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COSTUME

RUMBALL: BRITISH QUAKER WOMEN

<TITLE> **British Quaker Women's Fashionable Adaptation of their Plain Dress, 1860–1914**

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<AB>*Throughout the period 1860–1914, British Quaker women sought to negotiate the incorporation of fashionable attire into their wardrobes to varying degrees, after the religion's hierarchy made prescriptive religious 'Plain' dress optional in 1860. After centuries of restrictive Advices, which used scripture alongside peer pressure to encourage female Friends to dress ascetically, Quaker women began to interpret their new sartorial freedoms in diverse ways. Through the presentation of three female case studies from across the period, this article will suggest three newly identified distinct stances that Quaker women enacted in responding to the new Advice and adapting to fashionable ensembles, up until the devastating events of the First World War. These three stances were non-adaptive, semi-adaptive and fully adaptive. Based on empirical research conducted in dress collections across Britain, this article will describe and present the garments worn by these women, to illustrate and introduce these distinct sartorial stances.*

<KW>KEYWORDS: *Quaker, Plain dress, late nineteenth-century female fashion, religious dress practices, adaptation, sartorial negotiation*

<A>INTRODUCTION

<T>ORGANIZED IN BRITAIN AROUND 1652 by the English dissenter George Fox (1624–1691), the Religious Society of Friends was one of many Protestant or Nonconformist groups which sought to oppose the religious teachings enforced by the Church of England in the seventeenth century. Still thriving today, the main tenants of Quakerism focus on the notion that every person may enjoy a direct religious experience without the mediation of hierarchy or tradition. The emphasis on personal revelation for religious guidance, over and above Church teaching, is a principle that sets it apart to this day. Friends, as they are commonly known, see this spiritual revelation as a light that purged the believer of sinful sensibilities. Such revelation and purging was often physically enacted through trembling or shaking, hence the term Quakers which was applied to the group.

<NP>The distinctive aesthetic style historically adopted by Quakers makes them of specific interest to dress historians. Particularly notable in their clothing and furniture, this style was striking for its simplicity and, from at least 1689, termed ‘Plain’ in early Quaker tracts.<sup>1</sup> From around 1675, Quakers condemned any aspect of dress that could be interpreted as superfluous or excessive. This was an enactment of the biblical notion that dress was equated with the purity of the wearer’s spiritual attitude. Deborah E. Kraak in ‘Variations on Plainness: Quaker Dress in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia’, which details the American Quaker interpretations of dress, has usefully summarized how early eighteenth-century Quaker garb in Philadelphia was a ‘simple, unadorned version of contemporary clothing’, open to a diverse range of interpretations due to a lack of ‘a universally agreed upon standard of Plainness’, as it similarly was in Britain during the same period.<sup>2</sup> However, by the late eighteenth century these generalized recommendations on followers’ dress had become increasingly prescriptive in Britain; ultimately governing appropriate colours, textiles and, in some cases, prescribing the minutiae of garment construction.<sup>3</sup> When, two centuries later in 1860, British Quakers made this ‘peculiarity of dress and speech [...] optional’ to followers, British Quaker women did not uniformly abandon their religiously prescribed clothes.<sup>4</sup> Surviving garments in large and well-provenanced collections of British Quaker dress, including Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, the Gallery of Costume, Platt Hall in Manchester, Killerton House in Devon, Alfred Gillett Trust Clarks Archive in Street and North Hertfordshire District Museum, reveal that many Quaker women sustained, to varying degrees, the Plain style in their ensembles, even into the twentieth century. These surviving garments illustrate a personal sartorial negotiation of Quaker women’s commitment to religious Plain dress, alongside their aspirations to be fashionable during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

<NP>By studying Quaker women’s clothes that have survived from between 1860 and 1914, it is possible to identify three sartorial stances Quaker women adopted in navigating the material embodiment of two seemingly conflicting concerns: Plainness and fashionability within dress. My research concludes at the start of the First World War, an event that marked a compelling social and sartorial turning point for many Quakers. Three Quaker women, whose garments have been identified in these British museum collections, are discussed in this article. Their distinct approaches to dress represent how female Friends negotiated their clothing choices according to their individual Quaker beliefs and fall into one of three distinct interpretations during this period. In fact, these negotiations were widespread, with Quakers themselves recognizing very quickly after the amendment to the Plainness Query that women had broken into three sartorial factions when it came to their compromises between Plainness and fashionable taste. The Friend, William Pollard (1828–1893), in a letter to the Quaker journal *The Friends Quarterly Examiner* in 1869, while

complaining of the ‘fantastic structures’ of French millinery some female Friends had taken to wearing to Meetings for Worship, incidentally identified the three stylistic choices apparent in women amongst his religious community as ‘ascetic’, ‘moderate’ and those with ‘infinite orders of decoration’.<sup>5</sup> These interpretations illustrate the extent to which Quaker women adapted their clothes to incorporate contemporary fashions, based on a scale of their adaptation to, or resistance of, fashionable dress. In establishing points of comparison between differing and complex style adaptations between Plain and fashionable dress, I have identified three categories that will be used throughout. These are non-adaptive, semi-adaptive and fully adaptive, and reflect three distinctive Quaker interpretations to their dress during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Britain. It is this uneven, sometimes conflicted and always negotiated abandonment of Plainness that this article describes.

#### <A>ORIGINS OF QUAKER ATTITUDES TO DRESS

<T>During the 1670s, male and female members of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain assumed a distinctive form of modest dress, intended to reflect their humility and spiritual enlightenment as well as their affiliation with the widely persecuted Quaker religion. From the religion’s conception in the mid-seventeenth century, Quakers adopted many religious practices which differed from those advocated by the Church of England. As is still true today, their worship consisted of silent gatherings, called Meetings for Worship, while the religion always emphasized women’s spiritual equality with men. Historically, several other distinctive practices were observed, including the denouncing of politeness etiquette, the paying of tithes and the taking of oaths; alongside their use of a differentiating form of ‘Plain’ speech which rejected all titles, greetings, leave takings and honorific pronouns (such as ‘Your Grace’), as has been discussed in detail by Richard Bauman.<sup>6</sup> Congregants gathered together, in the early years, at inns or followers’ houses and waited in silence for God to communicate through one of them. Once moved, any member of the meeting could rise and deliver a sermon.<sup>7</sup> The Religious Society of Friends always emphasized the significance of personal revelation for religious guidance over and above the teaching and authority of Scripture. Thus, Friends’ beliefs were considered deeply heretical in the seventeenth century because they challenged the necessity of the strictures and guidance of the Church of England.

