

## **Clothing and the Poor in Eighteenth Century London: Evidence from the French Protestant Hospital<sup>1</sup>**

William Farrell, Birkbeck College, University of London.

In 1796 a disabled soldier called George Paterson was convicted in London for shoplifting eight silk handkerchiefs. Paterson entered a drapers' shop and asked them to show him a selection of handkerchiefs. A picky customer, he rejected the initial plain ones show to him, "Mr. Bloomfield [the draper] asked him if he wanted some square ones, or corner ones; he said he did not want white ones, he wanted coloured silk handkerchiefs; he made a great deal of objection, he had several pieces shewn him". Instead he demanded silk handkerchiefs of a dark colour and of the best quality. For comparison, he pointed to the silk handkerchief around his neck "of the Spitalfields sort, and it is all gone to pieces, and I wanted something of the India kind". He was caught with the handkerchiefs stuffed up the sleeve of his useless arm (see Image 3 for an example of an India silk handkerchief).<sup>2</sup>

George Paterson was an inmate of the French Protestant Hospital an institution established in 1718 for the care of poor or infirm Huguenots and their descendents. His trial highlights several ways in which poor people in the eighteenth century used and understood clothing. Primarily in this case garments were a source of value. Paterson would have wanted the handkerchiefs in order to resell them. But the con trick he used to shoplift reveals that the notions of quality and fashion were well understood outside of the gentry and middling sort. To complete the trick Paterson had pointed to the handkerchief around his own neck to add plausibility to his role as a customer. For the poor, clothing was also a means to self-representation, perhaps the most direct means of establishing ones' status to others.

In the last decade or so, historians have looked at what clothes the eighteenth century poor owned, how they acquired and used them, and what meaning they may have had. Partly this research was prompted by the desire to find out how widely new textiles, such as printed cottons, spread among consumers in the 1700s.<sup>3</sup> But historians have

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper comes out of material collected for my PhD thesis 'Silk and globalization in eighteenth century London'. As that title suggests it is not central concerned with poverty, so the following something of a new direction.

<sup>2</sup> *Old Bailey Proceedings Online (OBP)*, ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org), 20/02/2010), 6 April 1796, t17960406-21.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Roche and Beverley Lemire have argued that were taken up by the labouring classes, John Styles is more sceptical. Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite: the Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain, 1660-1800*. (Oxford: Pasold Research Fund & Oxford University Press, 1991.) Roche, *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the 'Ancien Régime'*. Translated by Jean Birrell. Originally published as *La culture des apparences: une histoire du vêtement (XVIIe-XVIIIe siècle)*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.) Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-century England*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.)

also been interested in how looking 'respectable' to potential employers was an important part of securing work. This was especially so in a society where large numbers workers - domestic servants, apprentices and journeymen - lived in the household of their master or mistress. John Styles has argued that most labouring people owned two sets of clothes and linen: one to wear and another to be washed and mended, in order to keep up appearances.<sup>4</sup> Clothing was a part of the 'economy of makeshifts' with people acquiring their clothes through second hand markets, gifts or thefts and pawning them in hard times.<sup>5</sup> Historians of the institutions responsible for providing poor relief have shown that the clothing of the poor was an increasing concern by the late eighteenth century. After food and fuel, providing clothing was the most common item requested by paupers and provided by the authorities. Some have even concluded that the English poor were 'well clothed' thanks to these efforts.<sup>6</sup>

In this paper I use inventories and other records from the French Hospital to explore what clothes Paterson's fellow inmates owned, how they acquired some of them and what they may have meant to their owners. The existing studies of clothing and poor relief are organised on a parish basis, as this was the organising unit of provision. This paper is more orientated towards an industry from which a significant proportion of the inmates came from: the silk industry. Therefore I also use evidence from the Weavers' Company (effectively the guild for weavers in London) and court records. Recognising the limitations of inventory evidence, that it is only a snapshot in time, I have tried to reconstruct this evidence along the lines of the life cycle.

---

<sup>4</sup> Styles, *Dress of the people*, pp.82-84.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Beverly Lemire, 'The Theft of Clothes and Popular Consumerism in Early Modern England'. *Journal of Social History* 24, no. 2 (1990): 255-276.

<sup>6</sup> Steven King, 'Reclothing the English Poor, 1750-1840'. *Textile History* 33, 1 (2002) 37-47; Peter D. Jones, 'Clothing the Poor in Early-Nineteenth-Century England'. *Textile History* 37, 1 (2006): 17-37. Idem. "I Cannot Keep My Place Without Being Deascent": Pauper Letters, Parish Clothing and Pragmatism in the South of England, 1750-1830'. *Rural History* 20, 1 (March 2009): 31-49; Vivienne Richmond, "Indiscriminate Liberality Subverts the Morals and Depraves the Habits of the Poor": A Contribution to the Debate on the Poor Law, Parish Clothing Relief and Clothing Societies in Early Nineteenth-Century England'. *Textile History* 40, no. 1 (May 2009): 51-69. There is a parallel set of research on the clothing of slaves and indentured servants in North America in the same period.