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*“There was a young woman called Jack”*

Vera Jack Holme: a case study -  
Dress, Gender and Sexuality  
1900-1920.

Becky Graham

A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in fulfilment of its  
requirements for the degree of Master of the Arts by Research

University of Huddersfield

September 2021

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## Abstract

At the beginning of the twentieth century, there was considerable social and political upheaval in Britain. Socialist and feminist movements pushed for radical social change causing industrial and social unrest. Vera Jack Holme, a young adult at this time, lived a dynamic life. She worked variously as a stage actor and singer, a political activist and chauffeur for Emmeline Pankhurst, and an ambulance driver during the First World War. In her personal life, her significant relationships were with women, and she rejected the traditional path to marriage and a life of restricted domesticity.

This case study examines Vera Jack's dress and identity viewed through the themes of everyday dress, theatre costume and uniform. Through the evidence of Vera Jack Holme's archive, this research explores her relationship to gendered dress and considers questions of lesbian representation. It situates Vera Jack within the complex culture of Edwardian theatre, by analysing the images of cross-dressed roles she played and by exploring gender representation of the time. Finally, it examines the role of uniforms in British society and considers Vera Jack Holme's uniformed presentation within the organisations of the First World War and the suffrage movement.

In doing so, this research offers a new examination of dress as experienced by individual women and challenges the dominant narratives of women's dress history which by focussing on elite fashions, give the impression of a homogenous experience of dress throughout society. This research goes some way to counter this bias by offering a nuanced view of dress as a reflection of the lived experience of Vera Jack Holme. Crucially, it contributes to histories of sexual identity by highlighting often overlooked lives and the varied expressions of gender in the early twentieth century, as seen through the prism of dress and sartorial expression.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors Dr Jade Halbert and Dr Allie Carr for their support, good advice, great conversations, and enthusiasm for the subject from the beginning of the project.

Thanks also to the University of Huddersfield, in particular my line manager, Stephen Calcutt for supporting our professional development wholeheartedly.

To the staff at the Women's Library, a brilliant resource, for quietly showing what not to do in an archive, thank you.

This thesis has been written largely during the COVID pandemic so I would also like to send thanks and gratitude to the keyworkers and NHS staff who made it possible for me to continue.

Lastly, my eternal thanks to my partner Caroline for listening to my ideas, reading the many drafts, and for the love, food, and tireless cheerleading without which I would not have got here.

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All images can be found in the papers of Vera Jack Holme, in the Women’s Library, at the London School of Economics (LSE), unless otherwise stated.



## Introduction

The Vera Jack Holme archive at The Women's Library in The London School of Economics gives us a tantalising glimpse of a woman who lived an active and unconventional life. It is the collected ephemera of the life of Vera Jack Holme (1881–1969), an extraordinary woman who lived in extraordinary times. She earned her own living from her early twenties in the theatre, often performing cross-dressed roles and was also a militant political activist, who campaigned for the vote for women and worked as the chauffeur for the leading suffragette, Emmeline Pankhurst. The First World War brought the opportunity for her to serve as a driver on the Eastern Front. In her personal life, she chose relationships with women as lovers, colleagues, and friends, choosing to live outside the expectations of middle-class womanhood, and outside the marriage contract with its inherent gender roles and expectation of bearing children. This thesis considers what Vera Jack Holme's life can tell us about women's dressed identities at the beginning of the twentieth century through evidence found in photographs, correspondence, and diaries in her papers.

Throughout the thesis I refer to Vera Jack by both the forenames she used throughout her life. She began to use the nickname 'Jack' in her early adult life which was probably from a character she played in the theatre.<sup>1</sup> The adoption of a masculine nickname was obviously important, and her pleasure is apparent as she records in her diary that the theatre manager called out 'halloa John' in greeting.<sup>2</sup> Friends and colleagues called her Jack or Jacko, but she usually signed herself Vera in any formal or public correspondence. Her niece, Vera and nephew, Jack were also named after her which further suggests the importance of both names in her life and the recognition of this importance within her family.<sup>3</sup>

The attention to the masculine nickname is a pertinent introduction to Vera Jack, as a quick perusal of her photographs shows that she had a masculine style of dress and performed as a male impersonator. Added to the knowledge that she had relationships with women it might be assumed the two are connected, that this masculine presentation was perhaps an outward expression of a lesbian identity we would readily recognise today. Perhaps it could signal that she is part of a community, and her dress was recognisable code to others.

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<sup>1</sup> Kisby, Anna. 'Vera "Jack" Holme: Cross-Dressing Actress, Suffragette and Chauffeur'. *Women's History Review* 23, no. 1 (2 January 2014): 120–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2013.866491>.

<sup>2</sup> Holme, Vera Jack. Diary, July 2, 1903. Papers of Vera Jack Holme. The Women's Library, London School of Economics and Political Science. 7VJH/6/01

<sup>3</sup> Kisby, 'Vera "Jack" Holme'.

These connections between masculine dress, lesbian identity and gender expression raise recurring questions in this thesis, as does the extent to which masculine dress is related to Vera Jack's own self-expression. By investigating this aspect, the research seeks to contribute to knowledge and understanding of women's dress as related to gender, sexuality, and identity in the early years of the twentieth century. It offers a different perspective to the dominant narrative of male and female fashions which is so often strictly segregated in fashion histories and considers the potential variety of dress and gender expression for some women at that time. In addition, by examining the links between lesbian identity and masculine dress, in connection with Vera Jack, it provides new insight into the discourse surrounding the emergence of a modern lesbian identity and broadens the discussions regarding the lives of non-heteronormative and gender non-conforming women. The analysis of the photographs and other material, viewed from my specialist perspective as a costume maker, offers new detail to the archivist's descriptions, and in some cases contradicts current attributions.

Research of Vera Jack's archive has been touched upon lightly by scholars writing about women's contribution to the First World War, suffrage, political theatre, or as an unconventional character in other people's stories.<sup>4</sup> This thesis focusses on Vera Jack as the central figure, and it is in part a biography, as her personality and the events of her life are intimately bound up with her dress.

## Review of Key Literature

Histories of nineteenth and twentieth century fashion, largely dominated by women's dress, often rely on images and descriptions of elite clothing. Portraiture of wealthy subjects, haute couture fashion plates or other exclusive styles are presented as a set of steadily changing trends using decades as a defining time scale.<sup>5</sup> Museum publications also contribute to this genre, featuring close-up photography of well-preserved museum pieces, providing remarkable detail.<sup>6</sup> These

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<sup>4</sup> Paxton, Naomi. *Stage Rights! The Actresses Franchise League, Activism and Politics, 1908-58*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2020; Hamer, Emily. *Britannia's Glory: A History of Twentieth-Century Lesbians. Women on Women*. London: New York: Cassell, 1996; Wheelwright, Julie. *Sisters in Arms: Female Warriors from Antiquity to the New Millennium*, 2020; Cockin, Katherine. *Edith Craig and the Theatres of Art*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017. Raeburn, Antonia. *Militant Suffragettes*. London: New English Library, 1974.

<sup>5</sup> Watson, Linda. *Vogue Fashion*. Rev. ed. Buffalo, N.Y: Firefly Books, 2008; Warnes, Felicity J. *Nineteenth-Century Women's Fashions*. Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 2016; Seeling, Charlotte. *Fashion: 150 Years: Couturiers, Designers, Labels*, 2014; Blackman, Cally. *100 Years of Fashion*. London: Laurence King, 2012; Banks-Blaney, William. *25 Dresses: Iconic Moments in Twentieth Century Fashion*. London: Quadrille Publishing, 2015; Blum, Stella, ed. *Victorian Fashions and Costumes from Harper's Bazar: 1867-1898*. Dover Pictorial Archive Series. New York: Dover Publications, 1974.

<sup>6</sup> Kogure, Tohru, Tamami Suoh, Dominic Cheetham, and Akiko Fukai. *Fashion: A History from the 18th to the 20th Century*, 2006; Johnston, Lucy. *19th-Century Fashion in Detail*. Revised and Expanded edition. New York, NY: Thames & Hudson, 2016.

chronologies can provide accessible visual resources; however, they offer a narrow view of dress as a spectacle, often isolated from its cultural context.

Other sources that aim to provide a commentary of social and economic influences on fashion also tend to focus on the cyclical commercially driven fashion system.<sup>7</sup> As such women's dress in the early years of the twentieth century has tended to be characterised as a step change from the elaborate and frothy, "froufrou" lace and frills of the Belle Epoch to the draped orientalism of Poiret, followed by an abrupt shift to the straight silhouette of the flapper after the First World War. The inference, and sometimes the overt analysis provided, being that changes in fashion are led by the elite, key designers or couturieres of a period, and the general population, in a "trickle down" effect, follow passively behind with watered down versions.<sup>8</sup> Of course, it is unfair to expect publications which cover a long period of time not to abbreviate the subject matter, however, these types of texts leave an impression that there was a homogenous experience of dress.

Joanne Entwistle usefully points out, that this "trickle down" theory has been shown to be too simplistic. The influences on fashion and dress are both complex and subtle and as other scholars have demonstrated, fashions have developed within other social groups, independently of privileged style.<sup>9</sup> Diana Crane, for instance, has investigated diverse social groups, in particular, women in the nineteenth century who she contends, adopted masculine forms of dress as a resistance to the feminine mainstream fashions. As she notes, "clothing and clothing choices in the nineteenth century are valuable sites for examining the relationships between marginal and hegemonic discourses. While histories of fashionable clothing give the impression of consensus, clothing actually involved a great deal of debate and controversy."<sup>10</sup>

In other words, dress practices as experienced by individuals are not linear processes but multifaceted, influenced by and negotiated within the cultural surroundings. By exploring Vera Jack's early life through her dress, this research aims to shift our understanding of the variation in dress practices for women in Britain at that time. In doing so, it can help to breakdown the idea of a

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<sup>7</sup> Mendes, Valerie D. and Amy De La Haye. *Fashion since 1900*. 2nd ed. World of Art. London; New York: Thames & Hudson, 2010; Ewing, Elizabeth. *History of 20th Century Fashion*. Pavilion Books, 2014. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/hud/detail.action?docID=1918889>; Laver, James, Amy de la Haye, and Andrew Tucker. *Costume and Fashion*. 6th ed. World of Art. New York: Thames & Hudson Inc, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of trickle-down effect attributed to Veblen, see Entwistle, Joanne. *The Fashioned Body*. Second Edition. Cambridge: Polity, 2015. 98

<sup>9</sup> Peiss, Kathy Lee. *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*. Temple university press, 1986; Buckley, Cheryl, and Hazel Clark. *Fashion and Everyday Life: London and New York*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/hud/detail.action?docID=4771453>; Lewis, Shantrelle P. *Dandy Lion: The Black Dandy and Street Style*. New York, NY: Aperture Foundation, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Crane, Diana. *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000. 99.

“consensus” of dress and fashion and contributes to a body of research which highlights a wider variety of experiences and types of lives lived.

