



HISTORIC ROYAL PALACES

dress codes

A Guide for School Visits

SPACE TO STIR AND BE STIRRED

TOWER OF LONDON • HAMPTON COURT PALACE • BANQUETING HOUSE
KENSINGTON PALACE • KEW PALACE • HILLSBOROUGH CASTLE AND GARDENS

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INTRODUCTION

Dress codes define what we wear and therefore how the rest of the world sees us. This is true both historically and today – we all follow, make or break dress codes, using what we wear to represent who we are and what we do. We may know of famous outfits from the past, however, we don't necessarily think about why they were worn, and the thought that went into creating and selecting them. The Dress Codes exhibition brings the factors and influences behind these decisions to light and explores the theme of rules by which we all dress: written and unwritten, formal and informal.

Presenting 34 amazing outfits from the Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection, Dress Codes is an exciting opportunity to view both recognisable, showstopping creations and never-before seen treasures of the collection. Alongside outfits from the Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection, we have creations from Young Producers – local to Kensington Palace and aged between 14 and 17 – who were inspired by our collection and their own dress codes. They created stories, films, music, and their own outfits, and their contributions are a core part of *Dress Codes*, including a room dedicated to their fashion creations at the end of the exhibition.

This guide has been designed to support teachers as they prepare to bring groups to experience the exhibition before and after your visit.

BOOKING TICKETS

Pre-booking is essential for all visits to Kensington Palace. Please visit our [website](#) for support booking and planning your visit.

CONTACT US

Historic Royal Palace's Schools team is happy to offer additional support and advice to prepare for visits to all of our palaces.

For school visits, please contact: kensingtonlearning@hrp.org.uk

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

This exhibition explores the codes and conventions of royal clothing, and the powerful impact fashion can make when boundaries are pushed and dress codes evolve.

A DRESS CODE FOR EVERY SETTING

Different settings require different dress codes – some more elaborate, some more practical – all of which have evolved and developed over the past 300 years. In the Dress Codes exhibition, we explore:

Dressing for court: from the 1700s to present day, dressing to attend a royal court has always required you to dress your best. However, codes have become less rigorous as time has gone on, and people from every background now attend the royal court to be honoured for their achievements.

Dressing for ceremony: at royal occasions, dress codes tend to emphasise ceremony and splendour, impressing spectators while maintaining tradition and history.

Dressing for politics: clothes aren't just surface level, and diplomatic uniforms have historically been an important way of conveying authority, status, culture and identity. Symbols, patterns and colours can have deliberate deeper meanings connected to the wearer's background or beliefs.

Dressing for work: uniforms are both practical items and a way to create a sense of belonging, convey status and identity within an official workplace. Uniforms in royal settings follow particularly strict codes, based upon protocols which can be hundreds of years old.

Dressing for occasions: parties are not only fun, but important markers of milestones in our lives. From debutante balls to royal fancy dress, parties have always given guests a chance to look their best – often following a dress code written on an invitation.

Dressing for rites of passage: Important social rites of passage include weddings, funerals, birthdays and graduations, all of which have specific dress codes. These differ between cultures and traditions, with many rules that people begin to learn from childhood.

BEFORE YOUR VISIT

To help prepare your students for your visit to Dress Codes you might like to explore:

- What we mean by the term Royal Court
- The Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection
- What is a dress code?

Below is some key information and some suggested enquiry questions you can adapt for your students.

WHAT IS A ROYAL COURT?

A royal court is a group of people who live and work closely with a monarch, such as a king or queen. It includes advisors, nobles, servants, military officers, and sometimes artists, musicians, and entertainers who help run the royal household and support the monarch in their duties. The court is not just a physical place, but also a community where important decisions are made, laws are discussed, and traditions are upheld. Royal courts have often been centres of political power and culture, where fashion, art, music, and ideas were shared and developed. They also hosted grand events such as banquets, balls, and ceremonies, reflecting the wealth and status of the monarchy.

- How do you think the people who are part of the Royal Court today are similar to or different from those who were part of it 200 years ago?
- What types of events does the Royal Court host today?



