

Sound recording and text creation: oral history and the Deliberately Concealed Garments Project

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ABSTRACT Oral history accounts (sound recordings and their transcriptions) are important sources for the study of textiles and dress. This paper demonstrates the value of such accounts for the Deliberately Concealed Garments Project (DCGP), set up to document garments and other things found deliberately concealed within buildings. This paper focuses on one oral history account of the Sittingbourne Cache, the collective name for over 500 items found within an old public house in Sittingbourne, Kent, UK. The account provides information about the location of the cache sites within the building and the circumstances of the 'excavation' of the finds. It also provides a vivid record of the finder's excitement at the discovery. Understanding the views and attitudes of finders was important for developing the conservation strategy of the DCGP and led to a focus on measures to raise public awareness of the practice of concealment and the evidential significance of finds and cache sites. The DCGP provides a useful model of 'material culture', not as a new term for artefacts, but as the interconnection of persons, artefacts and language. In the case of the DCGP the interconnections are shown to be between: the persons who hide, discover, report, curate, conserve and study caches; the artefacts that are involved in the concealments (e.g. buildings and garments); and, the language used to describe the practice. The oral history accounts of the DCGP provide a rich illustration of material culture as linking persons to language (in both speech and text) with textiles.

Keywords: Deliberately Concealed Garments Project, Sittingbourne Cache, Wessex Film and Sound Archive, cache, material culture, oral history

Introduction

Oral history accounts are recognised as important sources for the study of textiles and dress (e.g. Biddle-Perry 2005; Burman 1999; Guy *et al.* 2001; Lomas 2000). Sound recordings and their transcriptions may be viewed as research tools and as a means of archive creation (Samuel 1998: 391–2). This paper demonstrates the value of oral accounts for the Deliberately Concealed Garments Project (DCGP). The paper starts by introducing the DCGP and then focuses on one of the oral history recordings relating to over 500 items discovered within an old public house in Sittingbourne, Kent, UK. The paper draws attention to the benefits of integrating evidence from a variety of historical and contemporary sources, material, oral and textual, in order to enhance the understanding and conservation of garments (and other objects and materials) found hidden within buildings.

The Deliberately Concealed Garments Project

This project was set up by the author in 1998 at the Textile Conservation Centre (TCC), Winchester School of Art, the University of Southampton, with the aim of locating, documenting and researching garments and associated objects found concealed within buildings (Eastop 2001). The project builds on and complements the pioneering work of June Swann

(1969, 1996) at Northampton Museums and Gardens, where an index records hundreds of boots and shoes found concealed within buildings. The DCGP encourages the recording and preservation of garment and other finds by raising awareness of concealment practices and providing conservation advice. The project website¹ presents an online database of garment and associated finds, a guided tour of garment caches from



Figure 1 Pair of stays (corset), dated c. 1620, found (with the garment pictured in Fig. 3) under floorboards in an old public house in Sittingbourne (image courtesy Textile Conservation Centre) (Plate 31 in the colour plate section).

across the UK, interviews from the oral history programme, case studies and bibliography (Eastop and Dew 2003). Another outcome of the project was the exhibition *Hidden House History*, which toured Hampshire and Dorset between July 2005 and September 2006. Several very rare garments were displayed for the first time including the fragmentary remains of an 18th-century stomacher (Barbieri 2003) and a pair of stays (corset) dated to c.1620/1630 (Fig. 1) (Eastop and Dew 2006). Some caches were displayed in cases replicating three cache sites: under floorboards, within a wall and alongside a chimney flue (Fig. 2).

The deliberate concealment of garments and other objects within the structure of buildings has a long history but is seldom reported. These concealments (known as caches from the French word 'to hide') are usually uncovered during building work, rather than during planned architectural or archaeological investigations. Finds are sometimes viewed as rubbish or as too damaged to be of interest and are thrown away. A cache found in Saltville, Virginia, USA, which included a shoe and a 'corset type thing', was burned by the house owner 'thinking there was no significance to them'.² Some finds may be recognised as rare examples of dress, while others may be viewed as evil-averting agents and be re-concealed (Brooks 2000).

The DCGP was established in 1998 to help preserve these finds and information about them. It has resulted in a new

resource for the study of textiles and dress through the creation of a virtual collection of once concealed garments (available via the project's website) by fostering awareness of the significance of garment and other finds, by providing a mechanism for reporting and recording finds, and by recording information about cache sites. The project provides a vivid example of the benefits of integrating the study of textiles and text, where the latter includes the recorded accounts and views of finders. The DCGP offers a model of conservation as material culture, where people (notably finders), objects (for example, the early 17th-century stays found in the Sittingbourne Cache) and language (for example, oral testimonies) inform current understanding of concealed garments and concealment practices (Eastop 2006a, 2006b).

