

New research casts doubt over tale of famous Bronte dress

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Charlotte Brontë's 'Thackeray Dress'. Credit: The Brontë Society

Research by the University of Southampton has called into question a centuries-old story behind a dress that once belonged to one of the nation's most beloved novelists – Charlotte Brontë.

Colloquially coined the 'Thackeray Dress', this blue and white printed garment was always thought to have been worn by Brontë to a dinner, held in her honour at the home of her literary hero William Makepeace Thackeray on 12 June, 1850. However, a new study suggests this wasn't the case.

The famous dinner was a significant moment in Charlotte Brontë's career, as historian and lead researcher at Southampton, Eleanor Houghton explains: "It was a highly important social occasion for Charlotte – a public marker of her arrival on the literary scene, coming soon after the release of her best-selling novel, *Jane Eyre*. It's generally accepted that Brontë wore the iconic 'Thackeray Dress' on this august occasion, but my research suggests this may be more rooted in myth, than in truth."

In the paper, *Unravelling the Mystery: Charlotte Brontë's 1850 'Thackeray Dress'*, published in the journal *Costume*, Eleanor examines the style, fabric, context and history of the [dress](#), which is normally housed at the Brontë Parsonage Museum in Haworth, UK, but will shortly be at The Morgan Library and Museum, New York.

By delving deeper into surviving archival material, industrial practices and contemporary accounts, she confirms the garment can confidently be dated to the years close to 1850 – around the time of the dinner in Kensington, London. However, contemporary sartorial codes and conventions cast doubt on its suitability as evening wear and call into question its association with the event.



Novelist Charlotte Brontë.

One alternative theory for the purpose of the dress is revealed in a catalogue entry for its sale at Sotheby's in 1916, describing it as being made for Charlotte's honeymoon – but Eleanor also discounts this, stating: "By 1854, the fashion was for larger, more voluminous sleeves. Charlotte Brontë's own 'going away dress' of the same year features full, heavily pleated sleeves that taper to a narrow wristband. Conversely, the 'Thackeray Dress' features close fitting sleeves, more commonly associated with the fashions of the early years of the 1850s."

Having considered all the evidence, findings point to another solution to the mystery of the 'Thackeray Dress'. Sometime between 6 to 12 June 1850, during the same trip to London as the dinner engagement, another meeting took place between Charlotte Brontë and writer William Makepeace Thackeray. This was a private morning meeting, for which a printed day dress would have been appropriate. Eleanor comments: "The white and blue delaine Thackeray dress would have been the right choice for such a meeting. Its high neck, long sleeves and mid quality, printed fabric point to pretty, but unassuming morning attire. Though it can

never be categorically proven, it is possible that the dress is associated with this earlier engagement, not the evening dinner.

"We know Charlotte was embarrassed when she wore an inappropriate dress to the opera on her first visit to London, so with this in mind, I think we can be confident it is unlikely she would have made the same mistake twice, by wearing a day dress to an auspicious evening occasion - particularly one of such personal and public significance."

Furthermore, the research also reveals that a written account of the dinner, placing the dress there, in the 1914 book *In the Footsteps of the Brontës*, is actually based on second hand information – raising a question mark over its reliability.

Professor Maria Hayward, a historian and textile conservation expert at the University of Southampton says: "Charlotte's blue and white dress is a fascinating piece of clothing that reveals many insights into the life of its owner. Its size, the choice of materials and cut, and the quality have all allowed Eleanor to piece together when it was worn and what it reveals about the public life of this very private author."

Eleanor concludes: "My work deepens the mystery of this dress, but whatever the truth, it continues to exert power. In many ways, the myths that surround such an object - in this case involving the literary giants of both Charlotte Brontë and William Makepeace Thackeray, add a value and interest out of all proportion to its original worth."

More information: Eleanor Houghton. *Unravelling the Mystery: Charlotte Brontë's 1850 'Thackeray Dress'*, *Costume* (2016). [DOI: 10.1080/05908876.2016.1165956](https://doi.org/10.1080/05908876.2016.1165956)

Provided by University of Southampton

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