Indeed, clothing touches upon almost every aspect of life and accordingly the wider field of dress history ranges over the boundaries of academic disciplines, drawing from art history, social, economic and political history, material and visual culture. As such, both Lou Taylor and Christopher Breward have advocated interdisciplinary approaches to the study of dress, presenting “a more questioning framework which allows explanations which are multi layered and open ended.”<sup>11</sup> As exemplified by Elizabeth Wilson’s outstanding work, most famously in *Adorned in Dreams*, a feminist interpretation of the importance of fashion in relation to identity, modernity and the urban environment.<sup>12</sup>

Themes of identity, gender and sexuality are central to this thesis. Judith Butler, a major influence on current understandings of gender, provides a useful way to think about how it is constructed. She suggests, “terms such as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ are notoriously changeable; there are social histories for each term; their meanings change radically depending upon geopolitical boundaries and cultural constraints on who is imagining whom, and for what purpose.”<sup>13</sup> Gender, she contends, is culturally produced, and the very language we use and actions we make, create and perpetuate it. We speak and act in repeated and predicted ways that “congeal” to create the impression of being a man or a woman, as such gender is experienced as something that is “done”.<sup>14</sup>

She argues, we are not consciously creating our gender as individuals but playing out reinterpretations of an improvised “script” of expected actions and behaviours, thereby, facilitating some manoeuvre room for individuals to reshape their approach to gender.<sup>15</sup> In this way, the “terms of gender designation are thus never settled once and for all but are constantly in the process of being remade.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Taylor, Lou. *The Study of Dress History*. Studies in Design. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2002; Breward, Christopher. *The Culture of Fashion: A New History of Fashionable Dress*. Studies in Design and Material Culture. Manchester; New York: New York: Manchester University Press; Distributed exclusively in the USA and Canada by St. Martin’s Press, 1995.

<sup>12</sup> Wilson, Elizabeth. *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*. Revised and Updated edition. London: I.B. Tauris, 2013. See also: Styles, John. *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007; Steele, Valerie. *The Corset: A Cultural History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. London, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2004. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/hud/detail.action?docID=183001>. 10.

<sup>14</sup> Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge Classics. New York: Routledge, 2006. 33.

<sup>15</sup> Butler, Judith. ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory’. *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–31. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893>. 526.

<sup>16</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*. 10.

This is an interesting perspective with which to investigate Vera Jack's dress. It is this nature of breaking down and remaking of gender norms which allows us to view Vera Jack in her time and place, embodying as she does, the cultural and political changes rolling through society. I contend, she did not easily fit into the prescribed gender roles at the time but navigated a path and exploited the changing social framework to "do" gender in a different way.

Other theorists have also sought to question gender construction beyond the binary male/female system to further understand the experience of gender non-conforming people. Judith Halberstam for example, asserts that masculinity and femininity can be performed by both male and female bodies, therefore "female masculinity" can be seen as one of a multiplicity of gender variants.<sup>17</sup> This is an intriguing concept to apply to Vera Jack and her seemingly unique masculine dress style, as it was at odds with mainstream fashion. Perhaps she was expressing masculinity through dress, perhaps she would have identified herself as lesbian or transgender in present times. But while it is desirable to raise the profile of subjects from the past to bolster current marginalised identities, whether it be lesbian or any other classification, it is problematic to retrofit modern assumptions.

The modern concept of categorising sexuality as an identity can be traced back to scientific theories of sexologists in the late nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup> They reasoned that there were clear links between same-sex desire in women and masculine attributes, thus the archetype of the masculine woman as 'lesbian' began to develop.<sup>19</sup> This idea did not become embedded in the popular imagination for some time; however, it has now become firmly rooted and pervades our view of women who dressed in masculine style in the early part of the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup>

As Laura Doan has argued, using current terminology can be problematic as it brings with it a set of assumptions that can obscure the experience of the historical subject.<sup>21</sup> While labels such as 'female invert', 'third sex', and 'lesbian' entered the language in the early twentieth century to describe same-sex desire, both Alison Oram and Doan have argued that the spread of knowledge and adoption of these terms was not commonplace until much later in the century.<sup>22</sup> It can be argued that Vera Jack lived at a time when modern notions of categorised sexuality were just emerging,

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<sup>17</sup> Halberstam, Judith. *Female Masculinity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998.

<sup>18</sup> Oram, Alison. *Her Husband Was a Woman! Women's Gender-Crossing in Modern British Popular Culture*. Women's and Gender History. London; New York: Routledge, 2007. 2.

<sup>19</sup> For discussion of the work of Havelock Ellis and other sexologists see: Oram, Alison, and Annmarie Turnbull, eds. *The Lesbian History Sourcebook: Love and Sex between Women in Britain from 1780 to 1970*. London; New York: Routledge, 2001.

<sup>20</sup> Doan, Laura. *Disturbing Practices: History, Sexuality, and Women's Experience of Modern War*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Doan, *Disturbing Practices*.

<sup>22</sup> Oram, *Her Husband Was a Woman!*; Doan, *Disturbing Practices*.

however, she may never have defined herself through her choice of sexual partners. For this reason, I have largely avoided the use of ‘lesbian’ to describe Vera Jack and others in this thesis.

Along with actions and language, dress is an integral component in the construction of gender and dress historians have mined the subject in countless ways.<sup>23</sup> The majority being concerned with femininity and women or masculinity and men. Breward in particular, has made a considerable contribution to the under researched study of men’s fashions and the construction of masculinity.<sup>24</sup>

Histories of lesbian, gay, trans and queer style, including in recent years, museum exhibitions exploring queer culture through fashion and art, have mostly been limited to modern and contemporary accounts of metropolitan styles.<sup>25</sup> As Entwistle notes gay men’s culture has tended to dominate these spaces and analysis of lesbian dress has been given less attention.<sup>26</sup> Wilson also comments that discussion of lesbian style before the mid-twentieth century is problematic as same-sex desire has been obscured from view.<sup>27</sup>

Scholars who have studied the dress of women in same-sex relationships from the earlier part of the twentieth century and before, have tended to focus on a narrow section of society, within the upper class or bohemian, artistic circles.<sup>28</sup> Katrina Rolley for example, offers detailed research into dress and the development of lesbian identity through the writer Radclyffe Hall and her partner, Una

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<sup>23</sup> Tseëlon, Efrat. *The Masque of Femininity: The Presentation of Woman in Everyday Life*. Repr. Theory, Culture and Society. London: SAGE Publ, 1997; Evans, Caroline, and Minna Thornton. ‘Fashion, Representation, Femininity’. *Feminist Review*, no. 38 (1991): 48–66. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1395377>; Buckley, Cheryl, and Hilary Fawcett. *Fashioning the Feminine: Representation and Women’s Fashion from the Fin de Siecle to the Present*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2002; Roberts, Helene E. "The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman." In *Classic and Modern Writings on Fashion*. Oxford: Berg, 2009. Accessed August 13, 2021. <http://dx.doi.org.libaccess.hud.ac.uk/10.5040/9781847887153.v3-0071>; Cole, Shaun, and Lambert Miles. *Dandy Style: 250 Years of British Men’s Fashion*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021; Hill, Daniel Delis. *Peacock Revolution: American Masculine Identity and Dress in the Sixties and Seventies*. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350056466>.

<sup>24</sup> Breward, Christopher. *The Hidden Consumer: Masculinities, Fashion and City Life; 1860 - 1914*. 1. publ. Studies in Design and Material Culture. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999.

<sup>25</sup> Geczy, Adam, and Vicki Karaminas. *Queer Style*. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2013; Cole, Shaun. *Don We Now Our Gay Apparel: Gay Men’s Dress in the Twentieth Century*. Dress, Body, Culture. Oxford: Berg, 2000. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350050723>; Steele, Valerie, ed. *A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk*. New Haven: Yale University Press in association with the Fashion Institute of Technology New York, 2013, Exhibition publication; De La Haye, Amy, and Martin Pel, eds. *Gluck: Art and Identity*. New Haven: Yale University Press, Exhibition publication, Brighton Museum and Art Gallery, UK. 2017; Lesbian History Group, and Lesbian History Group, eds. *Not a Passing Phase: Reclaiming Lesbians in History; 1840 - 1985*. 1. publ. London: Women’s Press, 1989.

<sup>26</sup> Entwistle, Joanne. *The Fashioned Body*. Second Edition. Cambridge: Polity, 2015. xxvi.

<sup>27</sup> Wilson, Elizabeth, “What does a Lesbian Look Like?” in Steele, *A Queer History of Fashion*.

<sup>28</sup> Wilson, “The Artist and Masculine Dress”, in De La Haye and Pel; Rolley, Katrina. “Cutting a Dash: The Dress of Radclyffe Hall and Una Troubridge”. *Feminist Review*, no. 35 (1990): 54–66. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1395400>; Doan, Laura. ‘Passing Fashions: Reading Female Masculinities in the 1920s’. *Feminist Studies* 24, no. 3 (1998): 663–700. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178585>; Lampela, Laurel. ‘Daring to Be Different: A Look at Three Lesbian Artists’. *Art Education* 54, no. 2 (2001): 45–51. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3193946>.

Troubridge, whose strikingly masculine style and overt expression of same-sex sexuality provide a rich source of study.<sup>29</sup> Doan, has also focussed on these two women but draws a wider comparison with shifting gender norms and decidedly masculine dress styles in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>30</sup>

While these works form a rich body of dress research, there has been less study of diverse social groups, or from those in the early years of the century, who were gender non-conforming or non-heteronormative, such as Vera Jack. In addition, there is little research tracking gender expression through dress over a lifetime.

The work of academics who have studied cross-dressing goes some way to counter this, although much has been focussed on male to female.<sup>31</sup> Marjorie Garber's extensive survey of cross-dressing and cultural anxieties recognises the close link to gay culture, transvestite and transgender dress. She notes that just as gender definitions of masculine and feminine are mutable and culturally specific, so cross-dressing and its significance changes over time. In addition, she acknowledges that elements of dress cannot easily be attributed to single meanings such as signalling a sexual identity.<sup>32</sup>

The literature of female to male cross-dressing is a smaller canon, much from social historians interested in the emergence of a modern lesbian or transgender identity, or in theatre performance. Two authors in particular; Jacky Bratton, and Oram, have approached cross-dressing from different angles which are pertinent to Vera Jack.<sup>33</sup> Bratton has written extensively on the subject of music hall performers, in particular Edwardian male impersonators, unpacking the broad spectrum of female to male cross-dressing acts which flourished at the time. Oram has sought to bring to light potential expressions of same-sex relationships in the twentieth century by investigating women, often working-class, who cross-dressed to live and pass as men. Both scholars, in their respective fields have discovered detail and nuance in the historical record.

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<sup>29</sup> Rolley, Katrina. 'The Role of Dress and Appearance in the Construction of Lesbian Identities, Britain 1918-39'. PhD, Middlesex University, 1995.

<sup>30</sup> Doan, 'Passing Fashions'.

<sup>31</sup> See: Ferris, Lesley, ed. *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-Dressing*. London; New York: Routledge, 1993. Davis, Jim. "'Slap On! Slap Ever!": Victorian Pantomime, Gender Variance, and Cross-Dressing'. *New Theatre Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (August 2014): 218–30. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X14000463>.

<sup>32</sup> Garber, Marjorie B. *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. 1st HarperPerennial ed. New York: HarperPerennial, 1993.

<sup>33</sup> Oram, *Her Husband Was a Woman!*; Bratton, Jacky. 'Mirroring Men: The Actress in Drag'. In *The Cambridge Companion to the Actress*. Gale, Maggie B., and John Stokes, eds. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

By drawing on social and cultural theories and examining the evidence of Vera Jack's archive, this research seeks to provide new insights into the dress practices of women at this time. And in questioning the significance of masculine dress and identity what is presented here, adds texture to discourses surrounding women's lives and choices.