Oral testimony

One of the distinctive features of past concealment practices is the lack of contemporaneous written explanation or commentary. It is possible that many of the people who assembled caches were unable to read or write or they felt no need to write down this aspect of their lives, or that no written records have survived or yet been identified. This means that, as in archaeology, the significance of the finds has to be deduced from the finds themselves (from their location, distribution and contents) and by comparison with other finds. This has led to intensive investigation of the materials and construction of garment finds. It has also led to special attention being focused on the circumstances of their discovery and on the views of finders and custodians (Eastop and Dew 2006).

An oral history programme was initiated as part of the DCGP as a means of understanding more about the circumstances of discovery and concealment, and learning more about the views of finders, custodians and conservators. Recordings relating to the following UK caches have been recorded: the Brixham Cache (Eastop and Dew 2006), the Nether Wallop Cache, the Reigate Cache (Eastop 2000) and the Sittingbourne Cache (see below). The recordings are held by the Wessex Film and Sound Archive, Winchester, UK, where they are publicly accessible.

The Sittingbourne Cache

The Sittingbourne Cache is the collective name given to a large group of artefacts found within the fabric of an old public house in Sittingbourne, Kent, in the south-east of the UK, shortly before the building's demolition. The garment finds were discovered in three main locations in the building: in the voids on either side of a stepped, brick chimney flue; under floorboards in a first-floor room at the front of the building; and under floorboards in another part of the building. Most of the finds were found alongside the chimney flue; examples include shoes, a felt hat, fabric scraps, scraps of leather harness, rope, the remains of clay pipes and lots of paper scraps. The under floorboard finds include two garments found in the same location: a pair of stays (corset), dated c.1620/1630 (Fig.

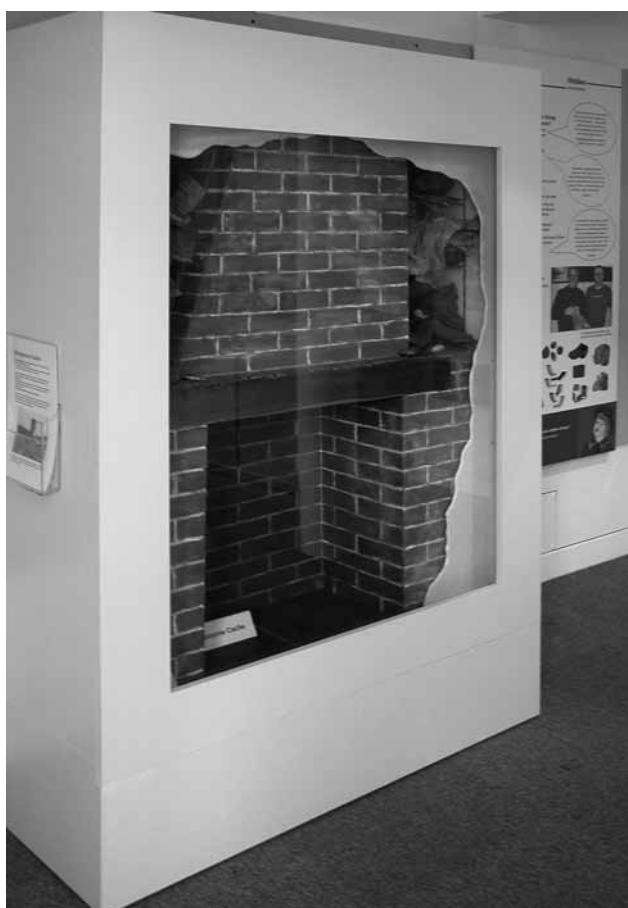


Figure 2 Display case made for the exhibition *Hidden House History* to show where many items from the Sittingbourne Cache were found (image courtesy Textile Conservation Centre) (Plate 32 in the colour plate section).



Figure 3 Lining of a pair of breeches found (with the stays pictured in Fig. 1) under floorboards in an old public house in Sittingbourne (image courtesy Textile Conservation Centre) (Plate 33 in the colour plate section).

Welcome to Hidden House History

Hidden house history

"The cache was entirely packed, standing ankle-deep in centuries old dust and debris, with a torch in one hand and a small metal detector in the other. I found a 17th century bicorn hat in the debris, it was mind-blowing...the feeling of excitement is still with me today..."

Alan Abbey

"The Abingdon Doublet is a remarkable survival...despite being a very fragmentary存活的, it is providing much information for the dress historian, for example the hoods show the doublet was worn with a shift not hose..."

