the ethics of the global fashion industry (Fashion Revolution 2019). We need to connect our work with local archives to larger issues.

AM: It's a branded revolution and every young person wants to be part of a revolution!

JB: ...we need to use the power of the selfie to share how we are making our own clothes – 'Who Made My Clothes' is a great way of calling for transparency in the fashion system. 'I Made My Clothes', with details of how they were made and cared for in a sustainable way, is a great response.

FH: Working with Fashion Revolution, we are developing something similar on the S4S project website, which is still currently in process.

AM: In early July we have an event about upcycling, recycling and saving clothes at Hereford Museum. 'Rose Tinted Rags' (@RoseTintedRags) – a part of Echo, an organisation in Herefordshire – and led by Karen Mickeljohn and Tina Walton who run craft workshops and a sewing group called Frock On. They work with adults with learning difficulties and have an amazing shop reselling clothing and all kinds of things from scrap bags to recycled ornamental tassels donated by a theatre that was closing down. They are working with us to create clothing from butter wrappers reclaimed from the restaurant at Berrington Hall which would otherwise have gone to land-fill. They make the most stunning gold textured fabric!

JB: ...I saw their shop on our way in from the railway station, it looked intriguing. We'll make sure to drop in to see them on the way back!

CA: We had a student doing work experience with them. She had never worked with people with learning disabilities before and gained so much from the experience, telling me how empowered she felt by it.

AM: They did a waistcoat project, 'Waste to Waist', which was based on the collection of eighteenth-century waistcoats here and at Berrington Hall (Rose Tinted Rags 2016-17) (Figure 10). Karen is keen

to up-skill women and we displayed the piece they made at Berrington alongside the originals. We are keen to build up a connection with students doing this kind of work.

[Figure 10]

FH: Yes, it's a really nice example of a project that works across archives, universities and a local charity to learn about fashion and textile history, be creative and ask questions about sustainability.

CA: It's a no brainer, it's all about connections.

FH: Yes, those connections through shared interests and pooled expertise bring so much value.

JB: Working with fashion students, there is pressure to be looking for the 'next thing' all the time, to the extent that you don't see what is outside that, to see the bigger movements and changes in society and the industry. There is increasing focus on sustainability in the fashion world coming from designers such as Stella McCartney and her collaboration with the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2019) working on the circular economy, and such fashion design initiatives as Antiform (2019) and Birdsong (2019). All this raises questions about how we live, our personal responsibility as designers. Fashion is changing and in many ways issues like this are the 'next thing'. Our new Fashion course at UoW is responding to this alongside our research with the S4S project. It's about rethinking our role as designers and consumers. There was so much interest in the S4S launch at the Fashion Lab in Wolverhampton. It was a great event, and people really responded to the presentations by Amy Twigger Holroyd and Lizzie Harrison from Antiform before getting hands on with different knit, textile, and upcycling activities. It had a great buzz and you could feel the excitement and interest surrounding this kind of thing (S4S 2018a). It was great for some of our MA Design and Applied Arts students to be involved such as Alice Mundon (2019) who upcycles using tufting, and Catherine, of course, who is working on Criminal Quilts, and with Ali at Coventry on the silk ribbon collection (Herbert 2019)

CA: I really like what Ruth Singer (2019) is doing with her Criminal Quilts project (Figure 11).

[Figure 11]

JB: Ruth is a visiting fellow in the Fashion and Textile department at Wolverhampton at the moment working about one day a month. It gives her the opportunity to use the facilities and opens the project to students and staff. My colleague Jan Wrigley has become deeply involved in the project. It has worked really well, giving her some space in a demanding teaching schedule to explore her research interests around hand-making and digital techniques, and helped her to see how the creative interpretation of archives can provide interesting, often surprising, ways into women's lives through textiles.