<NP>The earliest Quaker clothing Advices, which were rules and regulations intended to guide the behaviours of Quakers in their everyday lives, condemned all

superfluity or excess, rather than specific clothes or garments, by encouraging a rejection of dress described as ‘corrupt’ and ‘vain’ fashions.<sup>8</sup> These ideologies were inherited from biblical teachings, which equated outward presentation with inward piety. As such, the earliest surviving Quaker Advices regarding dress, from the Yearly Meeting on 17 March 1675, framed the guidance in reference to spiritual preservation and Scripture, stating:

<EXT>And lastly it is brought upon us to put Friends in remembrance to keep to the Christian Testimony Truth begot in our hearts in the beginning against the spirit of the World and for which many have suffered cruel markings, beatings and stonings; and particularly of their corrupt fashions and dealings and language of the World their overbearing and vain fashions, that the Cross of Christ in all things may be kept to which preserves Friends blameless and honours the Lords name and trust in the Earth.<sup>9</sup> </EXT>

<NP>Towards the close of the seventeenth century, these general clothing Advices were formulated by the religious hierarchy into what is commonly referred to as a Query. They therefore became ‘a subject for discipline; that is, a person, at least in theory, could be disowned for not observing the Quaker testimonies on dress or speech’.<sup>10</sup> The Plainness Query acted as a pledge from Quakers to the hierarchy of the religion to obey the collective belief that self-presentation was a valid signifier of spirituality.<sup>11</sup> It was through the religion’s organizational structure that these Queries were enforced. Failure to comply with the Queries illustrated a follower’s disunity with the religions practices. It could result in a Friend being ‘disowned’ or totally excluded from the Society’s affairs, and discouraged from associating themselves with the religious community.<sup>12</sup> The Plainness Query prompted all Friends to lead ‘Plain’ lifestyles and to encourage those within their households to do the same. It prescribed that Friends:

[...] endeavour by example and precept to train up their children, servants and those under their care, in a religious life and conversation, consistent with our Christian profession, in the frequent reading of the Holy Scriptures, and in plainness of speech, behaviour and apparel.<sup>13</sup>

By the eighteenth century, recommendations from the religion’s hierarchy of appropriate clothing for Quaker followers were becoming more exacting. For example, Peter Collins, in *Ethical Consumption as Religious Testimony: The Quaker Case*, quotes minutes from the Marsden Monthly Meeting in 1704, which recommended, ‘concerning buying, selling, making or wearing stript Cloth, Stuffs, Silks or any sort of flowered or figured thing of different colours [...] Friends stand clear of all such things’.<sup>14</sup> This Advice was circulated during a period when floral, printed textiles including chintz and silk fabrics with large-scale floral patterns were highly fashionable. In accordance with this guidance, plain unpatterned

cloth in muted colour palettes, such as brown, olive and drab, became one of the universal characteristics of male and female Plain Quaker garments.

<NP>Collins emphasizes that, alongside the formal organizational structure of the religion which disseminated and enforced the Queries and Advices, Quaker women were ‘perpetually exposed to the critical eye of one’s peers’.<sup>15</sup> Female Quaker ‘Overseers’ supported the Women’s Meetings in monitoring the behaviour of each Quaker community and admonishing female Friends who were seen to be inattentive to religious practices. A letter from 1668 describes this process, stating, ‘be you diligent in every of your Women’s Meetings, and order two faithful Women, in every Meeting, to take the care upon them’.<sup>16</sup> Even Quakers who maintained all other Quaker principles were still made to feel social discomfort if they failed to dress plainly and could even be disowned. This environment, which promoted dress as a marker of piety, enforced through a fear of ostracism from the society, and coupled with peer criticism, is essential in understanding why Quaker women were anxious about dressing in fashionable clothing long after 1860 when the Plainness Query was relaxed.

<NP>By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Plain dress had become a serious topic for contemplation by many ‘earnest and conscientious members of this Society’ who felt that the use of Plain attire by both sexes of the religion was ‘a weak point, scarcely susceptible to defence at all’.<sup>17</sup> By the 1830s, high-profile Quakers including the banker and Quaker minister Joseph John Gurney (1788–1847) had spoken of the lack of ‘moral virtue’ in the adoption of the Quaker ‘uniform’. They noted that the Society’s inflexible prescriptions about Plain dress ironically encouraged too much of a focus on clothing and appearance.<sup>18</sup> With the numbers of the religion’s followers shrinking at an alarming rate, a committee finally made ‘peculiarity of dress and speech [...] optional’, in 1860.<sup>19</sup> Thus, for the first time since the implementation of the Plainness Query in the seventeenth century, Quaker men and women were given individual liberty of choice in all sartorial matters without the fear of being ostracized.

<A>FULLY ADAPTIVE: LUCRETIA SEEBOHM (1841–1936)

<T>Well-provenanced surviving garments illustrate that from the outset of this revision of the Plainness Query, some British Quaker women relished adopting mainstream fashionable Parisian silhouettes, colours, trimmings and dress etiquette. The Quaker J. M. Richardson (dates unknown) in 1870 described how Quaker women of fashion appeared as if they were

mannequins, as the ‘dressmakers and drapers seem to use the sisterhood as pegs on which to hang in fantastic forms their wares and merchandise’.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, these British Quaker women who fully adapted their clothing to fashionable tastes chose to ignore Quaker guidelines which continued to encourage self-denial and moderation in dress. These women, who shall be referred to as fully adaptive, embraced all design elements of high fashion into their dress, including bright colours, lavish trimmings and accessories, and the distinctive silhouettes of the crinoline and the bustle. In fact, these garments of fully adaptive Quaker women give no hint of their Quaker connections in their styling or fabric, and it is only through the careful recording of their Quaker provenance that the association can be made. The fact that the provenance of many garments in museum collections has not been recorded means that there may be examples of surviving fully adaptive Quaker dress, which it is now impossible to identify. Examination of these garments alone reveals nothing of the religious affiliation of their owners, as these fashionable clothes were adopted to enable these British Quaker women to assimilate seamlessly into their peer group communities, so they would not appear ‘peculiar’.<sup>21</sup>