Dr Maria Hayward

"We look forward to hearing from you. Charlotte Dew and Dinah Eastop"

Exhibition curated by Dinah Eastop and Charlotte Dew

Look here on each panel for games and activities

Figure 4 Phil Talbot and Alan Abbey as shown in the *Hidden House History* exhibition, with a 'speech bubble' featuring an extract of the oral history recording of Alan's account of the discovery of the Sittingbourne Cache (image courtesy Textile Conservation Centre) (Plate 34 in the colour plate section).

1), and what may be the lining from a pair of breeches of similar date (Fig. 3).

The stays may be the second oldest pair in the UK. What follows are extracts from one account of the discovery of the Sittingbourne Cache. The quoted extracts come from the (annotated) transcription of the oral account given by Phil Talbot, a local historian, who helped to uncover the Sittingbourne Cache (Fig. 4). Mr Talbot was interviewed by the author at Rochester Museum, Kent, on 5 August 2005 (Wessex Film and Sound Archive, *Deliberately Concealed Garments Oral History Project, Phil Talbot*).

We [a group of local historians] became aware of the pub when it closed because it's (or was) almost diagonally opposite the museum [Sittingbourne Museum]... we became very interested in the building opposite knowing that it was closed down; it was decaying; the 'squatters' had been in there and we wanted to get in there to have a look round, just to see what historical features were still left in the building ...

'This is the time we were allowed a weekend to photograph and subsequently search the building.'³

Alan [Abbey, another local historian] wanted to do a photograph of the stepped chimney; we knew there was a hole in the lath and plaster work in a cupboard, like a 'walk in' cupboard at the side of the fireplace, and it was while Alan was just easing a little bit more of the lath and plaster off the wall so that you could get a decent photograph that he noticed the heel of one of the shoes sticking out of the back of this chimney void which would have fronted the room behind us ... pulled the shoe out ... or realised it was a shoe as he pulled it out, and the height it was obviously sitting at, we realised there must be a helluva lot of other stuff underneath it ... we started breaking the lath and plaster, the laths were pinned to just half-round pieces of wood – they'd just cut the pieces of wood down the middle.

'At this point we ceased our search for the day and rapidly reconvened with our "squad" on the following day.'⁴

[Dinah Eastop] like trees ... tree trunks?

Yes, still had the bark on at the back and they'd just put the lath across and then plastered over the top of that. So it was quite easy to break through the laths which are very, very thin and feeble and quite dry obviously being there that length of time and above a fireplace and we did have the vision originally, thinking that it was a deposit that had been made over time, we thought we could excavate it layer by layer. But the rats had made a nest in it as well, so things had been pulled diagonally through layers and so we might have part of a garment at the top of the layer but we were having to move other parts of the layer away before we could get to the bottom part of it, so we realised it was all sort of intermingled and then at that time everything just started turning up. We were working by torchlight; it was very difficult to see; we did have visions originally of trying to collate the stuff

as we found it but it ended up being so much we were just putting what we found into carrier bags...

... it was just so amazing. I mean we started finding the shoe and then something else would come up and the shout would go out. This voice would just be heard in the darkness by everybody else saying that 'we've got another shoe, a hat, or we've got a pair of gloves' or something.

... the actual deposit started from sort of waist level and then almost up to eye level so it was good two to two and a half feet, I suppose, of deposit which went probably three feet across the chimney breast and where the chimney is stepped in on the side there was a small amount that had gone round the side as well, so it was quite a large area in total. But as I say, we didn't notice the environment or the problems you know, the dust, we were just so enthralled with what we were finding that nobody complained of being cold or dirty or wet or hungry; we just had a job to do and we were just focused on getting on with it, you know, because obviously we realised that time was running out [because demolition of the building was planned].

Phil Talbot goes on to describe how a second investigation was made of the public house about two to three weeks after the discovery of the fireplace cache. Access was granted to the building for one morning and help was provided in lifting some of the floorboards in the front room. 'At this stage by the time I arrived on site the pub had been demolished down to second floor level with the walls removed and I was allowed to access the floorboard area of the first floor as they prised them up. Immediately following this the demolition continued and I watched as the remains of the building was demolished into the cellar area and the excess rubble removed.¹⁵

that was very lucky because obviously that's where we found the stays, the gentleman's undergarment [lining of breeches] and, I think, I'm sure it was the lace[-edged] hat although we've found so much on the day it was very difficult to keep a track of what was [where]...

[Dinah Eastop] Were they laid out flat or rolled up? *They [the stays] were folded. They'd been flattened sort of front to back so you had the whole of the front in one piece and then they'd just been folded in half down the middle rather than across. And they were just laid under the floorboards.*

Phil Talbot's account provides valuable information about the circumstances and conditions of the discovery, the subsequent 'excavation' of the material, and the locations of the finds. The excitement of discovery is also very clear from the oral recording.

You know, I mean, excitement doesn't really cover it; it was just a ... that feeling of, you know, well I suppose a mixture of excitement, euphoria ...