## Sources and Methods

Vera Jack's archive, comprising photographs, correspondence, and diaries is kept at the Women's Library, now housed at the London School of Economics. The library founded in 1866, aims to tell "the story of the campaign for women's rights and women's equality from the beginnings of the suffrage movement to the present day," and it still provides a vital resource for research into women's political and personal lives.<sup>34</sup>

Vera Jack's papers were recovered from her home after her death in 1969, and were donated in two parts, initially by her niece, Mrs Woodbridge in 1973 and then further added to by her great-nephew John Holme, between 2006 and 2012.<sup>35</sup> The archive is comprised of 11 sections organised into themes relating to the campaign for suffrage, First World War, foreign travel, and personal relationships, in the form of diaries, personal papers, over 300 photographs, and other sundry items, including two garments. Within these sections more detail is revealed of Vera Jack's experiences and achievements through correspondence, poems, press cuttings, and other memorabilia. Through her earliest diary we can glimpse her work with touring theatre companies and social life in young adulthood. Her arrest and imprisonment, in November 1911 for militant suffragette activities, are documented through police bail notices and her own sketches of her cell in Holloway Prison.<sup>36</sup> Vera Jack's extraordinary war experiences on the Eastern Front are revealed through her letters to friends and colleagues, and official documents, such as the medal certificate of the Serbian Cross of Mercy conferred on her by the King of Serbia.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Murphy, Gillian. *The Women's Library at 90*. LSE London school of Economics and Political Science. June 15, 2016. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/library/collection-highlights/The-Womens-Library>.

<sup>35</sup> Archive Custodial History. Papers of Vera Jack Holme. 7VJH

<sup>36</sup> Metropolitan Police bail notice to Vera Holme, November 22, 1910. 7VJH/1/2/01

<sup>37</sup> Certificate awarded for Serbian Cross of Mercy, 1912. 7VJH/2/6





Figure 1: Vera Jack (*left*) in fancy dress with two others.c1885 7VJH/5/1/43

The photographs in themselves provide a compelling resource, the earliest date from the late 1880s and this example shows Vera Jack as a small child, in fancy dress with other children (Figure 1). They continue through to the 1950's showing her with friends in leisure pursuits and in domestic settings. Foreign travel is also represented in the images, particularly of Serbia which was highly significant to her but also European trips she took in later years, including to Yugoslavia, Norway, and the Mediterranean.

It is also pertinent to consider what is absent from the archive. From the point of view of dress history, it is notable that only two garments were donated, these are housed in a separate building to the rest of the collection. They consist of, according to the archivist records: an "evening coat with blue trim" and a "Croatian man's jacket."<sup>38</sup> It indicates, arguably, a bias about which items are deemed important and collectable, either by the owner, executor, or the museum curator.<sup>39</sup> I had initially intended to study these intriguing items as part of the research, however, the breadth of photographs, dairies, and correspondence, which give insights into diverse areas of Vera Jack's life and identity, have proved a rich resource in themselves.

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<sup>38</sup> Holme, c.1920s. 7VJH/11/01 and 02.

<sup>39</sup> Taylor, *The Study of Dress History*.



Figure 2: Costume design by Sue Willmington. Lord Lechery, Pilgrim's Progress, 2012. English National Opera.

Vera Jack's papers are brimming with information from her eventful life and space necessitates a limit to the study. The scope of this research spans the first two decades of the twentieth century and encompasses her involvement in the theatre, the suffragette movement, and the First World War viewed through the lens of uniform, theatre costume and her everyday presentation. These themes offer an opportunity to gain significant insights into her relationship to masculine dress, gender conventions, and the variety of dress cultures for women at the time.

My approach to the analysis of Vera Jack's archive material is informed by my background as a costume professional working as a cutter and maker, in theatre, film and television, and I bring a critical eye to the nuance of representation through dress. Successful execution of costume for performance requires a broad knowledge of the cut, construction and fit of both historical and modern garments, in addition to the practical skill to realise the end product. It also entails, through collaboration with performers, an understanding of gesture, demeanour and the worn experience of costume and dress. As Hilary Davidson contends, a tacit knowledge of making gives the researcher a different perspective to those without this understanding and can be used for analysis and interpretation in historical research. The increasing academic interest in this approach she terms the 'embodied turn'.<sup>40</sup>

One of my key skills as a costume cutter and maker is design interpretation. I must be able to interrogate the costume designer's illustration or, sometimes more usefully from a technical point of view, their primary and secondary research images, and to transform that visual information into a three-dimensional material object which satisfies the needs of performance and represents the designer's vision. The design or images may provide clues to the construction, but also to the significance of dress detail, which may express character for an individual or convey historical meaning as part of a larger stage picture.

By way of illustrating the process of my work from design to completed costume, I provide an example below of a costume I was commissioned to cut and construct for English National Opera's 2012 production of *Pilgrim's Progress* (directed by Yoshi Oida).<sup>41</sup> Sue Willmington's design is a perky upbeat version of a half-man half-woman costume, a popular Vaudeville act which plays on the idea of gender crossing (Figure 2).<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Davidson, Hilary. 'The Embodied Turn: Making and Remaking Dress as an Academic Practice'. *Fashion Theory* 23, no. 3 (4 May 2019): 329–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2019.1603859>.

<sup>41</sup> For more images of the production see: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p011nllt/p011n19x>

<sup>42</sup> For more information and images of Sue Willmington's work see: <https://www.suewillmington.co.uk/>





Figure 3: Half man-half woman costume. C.1920. Image supplied by Sue Willmington.

While this costume does not directly relate to those worn by Vera Jack, the half-man half-woman act presented here, was part of familiar cross-dressing conventions evident in musical comedy and music hall at this time. These are expanded on further in Chapter 2. According to Frank Cullen it was “almost always a dance act, in a half-and-half act, a solo performer was costumed and made up to appear as both a man and a woman. He appeared male as he faced the wings on one side of the stage and then female as he turned toward the opposite side of the stage—like two sides of a coin.”<sup>43</sup> The costume was intended to be theatrical and bright, as part of the carnivalesque debauchery of the Vanity Fair scene in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, with an unspecified early twentieth century feel to it, reminiscent of the Berlin nightclubs of the Weimar Republic (Figure 3 shows additional reference material of an original 1920s costume).

For the male half, I drafted the pattern on paper for a period tailcoat, from an original 1920s tailor’s guide.<sup>44</sup> To achieve the bust shaping for the female side, I built up padding on a stand (mannequin) to enable the pattern for the fitted bodice to be cut directly on to it. This complicated costume required a close-fitting base and a number of hidden techniques to achieve the half and half effect and allow the performer to move freely without the two halves separating or collapsing in on themselves. Figure 4, Figure 5 and Figure 6, show the realised costume worn by the singer, Colin Judson, during a dress rehearsal.

By studying original garments and using period drafting or pattern cutting methods, the maker can contribute a sense of authenticity to the costume design. For example, the specificity of collar shaping or pocket details, can convey the difference between a coat from 1900 and one from 1920. No historical costume can ever be completely accurate, these are after all modern fabrics and made by modern makers and machines. Nor is it necessarily desirable, productions very often intentionally reflect contemporary ideas framed historically, or imagine how past subjectivities would be expressed today.

It has been noted that fashion and dress history have, at times, been heavily theorised without enough attention to considering actual practices.<sup>45</sup> Thus, in applying my specialist historical, visual, and haptic knowledge and understanding to images and text, I am able to make a valuable contribution to this area of research.

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<sup>43</sup> Cullen, Frank. *Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopaedia of Variety Performers in America, Volume 1*. 1st edition. New York: Routledge, 2006, 471.

<sup>44</sup> Bridgland, A. S. *The Modern Tailor Outfitter and Clothier*. Place of publication not identified: Obscure Press, 2010.

<sup>45</sup> Entwistle, Joanne. *The Fashioned Body*. 100.



Figure 4: Realised costume for Lord Lechery, played by Colin Judson. Cut and constructed by Becky Graham. Hair, make up, millinery and accessories by ENO staff.



Figure 5: Realised costume for Lord Lechery, played by Colin Judson. Cut and constructed by Becky Graham



Figure 6: Realised costume for Lord Lechery, played by Colin Judson. Cut and constructed by Becky Graham



## Chapter Structure

In this chapter I have set out key literature, the main themes and theories underpinning this thesis, and introduced the source material, in addition to my methodological approach to the research. It concludes with a brief biography of Vera Jack. In Chapter 1, I consider notions of masculine dress and sexual identity and question the extent to which Vera Jack dressed unconventionally and examine other potential influences on her dress choices. The conventions of cross gender dressing in theatre, are considered in Chapter 2, revealing a rich diversity of performances at that time. Vera Jack is located within these practices, and I venture to provide new insights on her experience of male gendered dress. In Chapter 3, I review the significance of the uniform in British society at the turn of the twentieth century and investigate Vera Jack's uniformed identity through her work as a chauffeur for the Women's Political and Social Union (WSPU). Finally, her experiences during the First World War, as part of the Women's Volunteer Reserve (WVR) and the Scottish Women's Hospital (SWH) is examined, offering thoughts on how uniform enabled women to define themselves as participants of war. The final chapter reviews the main points of the thesis and offers possible directions for further research.

## Biography



Figure 7: Vera Jack, her brother Gordon and Mother, Mary Louisa Holme née Crowe, c.1887 7VJH5//1/41

This thesis depends to some significant extent, on the reader's knowledge of Vera Jack Holme's life and times, therefore, I conclude this opening chapter with a potted biography. I do not claim to chronicle every important event, rather, I aim to chart a path for readers that highlights salient moments as they relate to the themes therein.

Vera Louise Holme (1881–1969) was born in Birkdale, Lancashire, daughter of Richard Holme, a timber merchant, and Mary Louisa Holme (née Crowe). She had one brother, Richard Gordon, (known as Gordon), whom she remained close to until his death in 1949 (Figure 7).<sup>46</sup> Her early life appears to have been a conventional, affluent middle-class upbringing. One photograph shows Vera Jack as a child at a Belgian convent school and later diaries show she was a practicing Catholic throughout her life.<sup>47</sup> According to her great-nephew, John Holme, Vera Jack's parents separated,

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<sup>46</sup> Holme, Personal papers, 7VJH/4/5

<sup>47</sup> Holme, 1903 and 1955, Diary. 7VJH/6/01, 7VJH/6/30 and c1900, Photograph. 7VJH/5/1/01

and her mother remarried, but as evidenced in her diary, Vera Jack maintained some contact with her father, and she regularly spent time with her mother and aunts.<sup>48</sup>

Vera Jack's early diaries reveal her sociable and energetic nature; she recounts how she quickly made bonds with colleagues, typically lunching with friends, and calling on others in the evening.<sup>49</sup> Images, in her role as chauffeur to Emmeline Pankhurst, show those around her unsmiling and serious, Vera Jack grins and seems to relish the adventure (Figure 8). Others were certainly struck by her presence, Sylvia Pankhurst, for instance, described her as, "a noisy and explosive young person frequently rebuked by her elders for a lack of dignity."<sup>50</sup> If disapproved of by some, a series of limericks signed 'M', found among Vera Jack's papers, indicate she was warmly regarded and give an insight into her gregarious and jovial character, as seen by others:

There was a young lady called Vera  
As a speaker all crowded to hear her  
She caused a sensation  
Throughout the whole nation  
Such as never was seen in our era!

