

A BRIEF
HISTORY OF

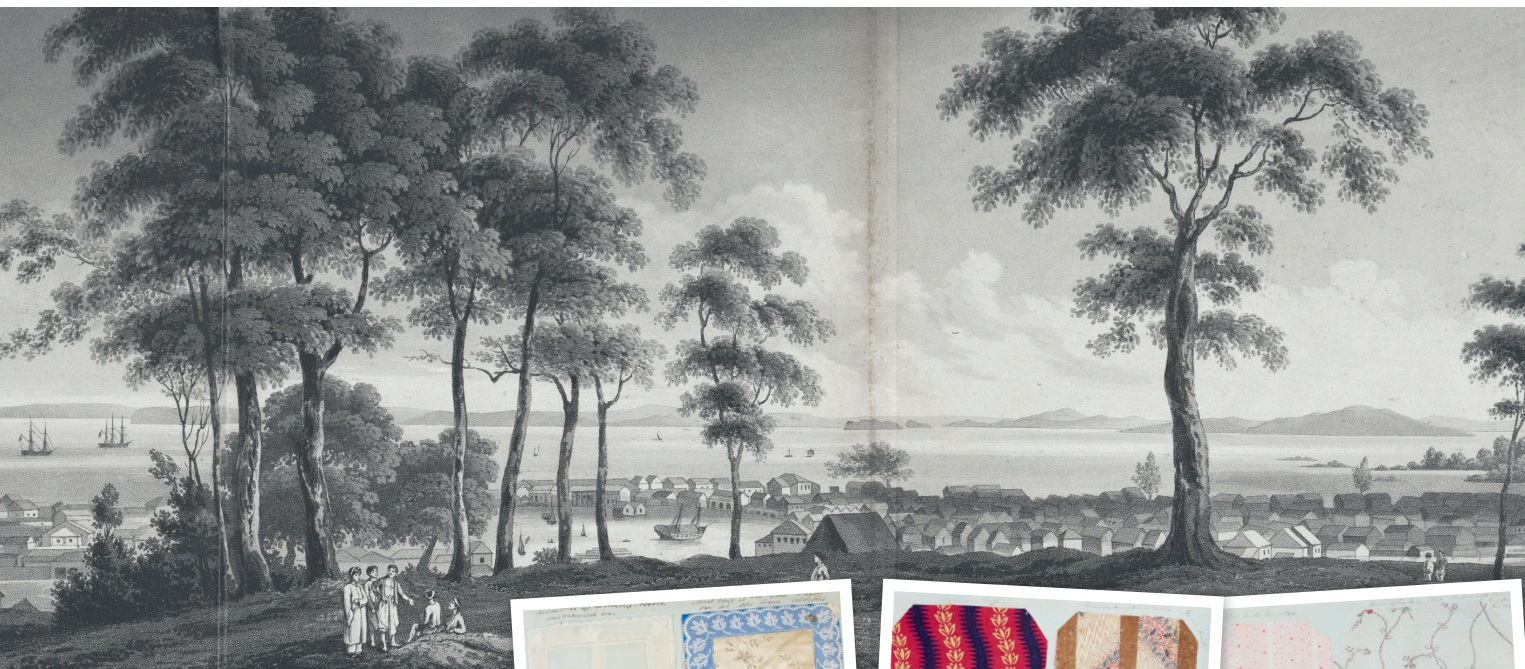


ABOUT
**MICHELLE
ROWLEY**

Michelle is a Content Writer
& Dressmaking Tutor at
The Sew-Cial Gathering
[www.michellerowley.
journoportfolio.com](http://www.michellerowley.journoportfolio.com)

The Dress Diary of **ANNE SYKES**

*Michelle Rowley chats with dress historian
Dr Kate Strasdin about her fascinating new
book exploring an 18th Century dress diary*



Dr Kate Strasdin



Wedding dress swatches



Printed cotton swatches



Anne's first dress swatches

Do you keep a record of your dressmaking projects? Whilst many of us document our makes on social media platforms such as Instagram to share our sewing love with fellow sewists, some of us keep a notebook of sewing plans, detailing fabric choice and pattern information. If you do keep a 'dressmaker's diary', please keep it safe... as one day you might just have a book written about you!

Dr Kate Strasdin is a dress historian who has been fascinated by old clothes since she was a child. She is a lecturer in Cultural Studies at Falmouth University and is a freelance consultant for dress and textile exhibitions. She has also shared her expertise on *The Great British Sewing Bee*.

Kate was given a very special book by a friend she had made at Honiton Lace making classes. Covered in bright magenta silk, the book, dated 1838, was filled with textile swatches cut into neat shapes and pasted on every page with a small handwritten note beside each entry. Kate uncovered that the book was the work of Anne Sykes, a Victorian woman who was the daughter of a mill owner in Lancashire.

