

Glendale Local History Society

Clothing and History: An Anglo-Saxon and Viking perspective

These days, we go to talks to hear about history, or we watch television programmes, listening attentively to a speaker or presenter. Glendale Local History Society members were not disappointed in early January. Paula Constantine, a specialist in creating clothing for living history re-enactments, did not disappoint us as she introduced us to life in post-Roman to Norman Britain, through the medium of the clothes people made and wore. It soon became obvious that, in those days, we would never have had time to just sit and listen. Instead, the business of creating our clothing would have occupied a lot of time in days already busy with many other tasks. Our learning, then, would have been through doing and making things. Instead of formal talks, we would have exchanged knowledge and information among ourselves as we worked on various tasks together. Today, only a few of us have the knowledge and skill to do the many complex tasks involved in producing a 'kirtle' – the smock form worn by men and women from iron age to medieval times.

In her talk, Paula took us through the various stages from initial ingredients to finished garment. The main materials for producing fabrics were flax, fibre from nettle stalks, and, especially in north Northumberland, wool. She explained that it is very difficult to find archaeological evidence of the fabrics as they decay so quickly, but sometimes leave their mark on the back of broaches. Archaeologists have also found signs of ponds used to soak flax and the pith from nettle stalks, as well as durable parts of spinning wheels and weaving looms. It looks as if some of the production of yarns of linen, nettle fibre and wool was organised in a semi-commercial way. Until just before the Norman period, when Flemish weavers brought a new weaving technology to Britain, upright looms were used. Paula told us that at Akeld, there is evidence of considerable weaving activity and speculated that this could have been for the production of rich garments for the royal household at early medieval Yeavinger. Some of the cloth found from early medieval times shows a very high level of skill in patterning the fabric and creating braiding which could be used to ornament the neckline, sleeve ends and hems. It was also possible to dye the cloth or thread in various colours, and elites enjoyed brightly coloured fabrics. The resultant clothing took a lot of time to make, so people had to make them last a long time. The braiding helped to protect the edges of clothes from wear and tear. Paula noted that some clothes were sufficiently valuable to be listed as goods in people's wills.

Anglo-Saxon costume women had kirtles made from two straight pieces of cloth, tied at the shoulders with broaches. Working women would have had short –sleeved garments, but elite ladies could allow themselves the luxury of longer sleeves. Ladies decorated their costume with necklaces made of glass beads, and teeth from wolves or boars, as well as small bronze discs. Possibly the discs and the teeth had a medical role in warding off disease and evil spirits. A belt at the waist was accompanied by a pocket bag, the opening made from iron or perhaps elephant ivory. Paula suggested that elephant ivory too had a medical purpose. Clearly such a material would have been imported from far away. Ivory was also used to make needles. Men's kirtles were shorter, worn with trousers, and with an indent in

the neckline. Both men and women's garments were braided, with very complex patterns woven into the braiding.

By the 900s, Scandinavian influence was beginning to be felt in north Northumberland, probably through trade links with Denmark and Sweden. This influenced the style of dress worn by women in particular. Paula demonstrated this by dressing herself in a fine pinafore-style garment, with stretch fabric over the chest and a fine flared skirt below. The shoulder straps were fastened with the classic 'Viking' tortoise broaches, with strings of beads hanging between them. By this time, and especially in the Viking culture, jewellery was worn as a sign of wealth, as was also demonstrated in the cut of the cloth and the colours used. By this time, yarns, cloth and jewellery were being traded on a considerable scale as well as made locally.

Paula brought with her a rich array of materials for us to look at and the fabric specialists among us were especially fascinated by the techniques. But I think we all felt that, through imagining making and wearing the clothing Paula described, we had been transported back a millennia and a half to a time when north Northumberland was at the centre of an important European kingdom.

The Society's next talk will be on 12th February at 7.30 Cheviot Centre, Wooler, when the topic will be *North East War Memorials*, by Janet Brown.

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