Methodology

The advice of the Wessex Film and Sound Archive was sought about the methodology, ethics and permissions required for making oral history recordings (Lee nd) as each of the sound recordings made for the DCGP was made by novices of oral history. A list of questions was developed to facilitate the recordings with a view to helping to structure the interviews and to record comparable data about each cache. As can be gauged from the extracts above, Phil Talbot gave a very lucid, chronological account, which addressed the questions without any need to ask them. The only listed question put to him was about what he thought should happen to the Sittingbourne Cache.

The sound recording was transcribed by the interviewer (the author) who determined the spelling, punctuation and spacing, and who also selected the extracts given above. In transcribing the text, every effort was made to reflect the rhythm and sense of the speaker, as well as his enthusiasm for the subject. As recommended by Samuel (1998) sentences that are incomplete or which trail off have been transcribed and have not been altered to meet the conventions of written prose. It must be noted, however, that transcription remains an act of interpretation (Perks and Thomson 1998; Samuel 1998) and transcriber bias is inevitable and should be acknowledged. The handwritten transcription was later typed and then checked by the interviewer/transcriber, who also annotated the above extracts. The transcript and the annotated parts quoted above were sent to the interviewee (Phil Talbot) prior to publication. He gave permission for the transcript to be published and added that 'Some of the summations are slightly incorrect and I have added extra text ... to explain and correct where necessary'.¹⁶

Discussion

The quoted extracts of Phil Talbot's spoken account (in italic text above) focus attention on the circumstances of the discovery. The later part of his account concentrates on media interest in the finds and the future of the collection. The selected extracts show his pride and deep interest in local history, and his familiarity with museum practice arising from his long association with metal detecting and local museums. A sense of awe, hard work and teamwork characterise his account of the discovery. The sense of revelation in a site of neglect, darkness and imminent destruction is highlighted in this use of oral history. It is important to point out, however, that the written transcript does not do full justice to the original spoken account, which is much more evocative of Phil's experience of discovering the cache. The sound recording of the interview is a more reliable and accurate account than the transcription because the many qualities of oral communication cannot be captured in transcription, e.g. nuances of accent, timing and the tentative quality of speech (Thompson 2000:126).

This brief analysis focuses on just one interpretation of one part of one account. Other accounts exist of the discovery of the Sittingbourne Cache, for example Phil Talbot's additions,⁷ Alan Abbey's oral testimony (Wessex Film and Sound Archive,

Deliberately Concealed Garments Oral History Project, Alan Abbey) and his published account (2005). The accounts of these finders, and others involved in the discovery, preservation and display of the cache, form a network of narratives. Each account, as well as the narrative network they create, could be understood in different ways, for example, in terms of gender, community and group identity.

As shown by the extracts above, the oral recordings made as part of the DCGP have proved to be a valuable part of the project in providing useful information about the cache sites and the circumstances of discovery. They also provide information about finders' attitudes to what they have found, and how they went about seeking advice and information about the finds. This has informed the preservation strategy of the DCGP; for example, we focused on 'outreach activities' which draw public attention to the evidential potential of what may, at first glance, look like rubbish. We stressed the importance of finders' reports and views in the display panels of the touring exhibition *Hidden House History*. For example, one of the display panels included a photograph of Phil Talbot and Alan Abbey with a speech bubble containing an extract from the transcription of Alan Abbey's account of the discovery of the Sittingbourne Cache (Fig. 4). Without the interest and commitment of finders like Phil Talbot and Alan Abbey, it is likely that the Sittingbourne Cache would have been destroyed when the building was demolished. This would have been a loss to the study of textiles and dress. Their spoken accounts of the discovery provide a new source for the study of concealment practices and establish a new link between textiles and what people say about them.

The Deliberately Concealed Garments Project provides a vivid model of 'material culture', not as a new term for artefacts, but as the interconnection of persons, artefacts and language (Eastop 2006a). In the case of the DCGP the interconnections are shown to be between: the persons who hide, discover, report, curate, conserve and study caches; the artefacts that are involved in the concealments (e.g. buildings and garments); and, the language used to describe the practice. The oral history recordings and transcriptions of the Deliberately Concealed Garments Project provide a rich illustration of material culture as linking persons to language (in both speech and text) with textiles.

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Notes

1. www.concealedgarments.org.
2. C. Schwartz, pers. comm., 26 June 2005.
3. P. Talbot, pers. comm., 23 February 2007.
4. P. Talbot, pers. comm., 23 February 2007.
5. P. Talbot, pers. comm., 23 February 2007.
6. P. Talbot, email dated 23 February 2007. These additions are indicated by notes 3, 4 and 5.
7. Of 23 February 2007.

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