CH: That was the aspect I found most interesting, the way women's social history is inextricably linked to textiles and can be interpreted through textiles. I learned so much from the photographs and information about the women of Staffordshire who had been criminalised, often for stealing to meet basic needs in life, like clothing or coal. I have responded to their stories by using modern digital technology and traditional skills like hand stitched patchwork, which used appropriate types of fabric and a very neutral colour palette (Figure 12). Later we moved on to less figurative representations of data which really pushed me outside my comfort zone - but I did it!

[Figure 12]

JB: The undergraduate students have found it harder to get involved in Ruth's work (Singer 2019), largely because it is extra curricula for them. I am keen to embed this kind of collaborative project

working with archives such as those at Hereford and the Hodson Shop Collection at Walsall into student projects to combine engagement with artefacts – a kind of living history – with creative interpretation and contemporary design.

AM: It's fertile ground!

FH: Yes, this kind of work needs to be embedded into the curriculum for undergraduates, and events for Masters students. It's important partly because it brings design history and critical studies alive. I remember this from my time studying an MA in Design History at the Royal College of Art. The course is based in the Victoria and Albert Museum and we were constantly riffling around in the archives and collections (with curators of course). It was amazingly inspirational, the material connection with historical artefacts as a basis for research, questioning and contextualisation. It is something that has stayed with me ever since and I want current design students to experience, rather than always finding things second hand on Pinterest. That's something I have written about elsewhere (Hackney and Maughan 2016). Connecting with the wonderful archives and collections on our doorsteps and embedding them in a thoughtful, critical, creative, hands-on way that links to contemporary themes and issues is a really productive way of doing this.

CA: Our students are coming for work experience with Althea's [AM] team at a relatively early stage in their college lives, after a year and a half with us, and the success of this depends to some extent on their research skills and experience. Amazing things can happen by chance, however. One student last year met the costume director on *The Crown* TV series, which she was very excited about!

AM: Factoring in and allotting time, space, and establishing good practice in advance is key so that this work can become normal rather than the exception.

CA: Yes, and for us it is about linking engagement with archives with what they are doing on the course, their modules but also their interests. We want to design a framework that enables students to go further than simply taking inspiration from archives. It's *so frustrating!* The tendency is that if they do come and look at the material in the archive at the start of a project they quickly move onto Pinterest, where everything is decontextualized and image: 'look' predominates. It limits material engagement and critical questioning in many ways. We want to try out a model next year based on the critical theory/cultural history side of things where they start off with an object and really examine it, interrogate it, ask questions about it and do research to find out the answers, and then frame questions that are relevant to contemporary issues, concerns, and technologies...for instance we could interpret smocking – of which there are many fabulous examples in the Hereford archive – using 3D printing technologies.

EB: This process of detailed looking and interrogating an object can be applied by researchers to recover the knowledge that went into the production – for example, Helen Burbidge (2017) examined garments from a range of archive collections to re-establish the tacit knowledge of pattern-cutting for good fit in sleeve setting. The knowledge embedded in the collections can be used to add value to new design and industry production (Nonaka and Teece 2001). It is also inspiring to see museum collections being used for new value creation (Porter 1985) with original design or art works developed, with the collection as a starting point. At NTU, their Lace Archive has been used for a range of new creative artwork in the *Lace Unarchived* exhibition curated by Amanda Briggs-Goode (2018) and the associated *Lace Unveiled* exhibition at Newstead Abbey (2018). It was also used as a source to develop a collection for Oasis as part of a live industry project with the students, which was launched nationally in October 2017 (NTU 2017).

AM: Another thing in using the collections with students is to encourage the curatorial approach to working with objects, learning through handling them and thinking about how one communicates through display, using this as a means to build skills and ideas for curating their own work and thinking about original ways of doing this.

