A Celebration of Plainness: Worthing Museum’s Quaker Wedding Bonnet, 1843

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Quaker Bonnet (Ref: 1961/491) made of beige silk satin, belonging to Eliza Westwood (née Nickalls) and worn for the occasion of her marriage, 1843. Photograph by the author.

This beige silk-satin wedding bonnet was worn by the Quaker Eliza Westwood (née Nickalls), for the occasion of her marriage in 1843 in Reigate, Surrey at the age of twenty two.¹ Her spouse, Thomas Edward, was a linen draper and non-Quaker, and the pair married at Reigate Parish Church. This was despite marriage between Quakers and non-Quakers being in contravention of the religion’s guidance during this time. Worthing Museum records indicate that despite apparent problems conceiving early in her marriage, Westwood went on to have seventeen children.

Her bonnet features a deep brim stiffened with card and a matching bavolet (a fabric curtain or trim), which covers the nape of the neck. The crown is gathered with beige twisted silk

¹ Genealogical research using census records has identified 1843 as the date of Eliza Westwood’s marriage, however the museum records differ in date, listing 1840.
cord and stiffened with a cloth known as buckram. Pale grey Petersham silk ribbons hang from the brim. These have become detached, a common occurrence for bonnets of this age which were well used. The exceptional quality of the outer cloth is apparent in the fine weave of the textile and the lack of decay despite the object being nearly one hundred and eighty years old.

Wedding garments have always involved considerable financial investment and Westwood’s wedding bonnet would have been no exception. While Queen Victoria had made white wedding garments de rigueur from 1840, having worn them for the occasion of her own marriage that year, Quakers were generally keen to avoid the trappings of fashion. Westwood’s choice of a beige silk for her wedding bonnet may therefore have been a rejection of this mainstream convention. Furthermore, a variety of colours was still worn by brides at this time including golds, silvers, greys, and soft sorbet shades of pinks, blues and greens, meaning that while Westwood’s choice of beige was not highly fashionable it was far from peculiar. Bonnets were considered appropriate headwear for weddings and as an everyday accessory that could be worn after the occasion to extend their use, making darker shades a more durable alternative to the fashionable, but easily discoloured and marked, white. Clothing, including everyday textiles, was a considerable expense during this period. For this reason, single-use wedding garments were much less common than today, even for women who could afford to purchase high quality clothing.

Bequeathed to Worthing Museum in 1961 by a descendant of Eliza Westwood, the bonnet is a typical example of the type commonly worn in Britain during the nineteenth century by female followers of the Religious Society of Friends, more commonly known as Quakers. The religion’s followers derived their name from their early practice of enacting spiritual revelation through trembling or quaking. Organised in Britain around 1650 by the English dissenter George Fox, the Religious Society of Friends was initially one of many rebellious Protestant groups which sought to oppose the religious teaching practised by the established Church of England. They emphasised, as practicing Quakers still do, personal religious experience over and above the authority of Scripture. Quakers became renowned for their distinctive style of religious dress which was recognisable by its ascetic simplicity and termed ‘Plain’. It signalled a wearer’s affiliation with the historically persecuted faith and was valued as a marker of piety amongst its members for three centuries. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the religion’s guidance regarding self-presentation and clothing became increasingly strict and specific, to the extent that followers who failed to wear Plain dress could be disowned or ostracised from the religious community.

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By the date of this bonnet, the style of women’s Quaker clothing bordered on a uniform. Westwood’s bonnet would therefore have been easily recognisable to Victorian society at large as a symbol of her devotion to the Religious Society of Friends. Typical Quaker women’s Plain dress was composed of a full skirt pleated into a wide waist band (without the support of fashionable petticoats made of stiff horsehair crinoline), a shawl, muslin or linen cap, kerchief and deep-brimmed bonnet; resembling that worn by Westwood. All of these garments were notable for their muted colours in greys, browns and drab greens, and distinctive lack of trimming. Even the popular press of the time acknowledged that an “exquisite delicacy” was apparent in their choice of fabrics however, with Quakers being well-known for wearing textiles of the best quality.

The style of Westwood’s bonnet is known as a bibi bonnet, or sometimes a wagon bonnet, and was a form typically favoured by Quaker women. A distinctive feature of these bonnets was their deep brim, which projected well beyond the face, providing overtly modest facial shielding for the wearer from the gaze of (male) viewers. As can be seen on Westwood’s bonnet, the brim descended low over the ears into a downward curve at the chin forming a flattering oval frame to the face. An exaggerated and decorated form of these face-shielding bibi bonnets was fashionable for wider society, for a time. After Queen Victoria ascended to the throne in 1837, this fashionable bonnet became, according to hat historian, Althea Mackenzie, “universal for the following decade”. Made of colourful silk satin, silk velvet, plaited straw, or sometimes willow, the most fashionable of bibi bonnets featured an abundance of decoration inside as well as outside the brim in the form of “marabous, glacés, silks, [...] and crepe mixed with violets”. By 1840, on the most fashionable of bonnets, the crown and brim had merged together into a single horizontal line with no demarcation between the two.

The version of the bibi bonnet worn by women of the Religious Society of Friends would therefore have been seen as strikingly unfashionable for being produced in dull colours of plain silk without a hint of embellishment. Westwood’s bonnet is typical of the Quaker form of bibi bonnet in that the brim and crown are clearly separate. This consistent style of the Quaker bonnet illustrates how these women’s Plain dress remained largely immune to the subtle changes of Victorian fashions during the early to mid-nineteenth century.

In almost relishing of the unfashionable nature of their dress, the most pious of Quakers clung to these distinctive bibi bonnets until the 1890s. They did this despite significant debates in the religion contesting the wearing of Plain dress as a marker of piety. These

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7 “The Decline of Quakerism”, *The Chester Chronicle*, 24th December 1858:2.


Considerations ultimately led to the practice of dressing Plain being made optional to followers of the religion in 1860. After this date, Quakers who were liberal and of the younger generation increasingly chose to incorporate fashionable garments into their wardrobes, including decorated bonnets and even hats. By the latter half of the nineteenth century a large proportion of female followers favoured subdued but conventionally fashionable dress, and had abandoned the traditional Quaker bonnet.

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Bibliography


“The Decline of Quakerism”, *The Chester Chronicle*, 24th December 1858