<NP>The collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) include a fashionable wedding dress, cape and collar with an established Quaker provenance which was displayed in their exhibition, *Wedding Dresses: 1775–2014* (3 May 2014–15 March 2015 in London) (Figure 1). It was worn by Lucretia Anson Seeböhm (née Crouch), for her Quaker marriage in 1874. The ensemble consists of a bodice, bustle-backed skirt, sash, collar and cape, all made of ivory-coloured silk gauze with an opaque silk stripe, trimmed with blonde silk net lace and cream silk satin rouleaux and bows. An examination of fashion plates of the period reveals the choice of colour, fabric and silhouette to be the height of fashion. *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* in 1872 described gauze as ‘amongst the favourite fabrics of the moment’, while *Beeton’s The Young Englishwoman* in 1874 noted that striped gauzes in ‘clear white gauze and coloured satin’ were ‘particularly admired’.<sup>22</sup> The silhouette of the dress is typically fashionable for the year it was worn. The draped polonaise (a matching overskirt looped up to show the underskirt) creates fullness at the back of the skirt and the underskirt features three flounces, edged with blonde-coloured net lace and a slight train. Most strikingly, at the centre-back of the bodice attached to the belt is a very large silk gauze bow entirely edged with the blonde lace, which is supported using a stiff cotton gauze interlining. Such bows were illustrated in *Beeton’s The Young Englishwoman* as early as

1872. While these ‘Toile de Laine’ examples, referred to as ‘basques’, were produced using ‘plain grey’ and ‘white and grey striped’ wool and silk, there is a clear similarity with the bow used on Seebohm’s dress’.<sup>23</sup> Clearly, Seebohm enjoyed adopting a fashionable Paris silhouette alongside the unrestrained accoutrements which had been perennially shunned by Plain Quakers to create a fitting and stylish ensemble for a middle-class woman.

<NP>Seebohm’s choice of a fashionable, bustled and fully adaptive wedding dress for her nuptials, however, could be seen as in direct and very public opposition to continuing Quaker religious guidance which emphasized simplicity, restraint and moderation for wedding attire. Even after the relaxation of the Quaker Advice concerning plainness of speech, behaviour and apparel in 1860, the Yearly Meeting continued to re-publish guidance from 1857 on marriage ceremonies, and the presentation of the parties present, until 1911. Whilst official Advices regarding day-to-day Plainness had been relaxed, the Society’s recommendations regarding marriage ceremony attire remained austere. These extracts emphasized marriage as a solemn religious act of ‘Divine ordinance’ and reminded all Friends that its purpose lay in influencing the ‘temporal and the spiritual condition of man’ and not for ‘exterior advantages’. More specifically, the extracts urged that during the service, the bride, groom and attendees should display sobriety and restraint in their dress, stating:

<EXT>On these deeply interesting occasions, let there be not in the attire of the parties themselves, or in that of their relatives and friends attending any display unbecoming an assembly of Christian worshippers; [...] never pass the boundary line of Christian simplicity, moderation and self-restraint.<sup>24</sup> </EXT>

<NP>Seebohm herself may have viewed her choice of ensemble as simple and moderate, in comparison to other stylish Protestant wedding dresses of her day, nonetheless it would have been seen as strikingly fashionable to fellow Quakers. Her decision to not adopt the simplest form of wedding attire is especially notable, given that she was paternally descended from an original seventeenth-century Quaker convert, William Crouch (1628–1711).<sup>25</sup> Despite this ambivalence towards the religion’s continued sartorial recommendations, however, Seebohm’s affiliation with the Religious Society of Friends, and her adoption of this ensemble for the event of her Quaker wedding, are crucial to understanding the significance of her sartorial choices; otherwise she is simply a fashionable woman getting married.

<NP>Clearly, Seebohm did not accept the traditional Quaker claim that attire reflected the wearer's spiritual sensibilities. In fact, a historical precedent did exist in which her fashionable clothing was entirely appropriate even for religiously devout Quaker women. Her actions may be seen as simply enacting the principles of Quakers including Margaret Fell (1614–1702) and Robert Barclay (1648–1690), who since the founding of the religion had argued that diverse, colourful and status-giving clothes offered suitable outward attire for each individual because clothing did not reflect the inward spiritual enlightenment of the wearer. Joan Kendall, in her article 'The Development of a Distinctive Form of Quaker Dress', described how those who never adopted the plainest form of dress were known as 'gay Friends', or 'wet Quakers', and were distinguishable by their wearing of ribbon, gauze and lace.<sup>26</sup>

<NP>In 1698, Margaret Fell wrote two Epistles decrying the use of a uniform by female Friends, and citing New Testament texts that condemned the use of 'outward ceremonies'. Fell wrote to her fellow female followers:

<EXT>It's a dangerous thing to lead Friends much into observation of outward things, for that will be easily done, for they can soon get into an outward garb, to be all alike outwardly. But this will not make them true Christians: it's the spirit that gives life.<sup>27</sup> </EXT>

<T>As such, Quakers throughout the history of the religion had publicly challenged the Quaker Advices concerning Plainness of apparel through published tracts and their clothing choices. In consequence, a precedent of adaption in dress, and of incorporating fashionable mainstream attire into the wardrobe of Quakers, had actually existed since the conception of the religion in the seventeenth century. Despite this, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Seebohm and fellow fully adaptive Quaker women would have still been enacting their fashionable clothing choices against a soundtrack of vocal consternation from conservative Quakers who decried fashion, because it 'was still deemed wrong, as it came from a spirit of vanity'.<sup>28</sup>

<A>NON-ADAPTIVE: ELIZABETH PETIPHER CASH (1796–1894)

<T>One such conservative middle-class female Quaker who made the decision not to adapt her dress to incorporate fashionable garments was Elizabeth Petipher Cash. Born on 8 February 1796 in Golden Square, London, she wore Plain Quaker dress until her death in April 1894. As Cash advised her granddaughter in a letter in 1872, she lived with vigilance to



the influence of ‘various people of differing tastes’ and prayed on matters which were contrary to the ‘needful discipline’.<sup>29</sup> Clearly, her retention of Plain dress indicated her opposition to the fashionable styles that were creeping into Quaker wardrobes.