There was a young person called Jacko  
Whom the tabbies all wanted to smacko  
For she cut her hair short  
Had a passion for sport  
And absorbed quite a lot of tobacco!

There was a young woman called Jack  
Who never was seedy or slack  
When she had to depart  
All her friends—from their heart—  
Would exclaim 'How we hope you come back!'<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Kisby, 'Vera "Jack" Holme'; Holme, 1903, Diary. 7VJH/6/01

<sup>49</sup> Holme, 1903, Diary, 7VJH/6/01

<sup>50</sup> Pankhurst, Estelle S., and Sylvia E. Pankhurst. *The Suffragette Movement*. Reprint. Virago History. London: Virago Press, 1988. 225.

<sup>51</sup> Unknown author, c.1910, Limericks about Vera Holme. 7VJH/4/2/12

NB: 'Tabby' was a slang word meaning old woman/gossip. Ware, James Redding. *Passing English of the Victorian Era: A Dictionary of Heterodox English, Slang and Phrase*. London: Routledge, 1909.  
<http://archive.org/details/passingenglishof00wareuoft>.



Figure 8: Vera Jack Holme and another suffragette c.1909 7VJH/5/2/03

By the turn of the twentieth century, societal restrictions were slowly beginning to ease for some women. Middle-class women were going outside the home to work in greater numbers, into a limited number of professions and engage in politics. Sport and physical activity were also becoming more desirable as part of healthy lifestyle.<sup>52</sup> Vera Jack took full advantage of these changes. She began to earn her own living in the theatre, whether this decision was through financial necessity, or her own choice remains unrecorded. Her diaries and photographs show she toured the country, working in pantomime and musical comedy as a singer and as a male impersonator. She also played the violin, performing one-off concerts. A contract from 1906 shows she was employed as a chorus member, in Gilbert and Sullivan operas, with the D'Oyly Carte theatre company.<sup>53</sup>

Although money was short, she lived a free and independent life, walking and cycling unchaperoned. She lived in digs often sharing with others. Her relationship with Aggie, seems to have been significant as indicated in a diary entry of April 1903: “Stayed in bed late reading Charles O'mally and smoaking [sic] til about lunch time. Rosie got into Aggie and my bed. Had great fun.”<sup>54</sup> We will never know the nature of the fun they had but it seems noteworthy that Aggie and Vera Jack shared a bed. It was clearly an intense relationship as over the few months Aggie is mentioned, Vera Jack records almost weekly, a “fearful row” or a “vile letter from Ag”, often followed a day or so later by “Ag & I made it up.”<sup>55</sup>

Vera Jack's early experiences of political activism came through the Actress's Franchise League (AFL). It had been established in 1908 to encourage theatre professionals to campaign for women's suffrage through plays, lectures, and pamphlets. Their productions overtly challenged stereotypes and restrictive expectations of women. One of their most successful productions was *The Pageant of Great Women*, written by Cicely Hamilton. An early feminist historical recovery project, it celebrated great women and their achievements from history.<sup>56</sup> Vera Jack played Hannah Snell, in at least one performance of this piece, a character based on a real eighteenth century woman who assumed the name and identity of a man in order to serve in the military.<sup>57</sup> In the published edition,

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<sup>52</sup> Richardson, Sarah. *The Political Worlds of Women: Gender and Politics in Nineteenth Century Britain*. London, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/hud/detail.action?docID=1143853>.

Delamont, Sara, and Lorna Duffin. *The Nineteenth-Century Woman: Her Cultural and Physical World*. London, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/hud/detail.action?docID=1101377>.

<sup>53</sup> Holme, 1903, Diary, 7VJH/6/01.

<sup>54</sup> Holme, April 13, 1903. Diary, 7VJH/6/01.

<sup>55</sup> Holme, March/April, 1903, Diary, 7VJH/6/01.

<sup>56</sup> Paxton, *Stage Rights*.

<sup>57</sup> Kisby. ‘Vera “Jack” Holme.

Christopher St John is pictured in this role. St John was also a suffragist and performer who, like Vera Jack adopted a traditionally male name and had relationships with women.<sup>58</sup>

Many well-known actresses including Lena Ashwell, Lillie Langtry, Ellen Terry, and her daughter Edith Craig supported the group. Craig was a theatre director and costume designer, who went on to create The Pioneer Players (1911–1925), a theatre company producing innovative political plays.<sup>59</sup>

Shortly after this, Vera Jack joined the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) and quickly became involved in both non-violent and militant activity. Vera Jack was an excellent horsewoman, and in June 1909, wearing a riding habit and sash in the WSPU colours, she was deployed to deliver documents to Downing Street. Antonia Raeburn recounted the tumultuous events:

Hundreds of yelling youths ran after her as her horse pushed its passage through the crowd...which scattered on either side....as she made the return journey to Caxton Hall, admiring crowds cheered and clapped.<sup>60</sup>

This incident indicates Vera Jack’s physical confidence and determination. She was arrested only once for obstructing a police officer in 1911, receiving a sentence of five days in Holloway Prison.<sup>61</sup>

As the WSPU’s popularity grew, the organisation bought a motor car to enable the leaders to travel the country for speeches and meetings. Vera Jack became their chauffeur, although her jocular attitude caused doubts about her ability, as she later recounted: “Mrs Pankhurst thought I was very giddy and wasn’t at all for having me because I used to play the galoot in the office.”<sup>62</sup> Indeed, driving at this time was no small task as the roads and reliability of early motor transport were testing. However, she remained in this role, for a number of years which indicates the suffrage leaders’ confidence in her.

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<sup>58</sup> Hamilton, Cicely M. *A Pageant of Great Women*. [London]: The Suffrage Shop, 1910. <http://archive.org/details/pageantofgreatwo00hami>.

<sup>59</sup> Cockin, *Edith Craig and the Theatres of Art*.

<sup>60</sup> Raeburn, Antonia. *Militant Suffragettes*. London: New English Library, 1974. 119

<sup>61</sup> Paxton, *Stage Rights!*

<sup>62</sup> Raeburn, *Militant Suffragettes*. 110



*Evelina* to thee, these lines are written!

Early the morn, list! the song bird sings sweet  
Varied the pleasures I meet on my ride  
Every gift nature has falls at my feet  
Horse - thou my <sup>good</sup> friend, through all time and tide  
A way thou and I, from life's madening throng  
Valiant old fellows, just gallops along  
Eager to do my desire? ay I know  
Resolute boy, yes - I know you can go!  
Field it is ours - you are leading the way  
Incline or hill - n'ce to slow you they tend  
Even the fields left behind us look grey  
'Leader' a well named, you have carried your friend  
Dear.

Please excuse - "This is a little thing of my own  
I shall not publish it" (Patience)

*VJH*

In memory of the morn we rode together - round the hill 'Arthur's Seat' 'Dinwiddie'  
When we were both so happy drinking in the full joys of nature -  
Which can seem more beautiful than ever when your twin soul is at your side -

Oct: 5<sup>th</sup> 1909.

Figure 9: Poem to Evelina from Vera Jack Holme, Oct 5, 1909. 7VJH/4/1/08

Vera Jack began a major relationship in 1909 with the Hon. Mrs Evelina Haverfield (1867–1920), who I refer to hereafter as Evelina. They were both members of the WSPU and would work closely together during and after the 1914–18 conflict. It is difficult to know the nature of their relationship, or how they may have defined or perceived it, but an affectionate acrostic poem written by Vera Jack spelling out her name, shows a clue perhaps, a postscript notes that nature “can seem more beautiful than ever with your twin soul by your side” (Figure 9). Evelina and Vera Jack lived together for a time at Peace Cottage, Brendon, in North Devon and poignantly, an inventory of the contents after Evelina’s death in 1920 records, “1 bed with carved sides EH & VH.”<sup>63</sup>

In 1918, Vera Jack recorded her feelings, possibly romantic, for the artist Dorothy Johnston. She subsequently went to live with her in Kirkcudbright, Scotland, and spent much of the following year with a set of bohemian artists there.<sup>64</sup> Vera Jack appeared to have several intimate relationships with other women around this time; as Kisby notes, she began a lifelong friendship with the Croatian artist, Nastja Rojc, who Kisby describes as lesbian, and also a close relationship with Natalia (Nat) while in Serbia. At New Year 1919 Vera Jack records:

Nat called for us [Vera Jack and Evelina] after supper and we went to the SWH dance ... it was just glorious. I did not have as many dances with Nat as we wanted but we took as many as we decently could. It was beastly when she had to go home instead of coming back with me to stay here. ...Had two dances with Eve. Kissed her when the lights went out at midnight.<sup>65</sup>

At the outbreak of war in 1914, Evelina established the Women’s Volunteer Reserve (WVR). It was established “to organise, train and drill suitable women to form disciplined bodies all over the country, who will...be ready to assist the authorities in transport, the carrying of despatches, and in any other way.”<sup>66</sup> Vera Jack signed up and gained the rank of Major in October 1914.

Soon after, they both joined the Scottish Women’s Hospital Unit (SWH) which had been set up by Dr Elsie Inglis to provide field hospitals and medical units for civilians and soldiers in Serbia and Russia. Vera Jack again used her proficiency as a driver and mechanic to work as a chauffeur. The work was tough as they battled with challenging terrain, disease, and the large numbers of sick and wounded.

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<sup>63</sup> Holme, c1920, Inventory of Vera Holme’s Property at Peace Cottage, 7VJH/4/1/07

<sup>64</sup> Holme, September 16, 1918, Diary. 7VJH/6/04.

<sup>65</sup> Holme, December 31, 1919, Diary. 7VJH/6/05.

<sup>66</sup> Author unknown, November 17, 1914, Press cutting. 7VJH/2/2/03.



The following excerpts from her correspondence give some indication of the difficulties of the work:

...All the time we have had a cannon and heavy gun accompaniment as the frontier is only 10 hours walk from here, and there has been very heavy fighting. ...Today I helped to lift a man who had the most appalling wounds I have ever seen. He had to have one eye cut out. You could not tell which [?] eye as it was cut open from his nose to his ear.

...The first half was the worst going out and oh! it was so skiddy. When we got about 7 miles from Valiavo [Valjevo] we got a puncture and I had to take the wheel off and put another one on so that delayed us a little bit, and we did not arrive until 10 to four.<sup>67</sup>

The many challenges for Vera Jack included a perilous journey back to Britain, in October 1917, to deliver a report on the situation on the Eastern Front to Lord Cecil of the Foreign Office and also being held as a prisoner of war for a time in 1915.<sup>68</sup> Despite these difficulties, Vera Jack expressed a sense of excitement and adventure, recounting in letters to friends moments of fun and relaxation.<sup>69</sup>

After the war, having spent some time in Britain, giving talks and fundraising for the Scottish Women's Hospital, Vera Jack returned to Serbia in 1919 to join Evelina who had established the Haverfield Fund for Serbian Children, in Bajina Bashta.<sup>70</sup> Sadly, weakened by the harsh conditions, Evelina contracted pneumonia, and died in 1920, aged 52.<sup>71</sup> Vera Jack remained in Serbia, working as an administrator for the orphanage until 1922. The loss she felt at Evelina's death would stay with her for the rest of her life.<sup>72</sup>

After returning from the Balkans, Vera Jack, moved together with two other SWH colleagues, Margaret Ker and Margaret Greenlees, to Allt Grianach, Lochearnhead, in Scotland. Vera Jack continued to give talks around the country about the work of the SWH and the suffrage campaign, often honouring the key women in these organisations.<sup>73</sup> She was also a lifelong active member of the Scottish Woman's Rural Institute, formed in 1917 by a Scottish suffragette, Catherine Blair,

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<sup>67</sup> Holme to Embleton. October 1915. 7VJH2/5/07; September 1915. 7VJH2/5/06.