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THE ROYAL CEREMONIAL DRESS COLLECTION

The Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection is a Designated collection of national and international importance, cared for by Historic Royal Palaces. It contains 10,000 items of historic dress and related material from the 16th century to the present day, providing information about the history of fashion, life at court, British ceremonial traditions, and the lives of key historical figures. Our collection contains items of clothing worn by royalty including George III, Queen Victoria, Princess Margaret, Diana, Princess of Wales and Queen Elizabeth II.



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The collection was created in the early 1980s after the historian Aubrey Bowden loaned Kensington Palace a significant collection of court uniforms. In 1989, the collection was passed to Historic Royal Palaces, who have continued to expand and develop the collection, which also contains prints, sketches, historical photographs, letters, diaries and scrapbooks.

Dress Codes showcases 34 outfits from this collection.

- What do you think are the challenges of keeping an item in good condition for hundreds of years?
- If you were to choose one item of your own clothing to be cared for by conservators and put on display in 100 years time, what would you choose?



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WHAT IS A DRESS CODE?

Dress codes can be written and formal: a rule defined through law, regulations or instructions. For example, the Yeomen Warders at the Tower of London have official uniforms which they must wear while on duty and you might have a specific uniform you have to wear to school. This is a formal written dress code - and one of the Yeoman Warders uniforms is on display as part of this exhibition.

Dress codes can also be unwritten and informal. For example, when you go to a birthday party you might choose to 'dress up' by wearing clothes you reserve for a special occasion. Even though this is not an official rule or requirement, being part of someone's special occasion, such as a birthday party or a wedding, may prompt people to feel that they need to appear 'smart' in their clothing.

- Can you think of a time when you dressed a certain way because of an unwritten rule? Why did you choose that outfit?

DURING YOUR VISIT

Below is some key information to help you navigate the exhibition and some suggested enquiry questions you can adapt for your students.

COLOUR AND OCCASION

White is now the traditional and most common colour for wedding dresses in Britain, a trend set by Queen Victoria's marriage in 1840. However, in many other cultures, wedding clothes may be bright colours or heavily bejewelled, and white is seen as a colour for funerals and mourning. White has also been worn in Britain for mourning, as seen in Queen Alexandra's white and mauve mourning dress, while black mourning attire can be seen represented by Queen Victoria's dress.

- If you were designing a wedding outfit for someone from your own culture or family, what colours or styles would you include, and why?
- If you were designing an outfit for a civil ceremony or same-sex wedding, how would you approach the choice of colours, styles, and overall design to reflect the evolving nature of modern weddings and inclusivity, and why?

MATERIAL CHOICES

Creating clothing isn't just about how they look, but how they feel. The fabric wall allows you to reach out and touch the material that goes into different types of outfits including day wear, occasion wear and uniform:

- The materials for every day clothing need to be durable and easy to clean.
- Outfits for special occasions can be more expensive and heavily decorated with beads or embellishments.
- Uniform material also has lots of embellishment, but for more specific reasons: the raised gold embroidery signifies status, so the more embroidery, the higher your rank.

Sensory input isn't just about sight and touch, but about sound as well. The music within Dress Codes is specially composed to reflect the process of making clothes. Charlotte Harding created the music in the same way that a designer might create clothes, using 'Stitches' – short, sharp notes like a running stitch, 'Threads' – a melody that sounds like it's weaving, and 'Panels' – smooth chords that sparkle like fabric in the light.

- What material is your school uniform made out of? Why do you think these materials were chosen?
- If you could design your own outfit for a special occasion, what materials would you choose and why?

BENDING THE RULES

Rather than following them exactly, many people use dress codes as a starting point from which they can bend the rules, wearing clothes in a way that expresses their identity and own unique style. Once you know the rules of dress and how to make them work for your individual style, you have cracked the code.

Some members of the royal family have iconic style and are instantly recognisable. Their dress sense helps define how we see and think of them. Members of the royal family dress to communicate their official role, show respect to their hosts or to express what is important to them. Their clothing choices can follow society's conventions, or challenge them, setting trends. Like everyone, members of the royal family also dress to express their taste and personality.