Kate used the notes in the diary to unravel the history of Anne, her family and the acquaintances she made as the wife of a textile merchant. Swatches from wedding dresses, waistcoats, ball gowns and more were insights to a life otherwise lost to history. *The Dress Diary of Anne Sykes* is an exploration of Anne's life, interwoven with the fascinating stories behind the fabrics in the diary which makes it the perfect read for sewists.

When did your fascination with clothes from the past start?

I was really young, probably about eight years old. I avidly collected the British Costume set of cards that came with Brooke Bond tea. I was fascinated with how people's clothes looked in the past. I even had a birthday party at a Fashion Museum, which I don't think my friends appreciated!

How did your love of historical clothing go from an interest to a distinguished career?

I started to work as a volunteer in museums, then as an assistant to a dress curator at Killerton House in Devon. After my history degree, I did an MA in History of Textiles and Dress which led to studying for a PhD whilst my kids were little. From there, I started teaching and went down the academic route.

You spent six years researching the diary, how did you fit it around your life?

I started by transcribing, in many short intervals, the captions written next to each fabric swatch to try to unlock who the diary belonged to and who the people were in her life. I started to write the book at

the beginning of 2020, thinking I'd be able to do research trips. However, March 2020 came along and all that came with it, such

“
I was
fascinated
with how
people's
clothes looked
in the past
”

Furnishing swatches



Pirate swatches



Mrs Balestier's swatches



as home-schooling and having to move my teaching online. The times I could shut out all of those things and do my research was an escape. Whilst we were all locked down, in my head I could escape to Singapore to find out what Anne was up to.

Why do you think Anne kept the diary?

I think for her it was like an autograph album, which was a very common thing for women to do at that time. Coming from a textile-based family, fabric formed the background to her life. She's memorialised her life with very few words, but the fabric holds strong memories. For her, moments were captured in cloth.

People were much more invested in their clothes then because they bought the fabric to be made up by a dressmaker. Cloth was so valuable that it had to have longevity. People valued clothes in a different way and were more invested in understanding them. There's a lot that we can learn from thinking about dress in that way.

The diary contains over 2000 fabric swatches, do you have a favourite?

Probably the most unexpected... the pirate flag! Next to it was the entry, 'Taken by the admiral in Borneo 1845' and I couldn't

imagine how it had got into her hands. I loved it because it was on the same page as, 'Pair of Adam's birthday slippers' – there was domestic and international piracy all on the same page!

The dressing gown samples were a window into their life and marriage and those more intimate moments. These are

the garments that don't tend to survive or be preserved by museums.

Which diary entry intrigued you the most?

What I found most interesting was the range of fabrics, some that I can't even put a name to. There's a brilliant almost translucent gauze with a mint green velvet stripe woven together, of which I have seen nothing like

in recent times. I love the complexity of the printed cottons. They are so bold, as roller printing technology had become sophisticated, and being kept in the diary had preserved their original colours.

I was very surprised that there was some leopard print in there!

It was so striking! Also, the swatch above it is a bright fuchsia pink damask, which she identifies as being the curtains in the same room. Imagine that combination! We tend to see the 19th century in black and white because of the photographs, but that would have been a very bold drawing room!

Fabric formed the background of her life



Which is your favourite story you were able to uncover?

Sometimes it was the lives that unfolded. Maria Balestier was really interesting because her unusual name enabled me to find her more easily. Her husband was the first American Consul in Singapore and I discovered that her letters to her sister, describing her life in Singapore, had been digitised. It opened up a really detailed female world which I hadn't imagined was possible.

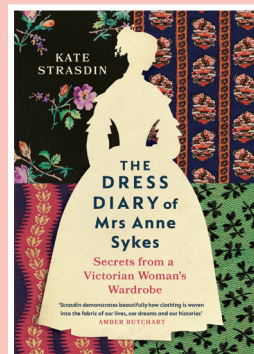
After six years of piecing together Anne's life, how did it feel to visit her grave?

It was a really emotional experience, as I had been on such a journey with her. I was also sad because I didn't want it to end. I planted a small plant.

I don't suppose she would ever have imagined for a minute that her story would reach a wide audience almost 200 years later.

What will you do with the diary?

It's important that it goes to a museum as it's such a rare object. I don't think it's rare because other people weren't doing it, but because they weren't kept. Women's objects weren't viewed as important. How it travelled from Lancashire to London to end up on a flea market stall, I'll never know. I'd love to digitise it so that people can visualise it easily, study it and zoom in on the fibres. However, that's quite an undertaking with over 2000 swatches!



ABOUT THE BOOK

The Dress Diary of Mrs Anne Sykes: Secrets from a Victorian Woman's Wardrobe by Kate Stradlin
 Published by Chatto & Windus, RRP £20