<sup>68</sup> Holme, 1916, photograph. 7VJH/5/3/48; 1915 diary. 7VJH/6/03; Kisby. Vera "Jack" Holme.

<sup>69</sup> Holme to Alick Embleton, 1915-1916, 7VJH/2/5.

<sup>70</sup> Chair of the SWH Executive Committee to Holme, January 11, 1919. 7VJH/2/5/12.

<sup>71</sup> Kisby. Vera "Jack" Holme.

<sup>72</sup> Kisby. Vera "Jack" Holme - according to Vera Jack's great-nephew John Holme, interviewed by Kisby.

<sup>73</sup> Holme, June 15, 1964, Contract with BBC for a radio talk on Dr Elsie Inglis. 7VJH/2/4/10.

providing a support network and addressing social issues for women.<sup>74</sup> She continued to travel abroad, recording various trips during the 1920s, in particular, her return to Eastern Europe to visit friends and the Haverfield orphanage.<sup>75</sup>

Theatre performance remained important to Vera Jack, as she played a significant role in the prolific work of Edith Craig. Along with her two life partners: playwright, Christopher St John (Christabel Marshal), and artist, Tony Atwood (Clare Atwood), Craig lived in Smallhythe Place, Tenterden, in Kent. Here they established the Barn Theatre, which was in part a memorial to Craig's mother, Ellen Terry, after her death in 1928.<sup>76</sup> Vera Jack spent much time assisting with productions and acted as amanuensis for Craig's memoirs. She was highly regarded by this community, even being honoured with special performances for her birthdays.<sup>77</sup> Vera Jack's letters, diaries, and photographs continue into later life, until her death in Glasgow, at the age of eighty-eight, in 1964. There is still much more they can tell us about life for women in the twentieth century and will prove a valuable source for further research.

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<sup>74</sup> Kisby. Vera "Jack" Holme; National Museums Scotland Blog. 'Happy 100th Birthday Scottish Women's Institute!', 3 November 2017. <https://blog.nms.ac.uk/2017/11/03/happy-100th-birthday-scottish-womens-institute/>. Accessed 20 August 2021.

<sup>75</sup> Holme, Various accounts. 7VJH/3/1.

<sup>76</sup> For further reading about Edith Craig see: Cockin, Katherine. *Edith Craig and the Theatres of Art*.

<sup>77</sup> Cockin, *Edith Craig and the Theatres of Art*. 240



Figure 10: Vera Jack in her study, c.1950.7VJH/5/5/04

## Chapter 1: Vera Jack and Everyday Dress

*There was a young lady called Vera  
As a speaker all crowded to hear her  
She caused a sensation  
Throughout the whole nation  
Such as never was seen in our era.*



Figure 11: Vera Jack and brother Gordon c.1900. 7VJH/5/1/02

This chapter considers Vera Jack's everyday dress, masculine dress, and lesbian representation. Firstly, it examines the concept of lesbianism in the early twentieth century, and the extent to which masculine dress played a part in self-identification. Then, by examining Vera Jack's everyday dress through the archival evidence, I consider her personal relationship to dress and conventionality of her gender presentation. In viewing her dress within the wider context of the photographs, her diaries and correspondence, I propose other potential influences on her style, relating to her social and political affiliations.

The archive contains many photographs showing Vera Jack in some form of masculine dress. She had the distinction of being recognised by *Chauffeur Magazine* as the first female chauffeur when she took up the role for the WSPU in 1911.<sup>78</sup> She proudly wore the long double-breasted coat and peaked cap complete with RAC badge, which denoted her role. During the First World War she donned the military uniform of the Women's Volunteer Reserve and Scottish Women's Hospital. Later in life, she is pictured in full male evening dress, complete with bow tie and patent leather shoes (Figure 4). In addition, in her twenties, she performed on stage in musical comedies and Gilbert and Sullivan operas, her photographs show her in a variety of theatre costumes, all of which portray male characters. This personal style was unusual and set her apart from the dominant conventions for women at that time.

It is unsurprising then that one of the key aspects of Vera Jack's life which is often commented on is her appearance in masculine dress. The phrase 'cross-dressing' is paired with her name and linked to her sexuality. As Kisby has noted:

A recurrent theme among Jack's friends is their use of male pseudonyms. Making her identity as a lesbian apparent according to the conventions of the time, Jack's nickname and her masculine dress act as key signals of her sexual identity.<sup>79</sup>

This statement assumes that there was a 'lesbian identity' with established conventions, and that masculine dress and nomenclature were recognisable signifiers. However, there has been much debate surrounding the origins of the modern sexualities and as to the moment when lesbianism began to be perceived and adopted as an identity. As Oram and Turnbull argue, "today's idea of lesbian identity – sexual desire for other women – as a conscious labelling of one's self would have been a puzzling notion to most early nineteenth century women, and really only emerged fully during the twentieth century."<sup>80</sup>

Rebecca Jennings makes the case that it was not until the interwar years, that some women who felt themselves different to the dominant culture began to adopt labels such as 'invert' or 'third sex' to describe themselves in relation to their sexuality.<sup>81</sup> It remains unclear, though, how widespread the notion would have been throughout society, the dissemination and acceptance of ideas necessarily varies depending on multiple factors, such as class, location or access to education. Artistic and

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<sup>78</sup> Kisby, 'Vera "Jack" Holme'.

<sup>79</sup> Kisby, 'Vera "Jack" Holme', 122.

<sup>80</sup> Oram and Turnbull, *The Lesbian History Sourcebook*, 237.

<sup>81</sup> Jennings, Rebecca. *A Lesbian History of Britain: Love and Sex between Women since 1500*. Oxford, England; Westport, Conn: Greenwood World Pub, 2007.

intellectual circles, for instance, being a different environment to working class rural communities.<sup>82</sup>

Furthermore, it seems problematic to attribute Vera Jack's dressed identity to her sexuality, firstly, because she may not have viewed herself in this way and secondly because it denies a mutability and messiness that the signification of clothing carries with it. It is important to acknowledge that although Vera Jack wore masculinised dress in certain settings, she also wore conventional female attire, as her 1903 diary and the photograph shown in Figure 11, illustrate. In this image she is seen in a small sailing boat with her brother, Gordon, both squinting slightly in the sunlight. Vera Jack is wearing a pale-coloured, probably white blouse, with broderie anglaise detail, a high collar and puffed sleeves. She has unbuttoned her cuffs and loosely rolled them up. Little detail can be seen of the skirt, but it is similarly pale in colour, perhaps made of linen which was commonly used for a summer wear. At the waist she has a striped sash or ribbon. The ensemble is conventionally fashionable for the period 1900–03, with her pouched blouse picking up on the 'S' bend silhouette which characterised the Edwardian period.<sup>83</sup>

It is not however, overly fussy as some contemporary images of fashionable blouses indicate. The fabric is fairly crisp, perhaps a poplin rather than a fine fabric such as cotton lawn, which was popular.<sup>84</sup> Her hat is a conventional shape for the time with wide low crown, allowing it to perch on top of her widely dressed hair. She has pinned a posy to the dark soft tie. Although conventionally dressed for a public setting, they look relaxed and fairly informal. Gordon has taken his jacket off, rolled his shirt sleeves up and turned up the front brim of his felt hat. His double-breasted waistcoat is still fully fastened. The shirt has a stiff collar, and his tie is secured with a neat tie pin.

Vera Jack makes little comment in her diary regarding her feelings about clothes except to record some pleasure if she had received or bought a new item. Her wardrobe seemed to consist of skirts, blouses, and dresses, accessorised with ties and hats – a conventional collection:

Tuesday 7 April 1903: Went shopping bought my new black canvas surge [*sic*] dress. Also got new hat with roses and forget me nots in it.

Tuesday 14 July 1903: Had a pair of blouses from Mater. Awfully nice ones.

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<sup>82</sup> Oram and Turnbull, *The Lesbian History Sourcebook*

<sup>83</sup> Mendes, Valerie D. *Fashion since 1900*.

<sup>84</sup> Arnold, Janet. *Patterns of Fashion. 2: Englishwomen's Dresses and Their Construction: 1860 - 1940*. Reprint. Drama Book. London: MacMillan, 1993; Gernsheim, Alison. *Victorian and Edwardian Fashion: A Photographic Survey*. New York, United States: Dover Publications, 1982. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/hud/detail.action?docID=1897281>.

Thursday 27 August 1903: Had a letter from Arthur he sent a ripping red tie.”<sup>85</sup>

Her expenditure appears to have been modest, and she was clearly struggling for cash on occasion, as her mother sometimes sent money which she immediately used to pay off small debts. She also made use of the pawn shop, on one occasion ‘popping’ a gold chain her mother had given her just two weeks earlier.<sup>86</sup>

These diary entries and photograph do not seem to fit in with Kisby’s perception of Vera Jack’s identity. Doan, writing extensively on the history of lesbian identity, highlights the pitfalls of the prevailing model of ‘recovering’ hidden stories of lesbians and other queer identities from the past, which she names “ancestral genealogy.” Such approaches, she argues, are often undertaken as an overt political project with the intention to raise awareness and counter prejudice.<sup>87</sup> This can be positive in that the recovered stories provide a sense of continuity and role models for us in the present day, and an interesting hook for public history projects, giving visibility and credence to marginalised groups. However, the disadvantage, Doan contends, is that it can lead to overlooking details that do not fit with the desired narrative and in doing so, there is a danger of losing the nuance of what is actually present in the archive. The contemporary historian must be wary of viewing the past through the lens of current assumptions. As she makes clear, “negotiating the past in relation to gender and sexuality forces us to raise our tolerance for conceptual messiness and engage with the pleasures of conjecturing about what may in the end be unknowable and irresolvable.”<sup>88</sup>

The subject of dress and lesbian sexuality is no exception to this unsettling proposition. One such assumption as Kisby has made is that masculine dress signifies lesbian. Oram and Turnbull caution that historians have often, “come to regard the mannish woman of the past as an archetypal lesbian, whether she is simply adopting elements of male clothing, or successfully passing as a man in everyday life.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Holme, 1903, Diary, 7VJH/6/01.

<sup>86</sup> Pawn shops were also known as pop shops.

<sup>87</sup> Doan, *Disturbing Practices*.

<sup>88</sup> Doan, *Disturbing Practices*, 104.

<sup>89</sup> Oram and Turnbull, *The Lesbian History Sourcebook*, 11.



Figure 12: Lady Una Troubridge left, and author Radclyffe Hall with their dachshunds at Crufts dog show, February 1923. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

As such, it has been argued that lesbians in the early twentieth century dressed in masculine style to signal their sexuality. Emily Hamer, for example claims that “from the turn of the [twentieth] century, if not earlier, lesbians have marked their identity by turning to masculine dress. Mannish lesbians,” she argues “wore men’s clothes in order to show that they were laying claim to that which was kept for men: sexual desire and women.”<sup>90</sup> Unfortunately, Hamer offers no evidence of dress practices therefore it is difficult to assess the validity of her claim.

