

FIT FOR THE COURT
LADY RIBBLESDALE'S SHOES, 1797

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This pair of women's shoes, V&A 266 & 266A-1899 (fig. 1), dates from the 1790s and has been selected for a forthcoming exhibition on footwear due to open at the V&A in 2015. While the scope of the exhibition will be wide in terms of the time period covered and styles included, a number of shoes bearing makers' labels from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries will be included. The right shoe of this pair bears a label identifying Sutton of Covent Garden as the maker (fig. 2).

Preparation for the exhibition requires careful physical examination of the shoes as well as investigation into their 'life', in order to unravel the context in which they were made, bought and worn. The shoes have black satin uppers, with kid leather lining and leather soles. They measure 24 cm in length, 8 cm in width, 8.75 cm in height, with a heel height of 4.6 cm. They were made by a method known as 'turnshoe' construction, which involved them being made inside out up to a certain stage and then turned right side out, thus hiding the seams on the inside and creating a neat appearance. In addition to the maker's label this particular pair of shoes instantly gives us a number of clues to investigate: the small Italian heels are covered in red silk; the shoes are embellished with silver thread embroidery, sequins and imitation gems (fig. 3); they have straps known as lachets, indicating that they originally bore buckles; and the inside of the left shoe is marked with the name 'Rebecca Ribblesdale' and the year '1797'. All of this information needs to be analysed to piece together the story of these shoes.

After examination of the shoes with the naked eye, further information has been gleaned from X-rays and XRF spectrometer analysis. These methods provide useful information on the construction techniques and materials used, which are not otherwise available. For example, an X-ray of the shoes reveals that no nails were used in their construction, just stitching and glue (fig. 4). This provides an interesting comparison with other shoes of the period, as well as revealing differences and similarities in modern shoemaking.

In the late-eighteenth century, ostentation gradually disappeared from clothing and footwear, with shoes becoming very low-heeled or flat in keeping with democratic ideals (fig. 5), except at Court where ostentation continued (fig. 6). The fact that these shoes were embellished not only with embroidery in pure silver thread, glistening gems (albeit imitations) and buckles, but also a red heel, indicates that they were most likely worn at a royal court. The display of wealth and high status was still regarded as entirely appropriate for a courtier, and necessary to support the luxury goods market.¹ The red heel had originated at the court of Louis XIV of France as a deliberate expression of privilege reserved for those who were permitted access to the French court.² This ‘notoriously undemocratic’ heel spread beyond France as a symbol of ‘sophistication, international travel and refinement’.³

In Britain, slender Italian heels became popular from around the late 1760s, probably due to an interest in all things Italian prompted by travellers returning from their Grand Tour of Europe.⁴ Characterised by their small wedge under the foot arch, they were a departure from the thick heels worn in the first half of the eighteenth century (fig.7). The Gentleman’s Magazine of August 1776 described them thus: ‘Heels to bear the precious charge, More diminutive than large, Slight and brittle, apt to break, Of the true Italian make’.⁵ They were not intended for heavy, everyday wear. The minimal wear on the soles of these particular shoes indicates that they were hardly worn at all. The shoes are straight, rather than shaped to fit left and right feet, indicating that they were made on a straight shoe last.⁶ The use of straight lasts was a solution to the introduction of high heels, as varying heel heights required different lasts.⁷ Straight shoes were the norm from the late-sixteenth century up to the late-eighteenth century, as by using just one straight last for each heel height, rather than a left and a right, the shoemaker essentially halved his expenditure on lasts.⁸

XRF spectrometer analysis of the silver thread and sequins reveals that they are pure silver, which would have added significantly to the cost of the shoes. The silver thread is

¹ McNeil, p. 383.

² François Boucher cited in McNeil and Riello, 2006, p.102.

³ McNeil and Riello, 2006, p.103.

⁴ Pratt and Woolley, p 49.

⁵ Cited in Swann, 1982, p.30.