JB: In HE, contextual studies always seem to be separated from studio practice. With our new Fashion course we want to include creative ways of combining the two and working with archival garments and artefacts, for instance, from the Hodson Shop Collection at Walsall...Although the collection comprises mass produced everyday dress, items bought from Birmingham wholesalers – something that Dr Jenny Gilbert (2019) is working on – as a local resource, the Hodson archive is embedded in the region. The sisters were Willenhall residents and ran the shop at the front of their family home, which also served as their brother's locksmiths' business. It provides an interesting historical model of enterprising women running a fashion business in the region, and is meaningful for students on that level alone, in addition to the garments, packaging, cosmetics, magazines etc. in the collection (Figures 13 and 14). This kind of everyday dress collection is rare and becoming rarer as funds for archive collections and display are cut, and questions about what is valuable focus on 'high end' garments rather than the everyday dress that tells us so much about how people lived, and provide insights into how we live today. The Hodson Shop Collection is now relatively inaccessible, having been moved from the museum to a warehouse in Walsall, so it's vital that we think around the situation and develop strategies for students to work with unique collections like this in their region.

[Figures 13 and 14]

AM: Getting young people to really look at things is so important. Drawing is a good way of doing this. Looking also provides a route into the bigger questions about why garments look the way they do, how they were made and who they were made for, how they circulated, how they were worn, what they signified? The links between fashion, display and the slave trade, for instance. It instils a context for the history of clothing.

CA: Our students are makers. Understanding how things were made through the process and experience of making gives them insight into how people thought and can provide new perspectives on how we think now.

AM: All kinds of insights can come from learning basic skills, such as how to smock and forming textiles – it's the tactility of the engagement.

FH: That is something that we are exploring in our S4S project, where a group in Cornwall have been reflecting on their fashion purchasing habits by having a go at weaving and dyeing cloth to get a true sense of what is involved in the process (S4S 2018b).

JB: You need to understand the rules before you can break them and innovate! We need to get our students thinking harder, thinking outside the accepted conventions and challenging them from other perspectives, from the perspective of debates about sustainability for instance. Fashion Revolution and others have done a massive amount to popularise critical sustainable thinking with young people, but we need to help them think of how to embed it in their practice, particularly aspiring designers and their design practice.

CA: We did ban Pinterest for a month at the start of the semester, but it just became a game as they found ways to get around it...it was like they were experiencing withdrawal symptoms! But they did start to look more and do more research.

JB: There are also important issues around copyright and the importance of doing primary research.

FH: ...and it's about the value of seeing something up close and in the round, smelling it, maybe touching it. We are talking about the difference between a material encounter with clothing and dress as opposed to primacy of 'the look' and the whole cluster of ideas around 'fashionology' (Kawamura 2004). Maybe this shift in value, from the look to the material, is required if we are to think and act more sustainably, a difficult task given the growing dominance of the internet and online shopping.

AM: Experiencing material culture is really important. It's not just about costume, it's about expanding students' knowledge about materials, their values, challenges, demands, repercussions, we can learn lessons from the past use of materials such as shark-skin, fish scales etc.

EB: Yes, it's good for students to see the social significance as well as the cultural value (Bourdieu 1984) of these fashion history artefacts in museums – to be able to look behind the famous couture names or glamour of beautiful historic garments and research more widely to see the biodiversity issues or the ethical implications of how they were made.

JB: I recently ran a two-day workshop exploring new uses for leather reclaimed from Aldridge Trimming (2019) specialist car trimmers in Wolverhampton. They gave us bags of very good quality leather and PVC that were otherwise being skipped. It currently costs them money to dispose of the offcuts, whereas we could set up a system that recycles to local makers, designers, colleges etc. It takes us back to locating our design and making in a local economy, but with a global market in mind. These are prototypes of course, but they are a great starting point for experimental design, and methods for scaling up would need to be explored.

AM: We can learn a lot by looking at the history of recycling clothing, the complex economy of how items were sold, swapped, passed on, altered and re-used. In the Herefordshire collection we have a petticoat made from what was formerly an engineer's plan for a bridge construction. Engineers and architects drew their plans on coated cotton sheets and when these were no longer in use the coating could be washed off leaving a high-quality cotton sheet, albeit decorated with the inked plan. The petticoat dates from the early twentieth century.