Others have provided more in-depth analyses, albeit restricted to a small number of women who were exceptional due to their class and economic position in society. Prominent amongst these is Radclyffe Hall (1880-1943), who was the author of the first novel featuring an overtly lesbian protagonist, *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928 (Figure 12).<sup>91</sup> The novel was published and subsequently banned following an obscenity trial. She was a vocal advocate for recognition and acceptance of this new category of sexuality. Rolley argues convincingly that some women, such as Hall and her partner, Una Troubridge, used masculine dress in the 1920s as an overt and coherent expression of ‘inversion’. As she asserts, “defining themselves ‘invert’ gave women who ‘weren't

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<sup>90</sup> Hamer, *Britannia’s Glory*. 202-3.

<sup>91</sup> Hall, Radclyffe. *The Well of Loneliness*. Repr. London: Virago, 2007.



women' a gender, a sexuality and an identity, and dress allowed them to triumph over their female bodies and express and communicate this identity.”<sup>92</sup>

In her study of a network of women artists and writers living in 1920s Paris, Shari Benstock similarly argues that those who cross-dressed did so purposefully as a visual and very public pronouncement of their same-sex relationships. She makes the claim that masculine dress – including short hairstyles and eccentric accessories, such as the monocle, was a recognisable presentation of lesbianism at that time.<sup>93</sup>

However, Garber reasons that to attribute masculine dress simply as an expression of sexuality, is to ignore wider possible meanings.<sup>94</sup> In her extensive analysis of cross-dressing and cultural anxieties, she provides a useful examination of the various potential codes of lesbian dress. The monocle, cited by Benstock as an indicator of lesbianism, Garber concludes, could equally indicate a complex combination of signals. It could be perceived as a mark of class or affectation, debauchery, gender or sexuality depending on where it was worn or by whom. While it can be argued that the women in this setting, displayed their lesbian sexuality through dress, they could equally have been using dress to disrupt class, gender or other dominant social expectations. It is hard to generalise outside of this elite artist community.

Furthermore, it is not clear that masculine dress and same sex attraction were linked in the minds of general population, as Doan's examination of origins of modern lesbian culture shows.<sup>95</sup> She challenges the arguments of Rolley and Benstock to assert that, at the time, it was not only lesbians who wore masculine dress. Indeed, she contends that it was not until after the publicity surrounding Hall's obscenity trial, in 1928, that any such connection was made.<sup>96</sup> Using evidence from newspaper reports and fashion magazine articles she shows the extent to which boyish styles for women had become mainstream fashions after the First World War. She argues that women's fashion in general was so comprehensively masculine in comparison with previous fashions that a woman dressing in this way would have been perceived as a fashionable modern woman rather than a masculine lesbian. As she explains, the definitions of female gendered dress had shifted, “when

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<sup>92</sup> Rolley. 'Cutting a Dash'.

<sup>93</sup> Benstock, Shari. *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900 - 1940*. 5. paperback print. Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1997.

<sup>94</sup> Garber, *Vested Interests*.

<sup>95</sup> Doan, 'Passing Fashions'.

<sup>96</sup> Doan, 'Passing Fashions'.

cape coats were fashionable, Hall wore cape coats; when the Spanish hat came into vogue, Hall could be seen in one.”<sup>97</sup> She goes on to ask:

So, is Hall fashionably Modern or a mannish lesbian? The answer-and the point-is both. Just as boyishness allowed young women and girls to pass or play-pass as boys, twenties’ fashions allowed older women-past the age to be taken as boys-to pass as the masculine “look.” Older women who flirted with this “look” would have been more likely to be taken for fashionable than lesbian. The Modern look and the Lesbian look would not converge until the trial of *The Well of Loneliness*.<sup>98</sup>

As Doan argues, there was no ‘secure link between the masculine woman and the modern lesbian.’<sup>99</sup> That is not to say there was no experimentation with gendered dress, as Katherine Cockin suggests in relation to representations of women in political theatre and women’s suffrage militancy, “there is evidence of a wide variety of cultural representations of gender inversion especially in clothing and demeanour.”<sup>100</sup> However, the meanings of dress as has been noted, are open to multiple readings and cannot be assumed to be outward expressions of sexual identity.

The following examines Vera Jack’s gender presentation through images from her archive and analyses the possible influences on her dress. Figure 13 shows Vera Jack planting a tree with three other women in the suffrage movement: Mary Blathwayt, Jessie and Annie Kenney. Blathwayt and her family supported the suffrage campaign, and between 1909 and 1912 they offered their home, Eagle House in Batheaston, Somerset as a retreat. According to Raeburn, Col. Lindley Blathwayt (Mary’s father) instigated planting an arboretum to honour suffragettes who had played an important role.<sup>101</sup> A species of fir would be planted, if they had been to prison, and if not, a holly.<sup>102</sup> Vera Jack was invited to plant a holly, (*Ilex Aquifolium*), on 9 May 1910.<sup>103</sup> Col. Blathwayt was a keen photographer and recorded each planting, along with a portrait of the honoured suffragette (Figure 14).

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<sup>97</sup> Doan, ‘Passing Fashions’, 686.

<sup>98</sup> Doan, ‘Passing Fashions’, 686.

<sup>99</sup> Doan, *Disturbing Practices*, 106.

<sup>100</sup> Cockin, *Edith Craig and the Theatres of Art*. 107.

<sup>101</sup> Raeburn, *Militant Suffragettes*, 158.

<sup>102</sup> Pugh, *The Pankhursts*.

<sup>103</sup> “Annie’s Arboretum,” Suffragette Stories, University of East Anglia, accessed August 7, 2021, <https://suffragettestories.omeka.net/annies-arboretum>.



Figure 13: Tree planting at Eagle House, Batheaston. 1910. by Col. L. Blathwayt. Bath Central Library

*L-R: Mary Blathwayt, Vera Jack Holme, Jessie Kenney, Annie Kenney,*

From the photographs of this event, we can see a full-length image of Vera Jack, and a close-up of the same dress, and they provide two points of interest. Firstly, the style of dress she is wearing and secondly, the gendered aspect of it. Vera Jack is shown wearing a conventionally feminine pinafore style dress, the scoop neck has a bound edge and three appliqued motifs. Although it is difficult to assess the fabric from the photograph, it appears to be a firm, medium-weight wool. Visible under the dress, is a pale, possibly white, blouse with full sleeves, gathered at the armhole and wrist. The turndown collar is embroidered with a clover leaf design. She wears a soft tie, knotted at the neck. In Figure 13, the gored skirt of the dress is visible. It flares out moderately from the waist and is fastened with a narrow belt with two buttons. Overall, it has a soft and feminised look.

Vera Jack does not conform the mannish dress narrative here; she wore very similar clothes to the other women which suggests she was fitting in with the homosocial setting. This style of dress, loosely belted and falling from the shoulders, has echoes of the dress reform movement which promoted healthy forms of dress, rejecting the restrictive and heavily draped styles of previous decades. The simple organic forms embroidered at the neck show the influence of the Arts and Craft movement, which looked to a pre-industrial era and was strongly influenced by Pre-



Figure 14: Vera Jack Holme, 1910 by Col. L. Blathway. Bath Central Library

Raphaelite aestheticism. Folk decoration was admired along with an emphasis on handmade rather than industrialised mass-produced goods.<sup>104</sup> Bohemian artists and writers were among the first to adopt these ideas. Wilson suggests these influences on dress had for, sometime, been associated with Socialism and other alternative groups before blending into mainstream fashions by late nineteenth century.<sup>105</sup> By which time, citing Stella Mary Newton, she suggests:

there had been a subtle shift in the meanings of this kind of dress, Reform dress, she believes, was now no longer a moral hygienic project, but had become a symbol of the wearer's taste and politics. You wore a 'socialist gown' not only because it was, you hoped, both attractive and comfortable but proclaimed what you were. It is this shift from clothing as part of a social project to clothing as part of an identity that really launches it into its most 'modern' manifestations.<sup>106</sup>

Thus, by choosing this style of dress Vera Jack was perhaps signalling something about her political identity rather than her sexuality or gender. Noticeably three of the four women in the tree planting scene are wearing pinafores which further suggests, a communal style of dress amongst this group of women who ostensibly have similar political and cultural affiliation. Kimberley Wahl, also tentatively links suffrage and the Arts and Crafts movement:

Although there are few explicit connections between the dress reform movement and the suffrage campaign, there was notable overlap in the area of the Arts and Crafts movement. ...Alternative forms of dress were promoted in rational and temperance circles as well as in various artistic groups who advocated reform through art and design, from the Arts and Crafts movement, through Aestheticism and later in early twentieth-century Modernism.<sup>107</sup>

Indeed, these images and Vera Jack's connection with other suffragettes such as Edith Craig, her mother Ellen Terry and Sylvia Pankhurst, who were all associated with alternative dress styles, indicates a close relationship between the artistic community, the suffrage movement and a dialogue around aesthetic dress reform.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Mendes and De La Haye, *Fashion since 1900*.

<sup>105</sup> Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*.

<sup>106</sup> Newton, Stella Mary. *Health, Art and Reason: Dress Reformers of the Nineteenth Century*. London, 1974. Cited in Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 219.

<sup>107</sup> Wahl, Kimberley. 'Silencing Fashion in Early Twentieth Century Feminism'. Accessed 28 November 2020. in. *Fashion in European Art: Dress and Identity, Politics and the Body, 1775– 1925*. Young, Justine De, ed. I.B.Tauris, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350986381.207-232>

<sup>108</sup> Cockin, *Edith Craig and the Theatres of Art*.



Figure 15: Vera Jack Holme and Alick Embleton. 1914. VJH/5/1/07.

In a relaxed studio portrait Vera Jack is pictured with Alick Embleton (Figure 15).<sup>109</sup> Vera Jack is wearing a knee length, single breasted jacket with collar and reverse, and skirt. Once again, the fit is loose, in contrast to close-fitting corseted fashions prevalent at the time.<sup>110</sup> Her long hair is pulled close to the head with a low roll. Other photographs show that Vera Jack had thick wavy hair which is smoothed down here. Both women wear an unstarched turn-down collar and tie. Alick is wearing a long knitted “cardigan jacket”, a garment gaining popularity by the 1910s.<sup>111</sup>

Vera Jack’s outfit has a distinctly masculine influence and does not signal extreme femininity, however, nor is it so masculine in style as to cause any confusion over her gender. She is standing with her hand in pocket. One reverse is slightly distorted by a flower or fabric brooch. She appears slightly crumpled and the creases and distortions of the cloth show this jacket has been worn for some time, and perhaps it represents a snapshot rather than an image intended for public view. Alick and Vera Jack were close friends as her many letters during the First World War attest. Perhaps this photograph was taken as a memento before Vera Jack commenced her war work. Her style was up-to-date with the changes in women's clothing generally. In 1914, with conflict in Europe looming, military influences had begun to enter women's fashion with three-quarter length, double-breasted reefer jackets. Significantly, as seen here, including patch pockets, whereas previously pockets in women’s garments were frequently small, well-hidden, or non-existent.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Alice, known as Alick, Embleton, was an entomologist. She studied biological sciences and was the first female graduate from University of Cardiff in 1899. Later, she researched pesticides contributing to improvement in crop production. Vera Jack, together with Alick, her partner Celia Wray, and Evelina Haverfield, formed The Foesack League in 1910, whose membership was restricted to women suffragists.