⁶ A shoe last is a carved wooden form which roughly approximates to the size of the shoe wearer’s foot.

⁷ Swann, 1986, p.8.

⁸ Saguto, p.91.

wrapped in a coil around a silk thread and is applied as a surface decoration rather than being stitched through the satin upper. It is held in place or ‘couched’ on by a non-metallic thread which is sewn through the surface fabric. The individual sequins would have been made by cutting a short piece of silver wire, bending it into a circular shape and beating it flat with a hammer. The imitation gems are made of glass and have mirrored backs to maximise their luminosity, and are held in place by small silver frames stitched to the shoe vamp. The silver embroidery and sequins on these shoes, now tarnished, would originally have gleamed and created a strong visual impact in combination with the glass stones and eye-catching buckles in a candlelit ballroom. Dancing would have afforded the wearer the perfect opportunity to display embellished shoes normally hidden by long skirts and petticoats.

The presence of latches indicates that the shoes would have originally borne buckles (fig. 8). Latches were short straps which, when looped through a buckle, kept the shoe closed. Buckles were conspicuous symbols of wealth and, as such, appropriate accessories for court attire. They declined as a mainstream fashion accessory in Britain in the late-eighteenth century, reflecting the simplification of fashion brought about by the French Revolution, and resulted in the massive unemployment of buckle-makers by the early 1790s.⁹ The buckle manufacturers petitioned the Prince of Wales for support in 1791. He ‘promised his utmost assistance by his own example and influence’ to support the industry and forbade any member of the Royal Household to adopt shoe tying in favour of buckles.¹⁰ His endorsement may account for the persistence of shoe buckles in court dress, but it failed to convince the general population to sustain the ailing trade. The owner of these shoes most likely wore them only to the royal court. Displaying buckles could be interpreted as a show of support for the stance taken by the Royal Household, or merely dutiful adherence to the rules of court dress.

The inside of the left shoe is marked with the name ‘Rebecca Ribblesdale’ and the date ‘1797’, possibly indicating that they were a bespoke product made for her in that year. Alternatively she may have written her own name on the inside of the shoe and the year 1797, perhaps because it was a significant year. It is likely that the shoes belonged to the wife of Thomas Lister, who was given the title Baron Ribblesdale of Gisburn Park in the county of York

⁹ Pratt and Woolley, 1999, p.55.

¹⁰ Urban, p. 1155.

in October 1797.¹¹ Indeed the Ribblesdale household accounts for 1789-1817, held in the archives of the Yorkshire Archaeological Society, do mention payment of a bill in 1795 to ‘Mrs. Sutton, Ladies shoemaker’.¹² She was probably the wife of Sutton the shoemaker, whose label appears on the insole of the right shoe. There appears to be an increase in spending on clothing in the accounts around the time of Lord Ribblesdale’s elevation to the peerage in late 1797, which could tally with a visit to the royal court. Interestingly there is no mention of any payment to Sutton the shoemaker after 1795. Perhaps these particular shoes were part of the bill paid in 1795, and the 1797 date was added later to commemorate the conferring of Lord Ribblesdale’s title. Otherwise, considering that eighteenth-century goods were bought on credit and paid for later, and the fact that aristocrats were notorious for not paying their bills, the absence of Sutton’s name after 1795 in the accounts could suggest that this particular pair of shoes were never paid for. Although payments ‘to my lady’ are recorded throughout the accounts, it is not possible to ascertain whether Lady Ribblesdale herself would have settled her shoe bill with her allowance.

