

Object in Focus: Mrs Hawker's Purse

Curator Rebecca Unsworth explores what the contents of a late nineteenth-century purse can tell us about the woman who owned it, and about the classification of collections at Birmingham Museums Trust.

Rebecca Unsworth

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The decorative art collection of the city of Birmingham, managed by Birmingham Museums Trust (BMT), contains a large quantity of dress and textiles. A particular strength of the collection, both numerically and qualitatively, is women's clothes and accessories from the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. This article focuses on a single woman's purse from the end of the nineteenth century in the city's collection.¹ It is 6 cm tall and 10 cm wide, made of green crocodile skin, and secured with a flap top and metal clasp. There is a pocket covered with a flap and five compartments inside, the middle of which is topped with a hinged metal fastening, and a further, unsealed pocket on the back of the purse. Gold embossed lettering on the interior indicates that it was produced by 'R. W. Forsyth, Glasgow'.

This purse was acquired by Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (BMAG) in 1981 as part of a bequest of around fifty objects – mostly items of clothing – from Nora Hawker (1905-1981). A number of garments in Hawker's possession were featured in Nancy Bradfield's book *Costume in Detail*, first published in 1968, suggesting that Hawker may have been a collector, or was at least known to have several examples of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century womenswear in her possession.² Her bequest included clothes which had belonged to her and to her mother, who was also called Nora (and is therefore referred to throughout this article as Mrs Hawker), as well as items which had belonged to other women, some named, but others unknown.

Birmingham began developing its decorative art collection some years before the formal opening of BMAG in 1885, purchasing many examples of metalwork, ceramics, textiles, glass and furniture, as well as accepting donations.³ However, it was not until the 1930s that significant quantities of dress began to enter the collection. Initially dress was primarily acquired by BMAG for its aesthetic qualities and for the purpose of illustrating the changes in fashion that had occurred over time. This purse differs both materially and stylistically from the other purses in the city's collection, which are mostly knitted, beaded and metal purses from the earlier part of the nineteenth century. It exemplifies the shift towards the use of leather purses which occurred at the end of the nineteenth century.⁴

Dress collections, however, can provide evidence of more than just sartorial change. Through both their materiality and usage, clothes and accessories can illustrate the histories of technology, materials, manufacturing and trade, as well as broader social, cultural and economic shifts. This particular purse speaks of the availability, desirability and use of exotic reptile skins in Britain in the late nineteenth century, whilst its diminutive dimensions hint at the corresponding size of women's pockets and handbags in the period. Its size would also have limited the quantity and proportions of its potential contents, impacting what women could carry with them on their person, although the inclusion of several expanding compartments suggests a need or desire to sort and separate the different objects to be housed within.

Contemporary museum interpretation often emphasises personal stories, elucidating bigger historical themes and bringing an object to life by reference to the history of the individual(s) who made, used or owned it. Presenting such stories can, however, be challenging with the dress collection at BMT, because generally we do not know the identities of these individuals. As biographical information was not regarded as being particularly important when objects entered the collection in the past, it was rarely collected.

In this context, this purse is remarkable in the amount of information it can provide about the woman who owned and used it. For the purse is not empty (see fig.2). It contains: a halfpenny and two farthings; two buttons; a book of postal rates and key dates for 1900, and the same for 1902; a third class train ticket from Claverdon to Hatton; a postcard from a friend staying in the Malvern Hills; a business card for W. Love, 'Fish, Game and Potatoe Salesman'; an inscribed ivory tablet; and a number of receipts. These assorted objects reveal that the purse belonged to Nora Hawker's mother, Mrs Hawker (1869-1909). They provide us with her address (Devonshire Road in Handsworth Wood), and clues to which shops she patronised. She purchased a variety of items from the haberdashers Jevons and Mellor on Corporation Street in the city centre, including a 'Costume Skirt' and a 'Paste Brooch'. She visited a grocer in Handsworth, a butcher near Perry Park, and at least two different fish, game and poultry sellers, one in the Market Hall in the centre of Birmingham and the other in Handsworth.⁵ A receipt for the rent of apartments shows that she took a holiday in Eastbourne. The train ticket indicates that she travelled in Warwickshire, and the text written on the small piece of ivory implies that the purse was a gift from a man, most likely her husband Frank, who described himself as 'a miserable old [screw]'.