<sup>110</sup> Mendes and De La Haye, *Fashion since 1900*.

<sup>111</sup> Mendes and De La Haye, *Fashion since 1900*.

<sup>112</sup> Gorea, Adriana, Katya Roelse, and Martha L. Hall. *The Book of Pockets: A Practical Guide for Fashion Designers*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019. Accessed August 07, 2021. <http://dx.doi.org.libaccess.hud.ac.uk/10.5040/9781474272513.ch-001>





A PARISIAN DIVIDED SKIRT

DESIGNED BY VIOLA, PARIS, AND 27, ALBEMARLE STREET, BOND STREET, LONDON

Figure 16: A Parisian Divided Skirt from Cycling World Illustrated June 3, 1896.  
[https://warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/archives\\_online/exhibitions/newwoman/rational/](https://warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/archives_online/exhibitions/newwoman/rational/)



In addition, the influence of the “New Woman” can be seen here, a literary phenomenon of the 1890s, she represented a generation of women who had feminist aspirations for higher education, access to work and more physical freedoms. The related dress style of a two-piece suit, consisting of a long, tailored jacket and skirt, often worn with a collar, tie and boater, became popular among the increasing numbers of middle-class women entering the workforce, and signalled modernity and a challenge to the status quo.<sup>113</sup> While caution should be taken with simple readings of individual garments, Vera Jack’s fondness for a collar and tie, could perhaps denote an affiliation with educated, independent serious thinking women rather than self-conscious masculinity.

Wilson has provided a useful analysis of the variety of influences on women’s social position and dress of this period.<sup>114</sup> One of the key factors, she suggests, was the idea that physical exercise was desirable for women’s health. Vera Jack’s diaries show how active she was, during a three-day holiday in September 1903, for example, she recorded playing golf twice, tennis and billiards as well as numerous walks and bike rides. She cycled around London daily, either to visit friends, make calls to her theatrical agent or other errands. Tantalizingly, she wrote in her diary: “Roed [*sic*] to Pontings about a biking skirt.”<sup>115</sup> Although, there was much made in the press about women wearing bloomers and knickerbockers for cycling, most women wore some kind of socially acceptable adaptation of the ankle-length skirt, perhaps similar to Figure 16.<sup>116</sup> Unfortunately, whether Vera Jack invested in one is unrecorded.

In examining Vera Jack’s everyday dress, this chapter has shown that she dressed in a variety of ways, and it has challenged the mannish woman as lesbian narrative, which reinforces Doan’s assertion that this link in the early part of the century was dubious. It suggests instead that Vera Jack presented herself in dress styles related to social and political groupings, in addition to taking advantage of general fashion trends. In doing so, it offers a fresh perspective on dress styles for independent and political young women and argues for a new, more nuanced understanding of the diversity of women’s dress in the early years of the twentieth century. The following chapter further explores expression and constructions of gender through the Edwardian theatre practices and Vera Jack’s diaries and photographs.

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<sup>113</sup> Kortsch, Christine Bayles. *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women’s Fiction: Literacy, Textiles, and Activism*. Farnham, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2009. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/hud/detail.action?docID=476382>.

<sup>114</sup> Wilson, E, *The Artist and Masculine Dress in De La Haye and Pel, Gluck*.

<sup>115</sup> Holme, April 18, 1903, Diary. 7VJH/6/01. Ponting’s was a department store based in Kensington High Street, London which operated from 1863 to 1970.

<sup>116</sup> Wilson, Elizabeth, and Lou Taylor. *Through the Looking Glass: A History of Dress from 1860 to the Present Day*. New York : London: Parkwest ; BBC Books, 1991.

## Chapter 2: Vera Jack and Theatre Costume

*There was a young woman called Jack  
Who never was seedy or slack  
When she had to depart  
All her friends—from their heart—  
Would exclaim 'How we hope you come back!'<sup>117</sup>*



Figure 17: Vera Jack in bellboy costume c.1902. 7VJH/5/1/1

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<sup>117</sup> Unknown author, Limericks about Vera Holme c.1910. 7VJH/4/2/12.

Vera Jack's relationship to theatre costume, in particular through the male gendered roles she played, is considered in this chapter. It examines the theatrical conventions of cross gender dressing in Edwardian theatre and Vera Jack's place within it, using photographic and written evidence from her papers, alongside contemporaneous documents (postcards, reviews, newspaper reports). Vera Jack's archive provides not only the opportunity to shine a light on the types and significance of theatre acts that proliferated at the time, but through Vera Jack's ownership of the photographic process, also offers an insight into her gendered self-presentation.

In the early years of the twentieth century, theatres offered one of the primary sources of popular entertainment, providing a multiplicity of performances to all classes in society. Literary dramas grand opera, melodramas and music hall acts all competed for a share of audiences.<sup>118</sup> In Vera Jack's diary of 1903 and through her photographs, her work in the theatre as a singer and violinist is recorded. These sources give an insight into the world of musical comedies, light opera, and music hall acts.<sup>119</sup> Sadly, there are no surviving diaries between 1904 and 1914 but other records and documents in her papers show she was still working in theatre, for the D'Oyly Carte Company, as a chorus member during the repertory seasons of 1906–07 and 1908–09.<sup>120</sup>

D'Oyly Carte, based at the Savoy Theatre, London was most associated with Gilbert and Sullivan's light opera. They had gained popularity in the 1880s and continued to be immensely popular with audiences and reviewers alike throughout the twentieth century. W.S. (William Schwenk) Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, famously created topsy turvy worlds, satirizing and probing topical subjects, where structures of class or gender, could be turned upside down to comic effect.<sup>121</sup> Indeed, theatre in general, provided a setting where social conventions could be skewed, highlighted, or dispensed with. As Butler notes, there is a social agreement that what happens on stage is not 'real', therefore challenges to the gendered status quo can be accepted within the confines of the theatre.<sup>122</sup> Cross gendered dress for example, deemed unacceptable in society outside could be tolerated, laughed at, or even celebrated.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Booth, Michael R., and Joel H. Kaplan, eds. *The Edwardian Theatre: Essays on Performance and the Stage*. Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

<sup>119</sup> Holme, 1903, Diary. 7VJH/6/01.

<sup>120</sup> D'Oyly Carte Company to Holme, September 4, 1908, 7VJH/4/3/002. Stone, David. 'Who Was Who', 24 September 2013. <https://www.gsarchive.net/whowaswho/>.

<sup>121</sup> Williams, Carolyn. *Gilbert and Sullivan: Gender, Genre, Parody*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. Accessed May 21, 2021. Doi:10.7312/Will14804. *Iolanthe*, *Patience*, and *Princess Ida* all raise questions of female equality and explore the changing gender norms, poking fun at masculinity and femininity, however, conventional gender divisions are returned to the by the end of the performance.

<sup>122</sup> Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution'.

<sup>123</sup> Oram, *Her Husband Was a Woman!*; Davis, Jim. "'Slap On! Slap Ever!'".

The genres of musical comedy, pantomime and music halls were closely related with performers moving between them.<sup>124</sup> The following gives some further background to Vera Jack's experience of this world through a production of *The Dandy Doctor*, in which she performed from June 1903. A musical comedy, it was a light-hearted and unchallenging entertainment, involving familiar plot devices of mistaken identity, comic songs, dances, and musical skits, where all confusions are resolved, and the status quo is restored by the end of the show.<sup>125</sup> Vera Jack toured with the production for six months, travelling to different towns and cities each week throughout the United Kingdom. Marris (the actor manager and author) described it as "a musical something to laugh at" and admitted that "it is not a London success but has been touring the provinces and drawing crowded houses nightly."<sup>126</sup> The local papers reviewed it favourably claiming it was "exceedingly well staged" with "fine music" and commenting that "the plot, of course, is the lightest, but so full of humour one does not look for anything particularly deep."<sup>127</sup>

The music was a crucial aspect of these shows, the plot would be helped along by songs and dances or sometimes broken up with other amusing acts, showing off the talents of the cast. The pattern was not dissimilar to the traditional pantomime today with occasional non-sequitur scenes performed in front of the curtain to allow a scene change to take place. Some of the songs would have had strong connections to music hall, an example of which were the speciality songs.<sup>128</sup>

Vera Jack was asked to perform the speciality act shortly after joining the company.<sup>129</sup> She was paired in the duet, with James Danvers (who was cast as Henson). She recorded feeling very nervous about the piece at first, stating "it is a fearful tarter [*Tartar?*], feel as if I should never do it", however, the performances went well, and she regularly received cheers for an encore. In Belfast, the show was particularly popular with audiences, and she comments: "Splendid press notice in which I am mentioned".<sup>130</sup> She evidently loved the praise of the audience and was relieved she had conquered the challenges of the speciality number.

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<sup>124</sup> Bailey, Peter. "'Naughty but nice': musical comedy and the rhetoric of the girl, 1892-1914". In *The Edwardian Theatre*, Booth and Kaplan eds. 36-60

<sup>125</sup> Bailey, "Naughty but nice."

<sup>126</sup> 'Exeter Day by Day'. *Western Times*, 16 March 1903. British Library Newspapers.

<sup>127</sup> "'The Dandy Doctor' at Exeter'. *Western Times*, 17 March 1903. British Library Newspapers.

<sup>128</sup> Bailey, "'Naughty but Nice": Musical Comedy and the Rhetoric of the Girl. 1892-1914.'

<sup>129</sup> "'The Dandy Doctor' at Exeter'. *Paderewski up to date* was a duet and parodied a well-known piece of music and was part of the final act, *Carnival on the Pier*, in which the costumes represented the titles of modern plays.

<sup>130</sup> Holme, August 4, 1903, Diary. 7VJH/6/01.

It is unclear if Vera Jack played a named character, or what costume she wore to perform in this show. It is possible she was a member of the chorus, as in previous employments.<sup>131</sup> There is no evidence that she cross-dressed in this production. Indeed, she comments on her disappointment at losing a female gendered costume to a fellow cast member, lamenting that, “Mrs Marris is having dress which I was fitted for, am awfully sorry as it is about the prettiest of the lot”.<sup>132</sup>

However, while Vera Jack played female characters on stage, cross-dressing and male impersonation were clearly also part of her repertoire. Figure 17 shows an early photograph of Vera Jack, c.1902 costumed as a bell boy, depicted by the short jacket with a stand collar and brass buttons. The hook and loop centre front fastenings are just visible causing the tightly-packed row of buttons to waver. Judging by the fit, this costume was a stock item or hired, and originally cut for a young man. Her hair is arranged close to her head or is possibly a hair piece. She signs it “Photographer and Artiste???” , perhaps envisioning herself both artist and performer.

Vera Jack was a keen photographer, frequently taking and developing photographs of herself in costume, sometimes for promotional purposes and also it appears, just for fun. In taking her own photographs, Vera Jack shows she was in control of her own image and was able to present herself as she saw fit. Indeed, it is notable that most of the theatrical photographs that survive in the archive of Vera Jack, are of her dressed in male gendered costume.