The shoemaker Sutton’s use of an insole label with which to brand his shoes may reveal an influence from France. According to Giorgio Riello, ‘branding’ was a widely-used marketing device of French shoemakers.¹³ Every maker was required by the Parisian Compagnie des Cordonniers (the shoemakers’ guild) in the eighteenth century to use a distinctive label to mark his products – this not only helped to distinguish one producer from another, but also highlighted their individuality.¹⁴ France had long been the leader in all things fashion-related by 1797, so it is not surprising that British shoemakers adopted the practice of labelling from the mid-eighteenth century, probably hoping to imbue their products with the same fashionable cachet.¹⁵

Aside from this association between Sutton’s practice of labelling and those of fashionable French shoemakers, the label itself contains information which speaks of the maker’s distinction. It bears the royal crest surmounted by the Royal Arms and printed with the following: ‘Sutton - Shoe Maker to Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Cumberland - Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, London’. Since the Middle Ages, formal recognition was given to

¹¹ Collins and Bryce, p.591, 1812.

¹² Ribblesdale household accounts for 1789-1817 [ref MD335/1/7/1/10].

¹³ Riello, 2006, pp. 210-212.

¹⁴ Riello, 2006, p. 212.

¹⁵ June Swann indicates that maker’s labels appeared c.1750 in British made shoes. Swann, 1982, p. 31.

tradesmen who supplied the Royal household with goods and services, and this relationship was formalised by the issue of Royal warrants over the centuries.¹⁶ Advertising the royal patronage they enjoyed no doubt helped to attract high status or aspiring customers. According to the historian Helen Berry as ‘customers crossed the threshold of a shop, the royal crest over the door fostered the illusion that they were entering temporarily into a space favoured by the ruling elite, even if the latter never went there in person.’¹⁷ The same air of distinction could be harnessed by the use of shoemakers’ labels bearing the Royal Arms. A customer’s ability to select distinguished products from the right supplier was an important signifier of status, as Claire Walsh explains:

In the same way that to be seen at assemblies and the theatre was a mark of social status, so too was making your purchases in the most fashionable shops – those that marked themselves out as distinguished and tasteful in their decoration, their selection of goods, and the type of service they provided.¹⁸

While Sutton furnished Lady Ribblesdale with high-end, probably bespoke shoes, this did not preclude him from subcontracting or supplying ready-made shoes. An advertisement for Sutton’s business in the *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser*, dated 10 March 1786, addressed ‘to the Ladies’ informs them ‘that they may be supplied with shoes ready made, which for neatness of workmanship, and excellence of materials, are equal to the best bespoke shoes’.¹⁹ This provides another reason for the use of the shoemaker’s label. Most luxury London retailers maintained a distinct separation between manufacture and selling and, rather than having a workshop on site, would buy in their entire stock from manufacturers.²⁰ It is also possible that Sutton, even if he did not buy in all his stock from manufacturers, had little direct input in making the Ribblesdale shoes, relying either on his own workers or an outside subcontractor to complete the order. Division of labour in shoemaking meant that the master shoemaker retained control over cutting hides and finishing, while most of the work was done outside his workshop

¹⁶ <http://www.royal.gov.uk/MonarchUK/Symbols/Royalwarrants.aspx>

¹⁷ Berry, p. 383.

¹⁸ Walsh, p.161.

¹⁹ *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser* (London, England), Friday March 10th, 1786, issue 4086.

²⁰ Walsh, p. 160.

by journeymen.²¹ The use of embellishment such as silver thread embroidery would have required the skills of yet another craftsman. Adding a maker's label obfuscated the division of labour and the complexity of subcontracting, 'guaranteeing quality through a process of trust'.²² A maker's name attached to a product, implied his close involvement with its creation or, at the very least, it guaranteed the quality of the work, regardless of whether or not it was created by his hand.

These shoes date from an interesting period of social and economic change. They are a symbol of wealth and privilege at a time when the overt display of neither was particularly fashionable. They are visual advertisements of their owner's proximity to the royal court; their red heels, glistening buckles and label bearing the royal arms speak of the wearer's nobility and stand in opposition to the plainer, more democratic neoclassical style popular at that time. While these were shoes for court, and may not have been particularly fashionable beyond it, they bear a label which simultaneously advertises affiliation with English royal patronage and appropriates the fashionable aura of French shoemakers.

²¹ Riello, 2006, p.175.

²² Riello, 2008, p. 260.

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