<NP>Killerton House in Devon, run by the National Trust, has eleven garments belonging to Cash, comprising of two shawls, three sets of mittens, four fichus and two bonnets, but no complete dresses or outerwear garments. Nonetheless, this collection of mid-to late nineteenth-century accessories still provide a clear overview of the garment styles, colours and fabrics worn by Cash.

<NP>One of Cash’s surviving shawls provides evocative evidence of her Plain clothing. At 114 by 78 inches (290 by 199 cm), this large blue-grey triangular shawl would have enveloped her silhouette, draping over her shoulders and covering the back of her skirt and her bodice. The shawl’s outer layer is comprised of a mid-grey lustrously shiny silk, whilst it is lined with a matt, pale blue-grey silk (Figure 2).<sup>30</sup> The shawl’s construction from two layers of silk is highly unusual due to the expense of the double layer of fabric. However, Quakers were always known for the ‘exquisite delicacy of their materials’. Their use of costly, high-quality fabrics was such a well-known characteristic of their dress that it was acknowledged, and criticized, in the popular press. The article ‘The Decline of Quakerism’ in *The Chester Chronicle* in 1858 levelled a strong charge of hypocrisy at Quaker dress, arguing that the ‘demon of finery’, far from vanishing in Plain dress, existed instead in Friends’ obsession with high-quality expensive material.<sup>31</sup> So, despite Cash’s shawl appearing unfashionably unpatterned, undecorated, untrimmed and therefore Plain, its construction from a double-layer of rich silk, drawing the eye to the quality and quantity of the fabric, was in keeping with characteristic Plain Quaker dress practices.

<NP>Cash’s continued observance and conspicuous preservation of Plainness is also evident in three carefully posed photographs of her, taken in 1860 and 1873. These studio portraits, housed in the archive of The Religious Society of Friends, London (Figure 3), reveal that she clearly believed that traditional Plain attire represented her sense of self, and her religious sentiment, most appropriately. This manner of dressing signalled her deep affiliation with the conservative Plain lifestyle, despite its increasing unpopularity in the Quaker community. Significantly, while Cash is a pertinent example of this fossilized sartorial style, her continued obedience to Plain clothes was not an anomaly unique to her. Consultation of an anthology of Quaker photographic portraits entitled the *Friends’ Institute*

*London* display several examples of other elderly Quaker women wearing Plain attire decades after the relaxation of the Plain Query, who never conceded to adapt their clothes as they had no aspirations to be fashionable, who are referred to henceforth as non-adaptive.<sup>32</sup>

<NP>Clearly, Cash's appearance was a typical dress style for non-adaptive Quaker women. These include Mary Ann Bayes (née Williams) who remained committed to Plain ensembles throughout the late nineteenth century until her death in 1876 (Figure 4). What is also clear from these photographs is that this non-adaptive style of dress was most prevalent amongst the older members of the religion. As older women often adhere to the fashions of their youth, older Quaker women remaining in non-adaptive dress would have been symptomatic of their age as well as their religious belief. By the relaxation of the Plainness Query, for example, Cash would have been sixty-four years old; a late age to be making radical sartorial alterations to her established style.

<NP>Each of these women wears the archetypal components of Plain Quaker women's clothing, very similar to that worn by Cash. These include full-length gathered skirts with a wide waist band without a crinoline or bustle, a large undecorated shawl in a variety of muted colours and fabrics and a pale, undecorated and untrimmed white muslin or linen cap with a high crown, tied under the chin, even after the amendment of the Queries in 1860 which allowed the use of fashionable alternatives. These women displayed a deliberate disregard for, and even relishing of, the unfashionability of their attire.<sup>33</sup>

<NP>These women's interpretation, however, was not a reactionary or hostile opposition to the relaxing of the Plain Query, because the Plain custom had become optional, not formally abandoned. Therefore, these British Quaker women were simply exercising their liberty in opting to remain Plain, which still represented obedience to the amended Query while being a public demonstration of their faith.

<NP>The given dates of these portrait photographs, alongside the ages of surviving non-adaptive garments, reveal that elderly Quakers who chose to not adapt their clothing to integrate fashionable garments were becoming an increasing minority by 1900. While hitherto unheard of personal sartorial freedom was officially permitted, the Plain debate continued to rage even throughout the early twentieth century, which considered the religious simplicity and self-denial, or lack thereof, communicated by certain types of fashionable

garments. Female followers grappled with how clothes could express individuality whilst adhering to the testimony of Truth, in the sense of not inflating their own image. Such considerations were especially pertinent, given that by the late nineteenth century many Quaker businesses were flourishing, with the founding families enjoying a great deal of wealth which enabled them to mix in fashionable society. Some Quaker women consequently sought a middle way of sartorial adjustments. These Quaker women's ensembles, henceforth referred to as semi-adaptive, allowed for a new display of individual fashionable identity, which illustrated their personal wealth, whilst retaining some visual affiliation to the traditional Quaker practice of moderation and simplicity in dress.

<A>SEMI-ADAPTIVE: HELEN PRIESTMAN BRIGHT CLARK (1840–1927)

<T>A female Friend who sought such sartorial moderation was the suffrage campaigner Helen Priestman Bright Clark. Born in Rochdale, she was the only daughter of John Bright MP (1811–1889), a wealthy cotton spinner and lifelong Plain Quaker, and his first wife Elizabeth Priestman (1815–1841), who died shortly after the birth. As regards dress, rather than looking to her stepmother Margaret Elizabeth Leatham (1823–1878) with whom she always had a strained relationship, Bright Clark consulted her paternal aunt, Priscilla Bright McLaren (1815–1906), who had raised Bright Clark until John Bright's remarriage in 1847.<sup>34</sup> McLaren was something of a radical, having been disowned by the Religious Society of Friends in 1848 for 'marrying-out', and, despite full familiarity with the Quaker's continued recommendations for simplicity and moderation in clothing, she chose to dress in highly decorative, fashionable garments. Her counsel, therefore, would have been most relevant for Bright Clark who, as her personal letters reveal, aspired to display a degree of fashionability for the event of her marriage.