An example of a royal with iconic style, and a fashion risk taker, was Kensington Palace resident Princess Margaret. She made exciting fashion choices, working with the latest British and international designers in the 'swinging' 1960s and 1970s when London was a vibrant centre of fashion, culture, music and art. When living here at Kensington Palace, Margaret turned it into a place where creative people gathered, reflecting her connections to the arts and culture scene in her own sense of style. Her bold and beautiful fashion choices were reported in the press and even garnered a name: 'The Margaret Look'.



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- Imagine a style named after yourself – what do you think 'The Look' would be with you as the inspiration?



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DRESS CODES TODAY

Dress codes are always evolving, and it's often young creatives who are pushing this change. To continue this evolution, Historic Royal Palaces worked with Young Producers – 25 local young people aged between 14 – 17, who took inspiration from the Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection to bring historical codes into the modern day. Their fashion designs mix traditional silhouettes and dress conventions with modern fabrics and styles and express themes of power, femininity and diverse cultural influences.

Their music compositions build on these themes, exploring dressing to feel powerful, representing our identities, and putting our best foot forward.

- How do people use their clothing to shape and display their identity in the past and today?
- What are you telling the world with your style?

AFTER YOUR VISIT

We hope you enjoyed your visit to Dress Codes: Decoding the Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection. Below are some extension questions and activities to do in your classroom.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Which outfit did you find most memorable, and why? Were there any that you wouldn't mind wearing?
- Were there any rules or codes that were new to you or surprised you? Were there any of your own codes that you would add?
- Are there any aspects of clothing or clothing rules from before the 21st century that you would like to see more commonly today?
- What do you think was the biggest difference between dress codes in the 18th century and dress codes today?
- Outfits have to serve a variety of purposes for the wearer: practical, aesthetic and symbolic. If you were to design an outfit for a special occasion, what factors would you keep in mind?
- The way you dress can create a sense of belonging and commonality, but it can also be a way to express identity and individuality. In what ways does what you wear on a day-to-day basis make you feel part of a community? In what ways does it make you feel unique?

ACTIVITY STARTERS

Create a soundtrack

The music within Dress Codes is specially composed to reflect the process of making clothes. The Young Producers used their compositions to explore dressing to feel powerful, representing our identities, and putting our best foot forward.

Use percussion and rhythm to create your own soundscape of making an outfit. You might like to consider sounds and rhythms to describe:

- Drawing a design
- Pinning the pattern
- Cutting the fabric
- Stitching the pieces
- Doing up the zip or the buttons
- Stepping into a room in your new outfit

Global dress codes

The outfits in the exhibition take inspiration from a wide range of cultures and nationalities. The outfit worn by Professor Sir Aziz Sheikh for his 2023 investiture is a sherwani, representing his Pakistani cultural origins and following South Asian formal dress codes. Princess Margaret's 1978 dress has a strong Middle Eastern influence in its paisley embroidery and kaftan like cape reflecting designer Thea Porters Syrian upbringing.

The Young Producers also drew inspiration from around the world such as cowrie shells representing traditional West African currency and fusions of Finnish and Egyptian colours, patterns, symbolism and shapes.

Think of another country in the world that is meaningful to you – you may be from there, have family ties there or have visited there. Design an outfit to represent your chosen country. You might consider:

- What dress codes are specific to your chosen country?
- Are there any shapes, colours, symbols or patterns that are significant?
- What materials might you use that reflect that country?



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A code fit for the 21st century

The outfits in the exhibition cover a period of almost 300 years from 1780 to the present day. As society changed expectations of royalty and the people who surrounded them also shifted. In the 1700s your finest clothes would enable you to gain entry to the palace and the opportunity to network. During the 1800s rules were stricter and written regulations were published in 'Dress Worn at Court'. In the 1900s we see a mixture of tradition and experimentation to express identity.

As society becomes more inclusive our dress codes are evolving further. Write your own 21st century dress code, for an event of your choosing, that highlights the importance of inclusivity and personal expression. You might like to consider:

- How and if you balance tradition and more contemporary trends
- How to write codes that leave room for individual interpretation
- How your dress code can welcome people from different cultures, faiths, and backgrounds
- What role comfort, accessibility, and sustainability might play