JB: Emma Prince at NTU did a lovely project where she recycled tents that were left behind at Glastonbury. She was inspired by *seeing* the waste to get a group of fashion, design and textile students together to work in small groups with the materials to test the materials and prototype designs to see what they could do with them.

CA: This links into the new university being developed in Herefordshire, the New Model in Technology and Engineering (NMiTE 2019) which is structured around a learning lab model with students working in groups with business and community partners to come up with solutions for 'real world' problems through a flexible, responsive co-designed curriculum. It's about problem solving, which is what we do as designers, but focuses on engineering in a broader cultural sense.

FH: A model that supports flexible, responsive, creative, problem solving learning is essential for art and design education, which is currently overloaded with unwieldy structures and administration at the moment. It's very debilitating. There is a model of interdisciplinary, problem-based, real-world learning here that we could think about in relation to working with heritage and archives.

JB: Yes, the Design Academy Eindhoven supports a flexible model in that students can move between different design disciplines building interdisciplinary skills and graduate with at BA Design.

Dutch Design Week in October each year is amazing and provides an international showcase for students. It blew my mind how confident the students were talking about their work.

CA: I've visited in the past. Its conceptually engaging and exciting but can result in a bit of a 'house style'. The interdisciplinary thing is a route we should all be going in, though. At Hereford we have a Fab Lab which can be used by all students as and when depending on their current project needs and requirements. It's flexible and works really well as a way for students to build skills and learn from each other across discrete disciplines. It would be good to think about how we might integrate these approaches and technologies into our work with archives to help develop good object-based learning skills at undergraduate. The current move back to materials based learning and interrogating materials helps this.

JB: Yes, learning and teaching that focuses on real-world problem solving needs to be central.

FH: Archives contain 'real world' items that hold clues to how people resolved problems in the past in relation to poverty, identity, status, fabrics, materials, markets, technology, aesthetics and so on. We always view history through the lens of our current preoccupations in terms of our interests and the questions we want to ask. Acknowledging this helps us look to the past to find new perspectives on our current challenges.

JB: We recently hosted The Singh Twins to speak at Wolverhampton Art Gallery, followed by a symposium unpacking the themes in their show *Slaves of Fashion* (Singh Twins 2018). They use textiles as a fascinating way of exploring the history of slavery through alternative or little known stories about the history of trade, Empire, technology, imagery and the individuals involved. It's an intriguing, accessible and provocative approach. The history of slavery embedded in the textiles is reclaimed, decoded, and used to point to current abuses in the name of fashion, trade and politics.

CA: ... it's all about ways of opening things up and getting us to ask questions about how we live. Thomas Thwaites' (2019) work is an interesting example of counter-factual reasoning. In many ways what he does seems mad (like building a toaster from scratch: mining ore for the steel, deriving plastic from oil) but it's a powerful way of questioning what we take for normality and the consequences of our cheap consumer world. Going back to basics also helps us pay attention to other ways of engaging with the world around us, through our emotions and sensations for instance.

AM: We had a placement student from the Royal National College for the Blind (2019) in Hereford and being visually impaired, he related to fabrics, materials and sewing in ways we did not expect – very tactile, feeling became seeing. He was very aware of what he was wearing, what he looked like. We learnt a lot from him.

JB: Currently, we have two deaf students studying on our Fashion course. As we work together we find ways of communicating when the signer isn't there, it's like a new language that is embodied in the way we communicate through fabric and process: we communicate through doing. What might be perceived as limitations become invaluable strengths by suggesting new ways of thinking about engagement with material and design through collaborative making.

AW: Curators don't know where collections can lead, we are very keen on broad and cross-collection responses: our visitors engage with personal stories and creative outputs work well too.

CH: Coventry has such a diverse population, lots coming from countries on the silk route itself – so their journey replicates that of the silk. But I also think that the thing everyone here has in common is the history of their region: the cities, towns and villages and the textiles heritage, current design

practice and future industries, it is relevant to everyone. The idea of real people and their stories is compelling.