<NP>In a letter dated 20 February 1866, Bright Clark admitted that, 'I feel it must be my nature to be very shabbily dressed, everyone, nearly, tells me I am so shabby that I am quite used to it — It is not exactly my wish, but my misfortune'.<sup>35</sup> Clearly, Bright Clark appreciated that fashionable elegance did not come to her naturally. So she sought the sartorial guidance of her fashion-conscious aunt in order to mitigate the possibility of her being 'shabbily' attired for the very public, formal occasion of marriage; an occasion still steeped in religious prescriptions regarding the appearance of the wedding party.

<NP>Despite McLaren's best efforts to elicit excitement from her niece over the delicacies of Paris-based seasonal fashion, however, Bright Clark never shared her relish for the subject. Instead, Bright Clark remained conflicted in her attitude to sartorial matters. She displayed a conscientious, and traditionally Quakerly, unease at the very nature of emphasis on outward luxurious and decorative things, despite seeking her aunt's advice regarding every sartorial decision. To her future husband, William Stephens Clark (1839–1925) of the shoe manufacturing family, in a letter dated 13 June 1866, Bright Clark confided, 'I like things plain best generally'.<sup>36</sup> Then, fifteen days later on 28 June, she further confessed that it did not 'seem right' to focus so extensively on 'furniture, clothes and linen &c. [...] at such a serious time as regards one's own life'.<sup>37</sup> Clearly, Bright Clark viewed her forthcoming betrothal with a pious reverence at odds with the whims and fancies of the fashionable consumption she was being encouraged to engage in by her aunt.

<NP>An enormous volume of letters survive in the Alfred Gillett Trust, Clarks Archive, between Bright Clark and McLaren during the months leading up to the wedding on 24 July 1866, and these are informative when compared to the surviving clothing. Letters reveal how the pair went shopping for the wedding trousseau and furniture for Bright Clark's future marital home, in several unspecified shops in London, Newcastle and Manchester, while McLaren shipped fabrics from London to Bright Clark in Newcastle and Rochdale on several occasions. Correspondence illustrates that by early June 1866 a dress with a 'purple stripe', luxurious moiré silk for the wedding dress, a lace mantle and 'feathers' had all been purchased by McLaren for the bride's new wardrobe. These letters reveal that much of the decision-making regarding fabric and dresses was left to the fashionable aunt who savoured the activity.<sup>38</sup>

<NP>Despite her own dress taste and inclination being so different, Bright Clark may have allowed McLaren to direct sartorial decisions for the occasion of the wedding in order to avoid distractions from her continued involvement in the national suffrage cause. During 1866, Bright Clark was among those campaigning to have women included in the Reform Bill of 1867, thus spending a great deal of her time coordinating suffrage societies in Manchester, Edinburgh, Bath, Bristol and London, and attending major demonstrations in support of the bill. In the months before her marriage Bright Clark spent many weeks in London with her father in order to enjoy access to political figures afforded to her through his position as an MP. During early July 1866, the very month of her wedding, Bright Clark was

engaged in seeking signatures to a petition for women's inclusion in the Reform Bill.<sup>39</sup> It is not unreasonable to assume, therefore, that much of Bright Clark's attention was directed towards events of the national suffrage campaign over and above the sartorial considerations of her marriage. Furthermore, McLaren's own active involvement in radical politics, in campaigning for the repeal of the Corn Law during the 1840s, may have made her sympathetic to Bright Clark continuing her political pursuits, and thus a perfect choice of personal shopper for her fashionable and political nous.<sup>40</sup>

<NP>Priscilla McLaren kept Bright Clark abreast of every decision, and indecision, she made regarding the purchasing and returning of fabrics and garments, alongside recommendations for the most fashionable cuts and styles of the day. In a letter to Bright Clark dated 6 June 1866 McLaren gave detailed directives regarding the construction of the wedding dress from lustrous grey moiré silk she had shipped to her niece from London. McLaren vehemently instructed, 'Do not have the moiré lined — it flows better without and is cooler and hem it long behind. It can be made shorter afterwards if thou wishes it'.<sup>41</sup>

<NP>A letter sent by Bright Clark two days later sought McLaren's opinion on the fabric and cut of the bridesmaids' dresses and the colour of her stepmother's dress, and reveals her clear need for guidance regarding fashionable sartorial matters, asking:

<EXT> [...] does thou think white muslin would do for dresses for Williams's sisters and Minnie? Mama will have white without any colour, which I think might look rather odd. And what sort of scarfs [*sic*] or cloaks could they wear with white muslin dresses? White Alpaca is very silky and pretty but would not do over muslin. Grenadine is the only thing I can think of but it is expensive. Would the enclosed pattern be nice for the dress?<sup>42</sup> </EXT>

<NP>Bright Clark's agitation is palpable in the letter, especially when she describes the sartorial decision-making process as 'a great nuisance'. On 15 June, Bright Clark sent McLaren a swatch of white silk grenadine muslin chosen for the bridesmaids' dresses which she had ordered. She described the material as 'very thin but with a thicker stripe', it still survives in the archive, but she fretted over how it would wash. Priscilla replied with the reassuring words; 'the muslin (white) pattern is exquisite and will look lovely for the Bridesmaids'.<sup>43</sup>

<NP>One surviving dress, held at Alfred Gillett Trust, Clarks Archive, clearly shows Priscilla McLaren's fashionable influence over her niece. Worn on 23 July 1866, at a gathering the day before her wedding, Helen Bright Clark's dress of a bright blue and grey striped silk is a fashionable, though not showy, choice (Figure 5).<sup>44</sup> The gown is made of a

grey-blue and bright blue vertical-striped silk with a matching bright blue silk fringe at the epaulettes, cuffs and bordering on the centre-back bow. The dress features hook-and-eye fastenings up the centre front of the bodice, concealed by cut-glass beads. It would have been worn with a skirt-supporting crinoline. The chosen colours were far more muted than other fashionable dresses of the decade, which featured swathes of synthetically dyed silks in strident colours. However, confirmation of the perfect fashionability of the gown's fabric pattern, colour, silhouette and trimming for the year 1866 can be seen in a near identical 'grey and blue striped fashionable dress' from that year housed at the V&A.<sup>45</sup>

<NP>A photograph of the wedding group shows that, on the day of the wedding itself, Helen Bright Clark and her bridesmaids adopted fashionable accessories. Bright Clark paired her dress with a pale mantle, rather than a more Quakerly shawl or scarf, and a white veil (Figure 6), while the bridesmaids wore mantles or capes, along with little bonnets, which letters reveal Bright Clark herself chose and bought. The appearance of wide, pale ribbons tied under Bright Clark's chin suggests she also wore a small, fashionable bonnet; however, such a detail is obscured by the quality of the photographic print.

