

In every period, clothing will reflect national traditions and customs. In the 18th century it was particularly effective in expressing social rank and status. Wearing the right costumes was not only a sign of good manners but also a necessity. Dress codes were strictly observed and enforced using the threat of strong social disapproval and sometime even physical force! It was common for those discovered wearing clothes too grand for their rank to be attacked as 'pretenders'. Servants who were fortunate enough to receive discarded clothes from their masters had to simplify the garments before they could wear them. Even those who had the means to buy expensive and luxurious clothes still needed to dress appropriately for their social position, or risk being shamed and ridiculed.

At court, dress codes were even stricter than in wider society, since these rules controlled who could attend court events. In the 18th century there was no formal system of invitation to court, and there was no need. Court dress was so expensive that only the wealthiest in the top tiers of society could afford it. As long as you were dressed according to the rules, you would be granted admission.

The amounts the nobility spent on clothing is staggering. In 1711 Anne, Countess of Strafford paid £100 for her new court dress, roughly £8,000 in today's money. Lady Mary Coke spent £70 (over £5,000 today) for the silk alone to make her a new court dress in 1767. The Duke of Bedford's silk suit embroidered with silver thread, spangles and diamonds cost him £500 in 1790, the equivalent of £28,000 today. These were the prices for single garments, and a complete outfit also included many accessories and jewellery. Also, courtiers were expected to have a number of them, since wearing the same outfit too many times was considered disrespectful towards the monarch. Not surprisingly, Lady Louisa Stuart complained 'fifteen or sixteen hundred a year would not do very much for two people who must live in London and appear in fine clothes at St. James's twice a week'. However, for the aristocracy, this was considered an essential expense.

To attend a court event was not only a great honour, but also the opportunity to climb the social ladder. Court was more than the place where the monarch and his family met the nobility, courtiers and political figure; it was the centre of power, influence and fashion. It was important for an individual to attend it as often as possible, since it provided an opportunity to conduct political business and seek potential royal favour. There were many court events throughout the year, including Sunday church services, *Levéés*, Drawing-Rooms and celebrations such as a royal birthdays. Drawing-Rooms were attended by both men and women and were larger occasions often held several times a week at ten o'clock in the evening. Guests waited for the monarch or his consort to make an appearance (Image 1). The royal birthday celebrations were particularly exciting (Image 2). They involved grand balls with music, dancing, gambling and a display of fireworks.

Dressing well played an important political role at court; wearing exquisite silk or rich embroidery could attract the attention of the king or queen in the middle of a crowd of courtiers. Mrs Delany, an English artist, attended many court events in the 18th century and recalled in a letter to her sister in 1728-9,

The 'royal court' refers to the extended household of a monarch and can include thousands of individuals. It was made up of lower status royal servants and high ranking 'courtiers', ladies- and gentlemen-in-waiting who served the king and queen.

'On Saturday the first day of March, it being Queen Caroline's birth-day, I dressed myself in all my best array, borrowed my Lady Sunderland's jewels, and made a tearing show. I went with my Lady Carteret and her two daughters. There was a vast Court, and my Lady Carteret got with some difficulty to the circle, and after she had made her curtsey made me stand before her. The Queen came up to her, and thanked her for bringing me forward, and she told me she was obliged to me for my pretty clothes, and admired my Lady Carteret's extremely; she told the Queen that they were my fancy, and that I drew the pattern. Her Majesty said she had heard that I could draw very well (I can't think who could tell her such a story); she took notice of my jewels; I told her they were my Lady Sunderland's; "Oh" says she, "you were afraid I should think my Lord Selkirk gave them to you, but I believe he only admires, for he will not be so free of his presents...'

So, getting noticed was important, as it could lead to a chat, or several chats, with the monarch! Other courtiers would look on enviously if the king or queen spoke to you more than once. It was considered as a sign of favour and the higher you grew in royal favour, the more powerful you could become.

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Engraved for the Ladies Magazine Published by J. Whelple, according to Act of Parliament, May 1771.



The COURT at ST JAMES'S.

The Court at St. James's, engraved for the Ladies Magazine, 1771.

Note the women wearing huge court mantuas, a type of dress that is discussed in detail in © Historic Royal Palaces



A View of the BALL at St. James's on her MAJESTY'S Birth Night.

Ball at St. James's on Her Majesty's Birth Night 1781, after Daniel Dodd, published 1782. © Royal Collection Trust