AW: So, we will have to see where the journey takes us!

## **Conclusions**

Foregrounding common concerns, preoccupations and ideas, this conversation is perhaps best characterised by the evident enthusiasm and willingness of participants for future collaboration and an awareness of its value, something that emerges through practice and in often surprising ways. As a group, our primary interest lies in 'bottom up' rather than 'top down' initiatives and, acknowledging that things are most likely to happen if they are aligned with and embedded in existing partner needs and interests, DTN proposed a series of informal, co-produced, catalysing activities. These were visualised as a series of nodes of activity in a network (Latour 2005) that will gradually and even opportunistically build capacity on the ground and, by dint of being connected through personal relationships, increase impact. Activities might include collaborative research bids, doctoral research projects, co-produced student projects embedded in the HE curriculum, independent artist initiatives (including training resources) and 'pop up' interactive display kits. Networked together in this way, through a series of co-produced activities and their resulting resources, HE providers, museums, archives, collections and local businesses might operate as movable hubs of distributed knowledge and activity that can inform, supply and support one another.

Activities to date include group presentations, collaborative student projects, artist residencies, workshops, and the development of research project bids. Professor Fiona Hackney, Dr Emily Baines, Claire Anderson, Jo Bloodworth and Ruth Singer, for instance, led a session at the AHRC-funded '4th Connected Communities Heritage Network Symposium', 29th June 2018 at Leicester Castle, hosted by De Montfort University (Connected Communities Heritage Network 2018). Presenting DTN activities, themes and discussion, they proposed an informal network with 'nodes' of activity to connect place-based fashion and textiles heritage with HE, business and the cultural and creative industries. Professor Hackney and Dr Baines are working on an AHRC network bid to develop this theme, and Professor Hackney is applying it to research with black, Asian and minority ethnic creative industries in the Midlands. The UoW and Black Country Living Museum, meanwhile, have launched the Black Country Studies Centre, a new education partnership to provide enhanced learning opportunities for communities across the Black Country. With a remit that includes, building on the history of the Black Country to nurture entrepreneurship, raise aspirations and encourage cohesion, the centre provides an ideal space for developing links between heritage, education and business, which fashion and textiles staff and researchers at UoW will explore. Claire Anderson has developed a number of educational and display initiatives linking textiles students at Hereford College of Arts to Hereford Museum's Learning Resource Centre. The latest, a project and exhibition titled 'Textiles in Context', enabled first year students to look beyond the studio and consider the role and impact of textile design in a wider context. Twentieth-century textile objects from the Museum's collection described how design is influenced by the world around us and how it influences the world, while responsive texts written by students considered how textiles communicate cultural concepts such as gender, taste, identity and class. In 2019, Dr Baines and Jenny Gilbert presented a panel, 'Design, Discourse and Distribution', examining different aspects of the production, retail, dissemination and representation of mid-twentieth everyday dress with a focus on the Midlands at the conference 'Everyday Fashion: Extraordinary Stories of Ordinary Clothes' (Halbert 2019). These are just a few of the 'nodal' activities that are sparking the DTN network 'journey'.

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Stephanie Mellini, MA Design & Applied Arts, University of Wolverhampton currently studying at Birmingham City University (PhD Candidate)

Ruth Singer Independent artist, leading Arts Council funded Criminal Quilts project in collaboration with Stafford Record Office archives and University of Wolverhampton

Mary Coleman, Demonstrator, Lace Guild, Stourbridge

Catherine Howard, MA Design and Applied Arts, University of Wolverhampton (PhD Candidate)

Michael Glasson, Leather Museum, Walsall Museum Service (retired)

Catherine Lister, Archivist Hodson Shop Collection, Walsall Museums Service

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Helen Taylor, Curator of Domestic & Cultural Life, Black Country Living Museum, Dudley

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## Figures

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