<NP>Helen Bright Clark's wedding dress, by contrast, is strikingly simple. Now held at the Gallery of Costume, Platt Hall, Manchester, it is highly traditional and reveals a far more restrained, Quakerly interpretation of fashionable styles (Figure 7). Despite being made from modish, grey moiré silk, the construction and silhouette are pure, simple traditional Quaker lines with no trimming. This is a one-piece dress with a slightly raised waistline and a short bodice, as was the fashion after 1865. The long sleeves are slim and plain, the neckline is cut round and high and would have been worn with a narrow collar, though none belonging to Bright Clark have survived. The skirt is set onto the waistband with a plain width at the front and pleated sections at each side and back, sweeping the fullness to the rear. The hem is slightly trained, in line with Priscilla McLaren's wishes, and features matching braided grey silk cord. Strikingly, however, the dress is untrimmed and unadorned. The absence of *any* trimmings (and no evidence that any were removed) shows that Bright Clark avoided the trappings of a typically fashionable wedding dress.

<NP>Made from lustrous grey moiré silk, the choice of colour is a notable rejection of the fashion for white, preferring traditional grey, as her late mother had worn. While it is unclear who made the gown; we know that the fabric was bought in London. It has been claimed that John Bright found 'the size of the bill from Marshall & Snelgrove, £48, for his

daughter Helen's wedding dress [...] disturbing'.<sup>46</sup> While such a claim is difficult to validate, letters do show that Priscilla McLaren and Helen Bright Clark had gone shopping in the West End together in the weeks prior to the wedding. However, the detailed directives from McLaren about the style of the dress suggest the purchase of the material and the dress's construction were organized independently, and since Priscilla posted the silk from London it seems unlikely for it to have been returned for construction at Marshall & Snelgrove. Miles Lambert, Curator at Platt Hall, has also suggested that the fashionable London department store probably only provided the fabric and that, whilst £48 seems a high price to pay for the silk alone, roughly 14 yards, he estimates that it would not have been an uncommon amount to spend.

<NP>Moiré silk was extremely fashionable during the mid-nineteenth century, with the fabric's rippled pattern optimally catching the light when displayed on the large bell-shaped crinoline supported skirts of the 1850s and 1860s. Moiré silks are difficult to produce, subject to failure and expensive to produce because the fabric must first be woven before the application of the moiré finish. Even manufacturers of the silk today, such as Humphries Weaving who wove the new moiré silk wall coverings for the William III State Bedroom in Hampton Court Palace, acknowledge that the most skilled of textile artists are required for the fabric's production.<sup>47</sup> Thus, Bright Clark's choice would have been understood to be the richest of silks, despite its absence of embellishment. The choice of moiré silk fabric, unhindered by adornments, drew the eye to the quality and quantity of the fabric, which was in keeping with characteristic Plain Quaker dress practices and was akin to the sartorial negotiations being made in the Plain dress of the non-adaptive Quaker Elizabeth Petipher Cash.

<NP>Plain dress practices may also have been influential by virtue of Bright Clark's familiarity with her mother Elizabeth Priestman's preserved Plain wedding dress of 1839. Now held at Platt Hall, during Bright Clark's lifetime it was conserved and treasured in the family archive. Both wedding gowns' grey colour, silk fabric and Quaker simplicity feasibly illustrate Bright Clark and McLaren drawing sartorial inspiration from the Plain Quaker wedding dress, in honour of the maternal presence missing from the day's proceedings and Bright Clark's own life.

<NP>Priestman's sartorial choices as an obedient Plain Quaker were bound by the strictures of the Plainness Query, but, despite Bright Clark's marriage taking place six years after its relaxation, the Plain debate continued. In 1866, the year of Bright Clark's marriage,

one female Quaker wrote to the Quaker newspaper *The Friend*, criticizing ‘the extravagantly wide and costly ribbons which are exhibited in our meetings, the expanded dresses, and the indulgence in almost every unbecoming and ever-varying fashion of the day’.<sup>48</sup> As such, the expectations of conservative Friends and their opposition of fashionable clothing may have shaped Bright Clark’s judgement when choosing her dress for the public and ‘religious act’ of Quaker marriage, which she openly acknowledged as a ‘serious’ event. Clearly, she was grappling with the opposing forces of being fashionable and being Quakerly, and found difficulty in reconciling these two forces to negotiate a consistent sartorial approach.

#### <A>CONCLUSION

<T>Quaker women’s attitudes towards, and their adoption of, fashion was not a smoothly graduated and linear progression between 1860 and 1914, whereby Plain dress was increasingly abandoned and fashionable clothing increasingly adopted. Such a simplification would be both untrue and disingenuous, and the three case studies here, from between 1866 and 1894, have served to illustrate the fallacy of this assumption.

<NP>The surviving garments of these women, housed in dress collections across Britain, materially mirror the three sartorial interpretations being negotiated during this time by all Quaker women. In comparing these surviving clothes it is evident that Quakers trod a carefully scrutinized path when balancing simplicity, traditional values, fashionability and wealth through their dress. The religious community recognized the rapid enactment of divergent stances on the absorption of Plain and fashionable dress, vocally critiquing their suitability, as evidenced by William Pollard’s letter. For many Quaker women, including Elizabeth Petipher Cash and Helen Priestman Bright Clark, notions of traditionally prescribed restraint, their faith and attitudes within their religious community, influenced their choices.