This purse is able to reveal more about the identity and life of its former owner than most other objects in the dress collection at BMT because it was used as a sort of repository for the kinds of documents that might usually be found in an archive. Its signs of wear are more verbose than the stains, mends and tears which are often used to help determine an object's history.⁶ Arguably, the location of these informative documents inside the purse makes them more revealing than if they had been encountered in an archive. At first glance

the purse looks as though it contains the natural detritus of everyday life – the random assortment of coins, receipts and buttons which have fallen off but not yet been sewn back on – that could probably be found in many of our purses today. It might initially appear that the purse was given to BMAG in the same state it was left in when Mrs Hawker died, in 1909. But a closer look at the purse's contents shows that they are from an array of different dates, from 8 October 1894 to 5 September 1907. Why was Mrs Hawker carrying around this assortment of old receipts? They do not form a complete record of her spending – she was not hoarding every receipt she ever received – and many of the receipts are for basic, everyday foodstuffs, rather than larger purchases which it may have been more apposite to keep a record of. If the purse was indeed a gift from Mrs Hawker's husband, there was probably some emotional value attached to it. Could some of its contents have also had a sentimental significance that belies their quotidian appearance, acting as material memories of events in Mrs Hawker's life? Did she make a conscious decision to keep the items inside the purse, or was it simply that the purse was not in daily use and therefore its contents were not regularly sorted, decanted and disposed of? Certainly the purse was too deep to be carried in the leather handbag which we know belonged to Mrs Hawker, dating from the first decade of the twentieth century.⁷

Generally, historians are reliant on literary and archival sources to determine what people in the past carried in their purses and pockets; these objects rarely contain traces – or actual examples – of their former contents.⁸ There are a couple of incidences in BMT's dress collection of a handkerchief forgotten in the pocket of a dress and a programme for a ball abandoned in an evening bag.⁹ There is also another purse which still contains a number of old documents and ephemera, but it was collected as part of the Birmingham history collection, rather than the dress collection. It is a brown crocodile skin wallet, which does not fasten or contain any coin compartments, but instead has pockets for holding bank notes and papers.¹⁰ It belonged to Sydney McMeekan, a Birmingham-based athlete who competed in the 1948 Olympics as part of the English basketball team. The wallet was donated to the city in 2014 alongside other objects relating to McMeekan's sporting career and military service during the Second World War. It contains a couple of newspaper clippings; several lists of basketball fixtures and results; a receipt and delivery note from The Fifty Shilling Tailors; another receipt for the sum of thirteen shillings; coupons; a membership card for the Birmingham YMCA, and another for the Queensberry All-Services Club in London. As with Mrs Hawker's purse, the contents of McMeekan's wallet also cover a sizable date range, in this instance from 1942 to 1957.

In the past both the collection and BMAG's curators were firmly divided into different departments. Large acquisitions generally went to a single department, rather than being separated out. This led to the inclusion of a number of non-textile objects in the dress and decorative art collection, such as photographs, books, and diaries, and to the presence of similar types of objects in different sections of the collection. Mrs Hawker's purse does not have an illustrious maker, and is not particularly visually spectacular, however it does say a

lot about the life of the woman who owned it. Would it therefore be more appropriate for this object to be housed in the history rather than the decorative art collection? Collection divisions can be useful in breaking down thousands of objects into more manageable chunks for curators. But they can also be rather limiting, by presupposing where the value of an object lies. The fact that this purse is not a display of great craftsmanship or artistic ingenuity does not disqualify it from being a 'decorative art' object; it would be dangerous to impose clear divisions in dress collections between aesthetically brilliant examples of high-end design and items of everyday dress collected as sources of social history. Instead, Mrs Hawker's purse illustrates that each object can tell a number of different stories, and that the narrative we choose to emphasise today may not be the one which prompted its acquisition, or led to it being housed in a particular corner of the collection.

Rebecca Unsworth is Research Assistant (Decorative Art) at Birmingham Museums Trust

¹ BMT, object number 1981M374.

² Nancy Bradfield, *Costume in Detail: Women's Dress 1730-1930*, new edn (Orpington, 1997). The objects now in BMAG's collection are those on pp.241-44, 263-66, 271-74, 303-06, 315-18, 341, 363-68.

³ Stuart Davies, *By the Gains of Industry: Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery 1885-1985* (Birmingham, 1985).

⁴ Vanda Foster, *Bags and Purses* (London, 1982), pp.58-59.

⁵ The locations of the shops which Mrs Hawker frequented according to her receipts can be viewed on this map:

https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=1tSd1P2z0QfQBJJZatgpvm4kTIK6J_ivt&ll=52.4976160628454%2C-1.9039786104980338&z=13

⁶ Bethan Bide, 'Signs of Wear: Encountering Memory in the Worn Materiality of a Museum Fashion Collection', *Fashion Theory*, 21.4 (2017), pp.449-76.

⁷ BMT, object number 1981M421.

⁸ Barbara Burman and Ariane Fennetaux, *The Pocket: A Hidden History of Women's Lives, 1660-1900* (London, 2019); Rebecca Unsworth, 'Hands Deep in History: Pockets in Men and Women's Dress in Western Europe, c. 1480-1630', *Costume*, 51.2 (2017) pp.148-70. An exception to this is the Francis Golding collection in the Museum of London and London College of Fashion. Cyana Madsen, 'A Pocket History: Exploring Object Biography in the Francis Golding Collections', conference paper, Everyday Fashion: Extraordinary Stories of Ordinary Clothes, University of Huddersfield, 27 June 2019.

⁹ BMT, object numbers 1957M69 and 1989M306.

¹⁰ BMT, object number 2014.37.40.