

A Woman of Significance

An interview with Di Reidie
Brighton Historical Society volunteer and president 1999 – 2016
by Annabel Butler

Introduction

In June of 2018, the BHS costume team was pleased to receive a substantial addition to the Di Reidie costume sub-collection from the archives of our much beloved past president.

Di's long association with the BHS included great devotion to uncovering and preserving the treasures of our State Significant Costume Collection. This devotion was underwritten by her deep appreciation for the importance of costume in the communication and understanding of social history, an interest which also fueled her work as a vintage clothing dealer and her significant and eclectic personal costume collection.

We are appreciative of Di's extensive work and advocacy and are pleased to share with you a transcript of a recent interview with Di, providing some insight into her work both at Brighton Historical Society, and as a dealer and collector of costumes.

Interview with Di Reidie April 2019

On Brighton Historical Society

What brought you to Brighton Historical Society?

In 1999 a friend, Jennifer Coghlan-Bell rang me and said she was working at the Society and would I like to come along and volunteer?

What was the society like at that time?

Rosalind Landells, Hilary Bullock, Kathleen Gawler, Bob Lawson (president), Robin and Anne Bailey and me.

[Also] a very rudimentary photocopier and computer – they had just moved (a year or two previously) from the Town Hall caretaker's flat to the Old Children's Library.

When I came along to the society it was operating on a shoestring. Despite having funds in the bank there was no money for milk. Mrs Landells' youthful energy had waned and there was generally less happening at the BHS.

Tell us about the costume collection at that time.

The clothing was in plastic supermarket bags, chests and suitcases, and a few were hanging up. I would pull a Victorian silk dress out of a plastic bag and it would disintegrate in my hands.

How did change come about?

Gradually. As we tidied up the filing, newspapers, photos and ephemera, I became more and more involved in the discovery of the clothing. Treasures appeared before my eyes! Anne Bailey also liked clothes and together we sorted and hung what we could. Jackie Mitchell and Kris Hall were other key volunteers who helped to get the costume collection appropriately stored, cleaned and hung.

There was very little awareness of textile collecting and conservation at this time. Whilst Mrs Landells had the foresight to begin collecting local clothing items and histories, which have provided the foundation of the collection, she was unaware of, and did not instigate, any collection management processes. To be fair, before the internet the attainment of appropriate resources and knowledge would have been considerably more arduous, especially as . . . the importance of textiles was relatively unrecognized and under-resourced. Slowly we instigated a conservation ethic, facilities were accessed, and storage improved. There are many years of work which have gone into assessing the collection and attaining the grant which supported completion of the *Significance Assessment 2005-2011*.

What can you tell us about the fashion parades held in the past?

The fashion parades were mostly before my time, largely held in the 1970s, except for the wedding parade. I coordinated [the wedding parade] in conjunction with St Andrews Church. It was a huge success [and] included a substantial number of wedding gown donated to the collection.

It was Roslyn (Landells) who toured the clothing all over Victoria. The models were predominantly local Brighton women, [and there was] a tendency towards engaging highly visible women from the ranks of society. Rosalind was very conscious of positioning the profile of the BHS to reflect the roots of the area's foundations and social position. The older pieces, such as the Ward Cole items, were commonly worn at these events. The parades were usually fundraisers for the society or a local cause and held in many venues ranging from the Southern Cross Hotel to local town halls.

How have you fostered relationships with donors over the years?

I have never needed to actively seek acquisitions. The reputation for the collection had become known throughout the community. BHS activities have also helped people within the community to be aware of the collection, they would get in touch and the donations followed. Approximately 50 per cent of our current collection relate to the time of Mrs Landells, with the remainder being donated since that time.

What are your favourite pieces in the collection and why?

A difficult choice but the two items I would choose from the broader collection would be the "George and Georges" gown because of the iconic nature of [Georges] department store within Melbourne culture and the 1930s Betty Cox wedding dress for its style and dramatic beadwork. Of my own donations it is most definitely the 'Eastern Pearson' outfit. I purchased it in Bay Street and it was the first time that I spent a substantial amount of money on an outfit and I loved the event to which I wore it.

What would you like to see the future of the collection become?

For it to be exhibited. Ideally, I would love to see the collection displayed within the context of the Brighton community to ensure the ongoing relationship between the community, the collection and the social history of Brighton, for future generations to enjoy. The exhibition space within the Old Town Hall would be an ideal venue for the collection to be featured, perhaps one month of the year. Evidence from the broader museum industry demonstrates the public's interest in clothing and the opportunity to share small exhibits that illustrate a small but important part of Melbourne history is currently untapped.

On collecting and dealing in clothing and ephemera

What triggered your work in collecting and dealing in clothing?

My family was not particularly wealthy, and my mum made all of my clothes. I didn't buy clothes until I moved out of home. I was always interested in the dressmaking patterns of her mother, and this interest slowly grew. I developed an interest in vintage clothing and collecting prior to being involved at Brighton. I started working with Maria Walsh, who lived in St Andrews Street. Her husband owned the Bay Street cinemas at the time (now Palace Cinemas). Maria and her husband used to travel to Cannes for the film festival each year and would buy textiles and clothing and resell them on their return. Maria also did bead repairs for people and had an amazing hat pin collection. Maria and I would operate a vintage stall, and I gradually moved into buying and selling, eventually continuing on my own.

Is there one that got away?

There are many that got away!

I wish I had purchased more from the Lisa Ho Collection as it was really quite special. The pleasure for me has been in travelling overseas and finding these little treasures. I used to hunt down particular shops and drag my husband David to go and look. I always brought something home from each trip. Purpose was important too. Was it something different to what I already had? Did it fill a gap or say something of interest?

Having said that, many of my purchases have been just what took me at the time, opportunistic finds at good prices.

Generally I love fashion as it is art on the body.

Do you have one very favorite piece that you could never part with?

There is a 1940s cotton rayon nightie that I took to India. It was my favourite and had become quite damaged, so I took it to the lady of the house and asked if she could help me to get it repaired. She took it and on its return I discovered it had been beautifully and substantially mended. As she returned it to me, she said 'Now when you wear this you will think of me'. That nightie has strong sentimental meaning for me, a deep emotional connection to a trip, a place and time and of course the lady.

You have recently parted with much of your collection, has that been challenging?

No, not really. I was ready to move on. Once the decision was made, I just went ahead and did it. There has to be a rationale to collecting. It serves a purpose and then there comes a time . . . for things to change.

Many of the items I have donated to the BHS are Melbourne-based fashion. I resent the emphasis often found in Australia on overseas fashions with little regard for Australian home-grown talent. I have sold many of the items that were not important to Brighton or Melbourne specifically. I have also saved most of my 'Studibaker Hawk' pieces for my daughter Kathryn as she has a particular affinity for the label.

What would you say to someone who doesn't understand your love of clothing? How would you sway them to understand what they are missing out on?

You can't! If you don't get it, you never will! But ... Costume is human history!

If you are keen to see more of our collection, including 10 items which tell a story of Di Reidie, please find us on Victorian Collections, Brighton Historical Society, or via this url:

<https://victoriancollections.net.au/organisations/brighton-historical-society#collection-records>