<NP>Whilst conservative non-adaptive Friends vocally decried the growing integration of seasonal Paris fashions into the attire of Quaker women, the presence in the religious community of fashionable semi-adaptive women, such as Helen Priestman Bright Clark, and fully adaptive Quaker women, including Lucretia Anson Seebohm, illustrates that many female Friends felt that dressing fashionably and the Quaker faith were compatible. In fact, despite the survival of non-adaptive Plain Quaker dress into the twentieth century amongst the stridently pious, as worn by Elizabeth Petipher Cash, by 1901 Plain clothing was



considered by many to be a historical peculiarity of the religion. Amelia Mott Gummere's publication, *The Quaker. A Study in Costume* (published that same year) was reviewed by Mathilda Sturge for *The Friend* in 1902. In an article that was as much a contemplative consideration of the role of dress in religion as a review of Gummere's book, Sturge admitted she felt Quaker dress 'a curious subject for a book'. She ultimately acknowledged, however, that, whilst fashion 'can be defied for a time or followed only at a distance, it cannot be wholly suppressed'.<sup>49</sup>

#### <NOTES>REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> 'To the Monthly and Quarterly Meetings in England and Wales and Elsewhere, From our Yearly Meeting held in London the 20<sup>th</sup> 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> days of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Month, 1689', *Men's Yearly Meeting Minutes* (March 1689), YM/Volume 1, Microfilm 13. Archive of the Religious Society of Friends London. The term Plain is still widely used by many Christian denominations, including the Amish and several other Anabaptist groups, to describe their style of dress. The first recorded uses of the term in early Quaker tracts dates from 1689, but it is entirely possible it was in general usage from before this date.

<sup>2</sup> Deborah E. Kraak, 'Variations on Plainness: Quaker Dress in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia', *Costume*, 34 (2000), 51–63 (p. 51).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Collins, 'Ethical Consumption as Religious Testimony: The Quaker Case', in *Ethical Consumption, Social Value and Economic Practice*, ed. by James G. Carrier and Peter G. Luetchford (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012), p. 184.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Isichei, *Victorian Quakers* (Oxford: University Press, 2008), p. 159.

<sup>5</sup> William Pollard, 'Colloquial Letters 9. My Unspoken Speeches in the late Yearly Meeting', *The Friends Quarterly Examiner: A Religious, Social & Miscellaneous Review conducted by Members of the Religious Society of Friends*, XI (1869), 443–44.

<sup>6</sup> See Richard Bauman, 'Christ Respects No Man's Person: The Plain Language of the Early Quakers and the Rhetoric of Impoliteness', *Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, Texas* (1981), pp. 3–29.

<sup>7</sup> Collins, 'Ethical Consumption as Religious Testimony', p. 187.

<sup>8</sup> William Frost, 'Changing Quaker Ideals for Material Culture', in *Quaker Aesthetics. Reflections on a Quaker Ethic in American Design and Consumption* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> 'Of Friends Christian Testimony against the Corrupt Fashions and Language of the world', *Yearly Meeting Minutes*, 17 March 1675, YM/Volume 1, Microfilm 13. Archive of the Religious Society of Friends London.

<sup>10</sup> Frost, 'Changing Quaker Ideals for Material Culture', p. 50.

<sup>11</sup> The Plainness Query is a term used by Quakers and Quaker scholars to cover a number of versions of a Query providing guidance on appropriate dress, for both men and women. The first evidence of it appears in 1693, but the way it is worded suggests it was already in action and thus was already a Query no later than 1693.

<sup>12</sup> Frost, 'Changing Quaker Ideals for Material Culture', p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> 'Answers to the Yearly Meetings Queries from the Quarterly Meeting for the Counties of Derby and Nottingham held at Nottingham 4th mo 19th: 1814', *Yearly Meeting of Women Friends Answers to Queries* (1814), YM/YMWF File 1. Archive of the Religious Society of Friends London.

<sup>14</sup> Collins, 'Ethical Consumption as Religious Testimony', p. 184.

<sup>15</sup> Collins, 'Ethical Consumption as Religious Testimony', p. 191.

<sup>16</sup> 'A Testimony for The Lord and Truth. Given forth by the Women Friends at their Yearly-Meeting at York; being a tender Salutation of Love to their Friends and Sisters in their several Monthly-Meetings in this County and Elsewhere. From our Yearly-Meeting at York, the 28th of the Fourth Month, 1668', *Yearly Meeting of Women Friends Answers to Queries 1668–1896* (1668), YM/YMWF. Archive of the Religious Society of Friends London.

<sup>17</sup> *Observations of the Quaker-Peculiarities of Dress and Language* (London: Effingham Wilson, Royal Exchange, 1836), pp. 5–12.

<sup>18</sup> *Observations of the Quaker-Peculiarities of Dress and Language*, p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Isichei, *Victorian Quakers*, p. 159, and Thomas C. Kennedy, *British Quakerism 1860–1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 216. It was formally written into the Quaker publication of religious guidance, *Christian Doctrine, Practice and Discipline*, in 1861.

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<sup>20</sup> J. M. Richardson, 'An Address to Christian Women', *The Friend. A Religious, Literary and Miscellaneous Journal*, x.119 (1870), 261.

<sup>21</sup> Richardson, 'An Address to Christian Women', p. 261.

<sup>22</sup> *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine An Illustrated Journal combining Practical Information, Instruction and Amusement*, XIII–XIV (London: Ward, Lock & Tyler, 1872–73), 32; *Beeton's The Young Englishwoman. A Volume of Pure Literature, New Fashions and Pretty Needlework Designs*. III (London: Ward, Lock & Tyler, 1874), p. 514.

<sup>23</sup> *The Young Englishwoman*. p. 346.

<sup>24</sup> *Extracts from the Minutes and Epistles of The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends held in London from its First Institution to the Present Time Relating to Christian Doctrine, Practice and Discipline* (London: Friends' Book Depository, 1861), pp. 91–92.

<sup>25</sup> William Crouch, 'Memoirs of William Crouch', *The Friends Library: Comprising Journals, Doctrinal Treatises, and other Writings of Members of the Religious Society of Friends* (Philadelphia: Joseph Rakestraw, 1847), p. 297.

<sup>26</sup> Joan Kendall, 'The Development of a Distinctive Form of Quaker dress', *Costume*, 19 (1985), 58–74 (p. 59).

<sup>27</sup> Margaret Fell, Epistle, June 1698. Quoted in Ross, Margaret Fell. Isabel Ross, *Margaret Fell. Mother of Quakerism* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1949), p. 379.

<sup>28</sup> Frost, 'Changing Quaker Ideals for Material Culture', p. 33.

<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Petipher Cash, Letter to Elizabeth Mary Taylor, 4 November 1872, MS 466 325/11–12, Papers of the Cadbury Family of Birmingham, Birmingham Library National Archives.

<sup>30</sup> Blue-grey silk triangular shawl, nineteenth century, KIL/W/04494, Killerton House, National Trust Collection.

<sup>31</sup> 'The Decline of Quakerism', *The Chester Chronicle*, 24 December 1858, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> Friends Institute London, C-F. NSA 13 Shelf 4, Archive of the Religious Society of Friends London. This collection includes hundreds of alphabetically arranged anthologies of carte-de-visite photographs of British and American Quakers, collected from 1887 until the turn of the century. These portraits illustrate members of the Society who had died and whose biographies were being compiled for archival and memorial.

<sup>33</sup> While there are some examples of younger Quaker women who are characteristic of the non-adaptive category, most of these younger women, unlike Cash, belonged to a schismatic minority faction of Quakers, known as the Fritchley Yearly Meeting, who refused to adopt the relaxation of attitudes to speech and dress introduced in 1860.

<sup>34</sup> Sandra Stanley Holton, *Quaker Women: Personal Life, Memory and Radicalism in the Lives of Women Friends, 1780–1930* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 98–100.

<sup>35</sup> Helen Bright Clark to Mrs D. McClaren, 20 February 1866, Alfred Gillett Trust/C. & J. Clark Ltd Archive, Street.

<sup>36</sup> Helen Bright Clark to William Stephens Clark, 13 June 1866, MIL55, Alfred Gillett Trust/C. & J. Clark Ltd Archive, Street.

<sup>37</sup> Helen Bright Clark to William Stephens Clark, 28 June 1866, MIL55, Alfred Gillett Trust/C. & J. Clark Ltd Archive, Street.

<sup>38</sup> Priscilla Bright McLaren to Helen Bright Clark, 6 June 1866, MIL43, Alfred Gillett Trust/C. & J. Clark Ltd Archive, Street.

<sup>39</sup> Holton, *Quaker Women*, pp. 143–44.

<sup>40</sup> Holton, *Quaker Women*, p. 83.

<sup>41</sup> Priscilla Bright McLaren to Helen Bright Clark, 6 June 1866, MIL43, Alfred Gillett Trust/C. & J. Clark Ltd Archive, Street.

<sup>42</sup> Helen Bright Clark to Priscilla Bright McLaren, 8 June 1866, MIL59, Alfred Gillett Trust/C. & J. Clark Ltd Archive, Street.

<sup>43</sup> Priscilla Bright McLaren to Helen Bright Clark, 11 June 1866, MIL43, Alfred Gillett Trust/C. & J. Clark Ltd Archive, Street.

<sup>44</sup> Dress, 1866, COST Box 7/1, Alfred Gillett Trust/C. & J. Clark Ltd Archive, Street.

<sup>45</sup> Blue and grey striped fashionable dress, 1866, silk trimmed with bugle beads and silk fringe, lined with cotton, reinforced with whalebone, T.174&A-1965, V&A, <<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O13841>> [accessed 16 June 2015].

<sup>46</sup> Robbins, *John Bright*, p. 182 Frustratingly however, Robbins' assertion is unreferenced.

<sup>47</sup> Richard Humphries, 'The Watermark of Quality — The Art of Moiré in Silk Fabrics', *Humphries Weaving* <<https://www.humphriesweaving.co.uk/watermark-quality-art-moire-silk-fabrics/>> [accessed 5 April 2018] (para. 7 of 8).

<sup>48</sup> A female member, 'On Christian Simplicity', *The Friend. A Religious, Literary and Miscellaneous Journal*, VI.65 (1866), 99.

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<sup>49</sup> Mathilda Sturge, 'Quaker Costume', *The Friend. A Religious, Literary and Miscellaneous Journal*, XLII.8 (1902), 117.

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<CAPNS>FIGURE 1. Fashionable wedding dress worn by Quaker Lucretia Seebohm, 1874. Silk gauze, trimmed with silk embroidered net lace, silk satin, lined with silk. Victoria and Albert Museum, T.68 to E-1962

© *Victoria and Albert Museum, London*

FIGURE 2. Large blue-grey triangular silk shawl worn by Elizabeth Petipher Cash mounted on a mannequin. Made of two layers of silk, with a matt, pale blue-grey silk on one side, and a mid-grey silk on the other, nineteenth century. Killerton House National Trust, KIL/W/04494

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FIGURE 3. C. A. Gandy, Elizabeth Petipher Cash, carte-de-visite, 1873. Archive of the Religious Society of Friends, London

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FIGURE 4. Mary Ann Bayes née Williams, c. 1860–1876. Archive of the Religious Society of Friends, London, Friends' Institute Album A–B, NSA 13 Shelf 4

*Personal photograph by the author, 13 March 2015. © Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*

FIGURE 5. Detail of bodice of Helen Bright Clark dress. 1866. Striped silk, silk fringe, glass beads. Clarks Archive, Street, Alfred Gillett Trust, COST Box 7/1

*Personal photograph by the author, 17 June 2015. Courtesy of the Alfred Gillett Trust/C. & J. Clark Ltd*

FIGURE 6. Detail of Helen Priestman Bright Clark (centre) in Bright Clark wedding photograph, 1866. Black-and-white photograph mounted on card. Clarks Archive, Street, Alfred Gillett Trust, PHO 1/1/5/23-24

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*Courtesy of the Alfred Gillett Trust/C. & J. Clark Ltd*

FIGURE 7. Wedding dress worn by Helen Priestman Bright Clark, Grey moiré silk, 1866.

Gallery of Costume, Platt Hall, Manchester, 1960.224

*Personal photograph by the author, 15 May 2013*