Evidently, her search for work demanded constant attention and Vera Jack showed her practicality and grasp of modernity in using photography to promote herself. Her diary entries show that she visited her theatrical agent to enquire about suitable work opportunities, almost every day between engagements.<sup>133</sup> Even while employed on a contract, she continued to write to producers and ask for introductions from her current manager and wrote “went to the photographers and had photographs (business ones) in fancy costumes with a view to panto engagements” [her parenthesis].<sup>134</sup> As David Mayer observes, by 1900, photography was an essential promotional tool for theatre performers, used to gain work and advertise themselves to the public, noting that “it was common and accepted practice for British and American actors and actresses seeking engagements to send

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<sup>131</sup> Vera Jack records other engagements including pantomime and one-off concerts. She joined the company of *Aladdin and his Wonderful Lamp* at the Avenue Theatre, Sunderland in December 1902, where was part of, what the local papers referred to as, the “London chorus”, perhaps indicating that they brought some metropolitan kudos to the production.

<sup>132</sup> Holme, May 20, 1903, Diary. 7VJH/6/01.

<sup>133</sup> Holme, 1903, Diary. 7VJH/6/01.

<sup>134</sup> Holme, July 14, 1903. 7VJH/6/01. She mentions the studio a few days later: *Wiggins of Blackpool*.



Figure 18: Vera Jack and Isobel in costermonger costume, c.1903. 7VJH/5/1/24.

photographs to theatrical managers and agents.”<sup>135</sup> This advance in technology, he argues, combined with the development of the national railway network, facilitating more convenient travel, contributed to the rise of celebrity status for popular actors.

While on tour with *The Dandy Doctor*, she documents several occasions when she photographed herself and Nora (Nobbie), a fellow cast member and roommate. She notes, for example, “we went in town and bought things to take photos with. Took photos of Nobbie and then I dressed up in Nobbie's wig and she took a photo of Iris and self.” And on another day, “took character photographs all day.”<sup>136</sup> Figure 18 could be the result of an impromptu photography session such as these. The backdrop seems hastily arranged, perhaps in a backyard, the floor is rough, and a hairbrush has been left on the floor, in shot.

Later, in October 1903, Vera Jack, also records that she and Nora, dressed as principal characters from the show, Nora as Jane and she dressed as Henson, (her male counterpart in the speciality act and not normally a cross-dressing role).<sup>137</sup> She later wrote that she showed them to the manager of their company Mr Marris, who was “very pleased with them”. They were hopeful that they would be called upon to understudy these roles in London, as the usual actors might not be performing there.<sup>138</sup> Unfortunately, this was not to transpire, however, it is noteworthy that she saw herself playing a male role.

I would argue that this incident shows Vera Jack was considering, if not already playing cross-dressed roles and that this was not an unusual or shocking idea to colleagues. Women cross-dressing on stage has a long history, stretching back to the 1660s. These parts, known as ‘breeches roles’ were often comic and assisted the plot by providing a disguise for the heroine. It has been argued that it created an opportunity to eroticise female bodies, in particular revealing their legs, thus facilitating sexualised performance, largely to titillate male desires.<sup>139</sup> Tracy C. Davis, for instance, argues that in the nineteenth century, the costumes worn for these cross-dressed roles were fetishized and inextricably linked to tropes in pornography of the time.<sup>140</sup> Undeniably, actresses

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<sup>135</sup> Mayer, David. “‘Quote the Words to Prompt the Attitudes’”: The Victorian Performer, the Photographer, and the Photograph’. *Theatre Survey; Washington* 43, no. 2 (November 2002): 229.

<sup>136</sup> Holme, Diary, June 2, June 12, 1903. 7VJH/6/01.

<sup>137</sup> The Henson role had consistently been played by a male actor, as cast lists of this and previous iterations show. ‘The Dandy Doctor’. *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 27 March 1900. British Library Newspapers; “‘The Dandy Doctor’ at Exeter”.

<sup>138</sup> Holme, October 1903, Diary. VJH/6/01.

<sup>139</sup> Aston, Elaine. ‘Male Impersonation in the Music Hall: The Case of Vesta Tilley’. *New Theatre Quarterly* 4, no. 15 (August 1988): 247–57. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X00002797>.

<sup>140</sup> Davis, Tracy C. *Actresses As Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture*. London, United States: Routledge, 1991. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/hud/detail.action?docID=169519>.



were generally obliged to serve the interest of male desires given that the balance of power lay with male-operated theatres, but as Gillian Rodgers maintains, examples of cross-dressing acts in late Victorian and Edwardian theatre were far more complex and diverse than this argument suggests.<sup>141</sup>

As Bratton notes, a 'realistic' tradition of cross-dressing was also present alongside other eroticized iterations. Leading actresses for example, had taken on the Shakespearian role of *Hamlet* and it was commonplace for women to play boys or youthful men in legitimate theatre.<sup>142</sup> Indeed, by the late nineteenth century, elements of masculine dress were used in a plethora of ways ranging from hypersexualised burlesques, serio-comic singers of the music hall performing multiple quick changes, to more carefully observed 'boy' roles full of pathos. As Bratton explains:

At one extreme were Vesta Tilley and others who aimed at illusionist perfection of disguise, women like Flo Windsor, who in a newspaper interview in 1891, stressed her careful study of male body language, and proudly boasted of the day when she was sent around to the men's side of the stage by a confused stage manager. But they were surrounded by a world of cross-gender and parodic and confused or comical dressing and impersonating which is bewilderingly various in its signification; not only Miss Ethardo the lounge suited juggler, but Miss Billie Butt the dancing sailor, Miss St George Hussey the female Irishman, the three sisters Oliver impersonating in quick succession New Women in rational costume, Gaiety girls and coon dancers-this last would be in drag.....and many more serious doing a song as a coster boy or a policeman or some other stereotypical male, in full costume, in the course of their act.<sup>143</sup>

From Vera Jack's diaries we can see she was immersed in this topsy turvy world and familiar with the stock characters and songs. In one example, she records rehearsing and singing, *Lindy Loo*, part of a genre known as 'coon songs.'<sup>144</sup> These popular songs were often sung in blackface using racial stereotypes and mocking imitations of African-American people, and although influenced by the music of black American minstrels were written by white songwriters and performed for white audiences.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Rodger, Gillian M. *Just One of the Boys: Female-to-Male Cross-Dressing on the American Variety Stage*. Music in American Life. Urbana: Chicago: Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2018.

<sup>142</sup> Bratton, J. S. 'Irrational Dress'. In *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850-1914*, edited by Viv Gardner and Susan Rutherford, 77-91. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992. 83. Sarah Siddons played Hamlet as early as 1776.

<sup>143</sup> Bratton, 'Mirroring Men: The Actress in Drag'. 86

<sup>144</sup> Holme, 1903, Diary, VJH/6/01.

<sup>145</sup> Jasen, David A. *A Century of American Popular Music*. Routledge, 2013. *Lindy-Loo* possibly refers to a version of the song "By the watermelon vine, Lindy Lou" W&M by Thomas S. Allen. There are various songs with *Lindy Loo/Lou*



Furthermore, her photographs show she presented herself as a number of cross-dressed characters from early in her career, such as a bell boy, as we have seen. The following examines three more of Vera Jack's male gendered costumes: a 'coster' boy, an eighteenth-century courtier type, and the most familiar of these male impersonations; the swaggering man about town known as a 'masher' or 'swell'.

Figure 18 shows Vera Jack and Isobel, in what is described in the archive, as a naval uniform, however, I would argue the waistcoat and trousers decorated with oversized buttons, a neckerchief and peaked cap, represent a costermonger costume – costermongers were itinerant London street traders who sold fruit and vegetables from barrows. The high-waisted trousers, with a button fly front, are typical male attire of the period. The braces are just visible buttoned to the waist and the waistcoat is worn over a knitted jersey. The coster boy character became interchangeable with the idea of a stereotypical Cockney and was familiar to music hall audiences. Isobel is dressed in the equivalent female costume with an apron, denoting a working woman, and a battered feathered hat. Coster boys were usually played by men, Albert Chevalier, a music hall favourite, for instance, was particularly associated with the genre (Figure 19).<sup>146</sup> However, female performers such as Jenny Hill, star of music hall in the 1880s, regularly performed as a coster boy. Derek Scott could easily be describing Vera Jack and Isobel's photograph, as he notes:

Jenny Hill (1850–96) portrayed another Cockney would-be swell in 'Arry ...in the 1880s. The character itself remained male, however; the female counterpart of 'Arry and his pearly buttons was his 'donah' 'Arriet and her feathered bonnet. It was she, Shaw had in mind for Eliza Doolittle when he set about writing *Pygmalion* in 1913.<sup>147</sup>

It seems likely that Vera Jack and Isobel were performing popular Cockney themed songs in the music hall tradition. This represents one version of an array of male impersonator acts proliferating at the time.

A further incident reflecting Vera Jack's interest in cross-dressed roles came during a week in London where she saw a production of the musical comedy *My Lady Molly* not just once, but three times. She was impressed with the leading lady, Sybil Arundale, who played a breeches role, in the

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in the title or lyrics however this one appears match the dates. See also: Pickering, Michael. *White Skin, Black Masks: 'Nigger' Minstrelsy in Victorian London* in. *Music Hall: Performance and Style*. Bratton, J. S., ed.

<sup>146</sup> Scott, Derek B. 'The Music-Hall Cockney: Flesh and Blood, or Replicant?' *Music & Letters* 83, no. 2 (2002): 237–58.

<sup>147</sup> Scott, 'The Music-Hall Cockney: Flesh and Blood, or Replicant?', 249. 'Arry composed by E.V. Page



Figure 19: Albert Chevalier c.1890. National Portrait Gallery

theatrical tradition of disguise and mistaken identity. Figure 20 shows a publicity image of Arundale in this role. According to the *Daily Mail*:

To the procuring of this happy result a young actress Miss Sybil Arundale materially contributes. A more handsome and refined “boy” could not be desired. She is literally as pretty as a picture, playing and singing with a modesty and refinement worthy all praise”.<sup>148</sup>

Vera Jack comments in her diary several times that week of her desire to play a role like this in future. The show gained praise for its “clever and artistic” quality in contrast to the “vulgar” musical comedies of the day.<sup>149</sup> Vera Jack may well have aspired to it, as it represented a more artistically worthwhile or challenging role.

However, it is significant that this was a gender crossing role. Figure 21 shows Vera Jack in a strikingly similar eighteenth century male character costume. It is interesting to speculate whether Vera Jack was experimenting with possibilities of future roles, perhaps imagining herself as Lady Molly. In the image, which is hand-tinted, she wears an embroidered coat, which is pale blue with a mauve lining. The sleeves are also embroidered, and lace cuffs fall from the wrists. The waistcoat is similarly embroidered, and she wears a jabot at the neck and a purple sash tucked into the waistcoat. She holds a white and silver bicorn hat and a lace handkerchief. The slim fitting breeches have the sheen of satin and a mauve binding at the knee with two buttons. They possibly fasten with front falls.<sup>150</sup> The white face make-up, beauty spots and powdered wig are a commonly used signifier for eighteenth century style. The painted backdrop in this photograph suggests it was a studio portrait and could have been publicity for a Gilbert and Sullivan production or possibly a pantomime. Her diary of December 1903 records a further engagement in *Babes in the Wood*, a pantomime in Camberwell. She describes her costume: “I tried on my clothes they were very nice - in Act 1 I have - a grey squires coat, white britches and a beaver top hat and a white ruffle stock.”<sup>151</sup> This indicates that Vera Jack was cast in cross-dressed roles.

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<sup>148</sup> ‘My Lady Molly: Delightful Comedy-Opera at Terry’s Theatre’. *Daily Mail*, 16 March 1904. Accessed August 8, 2021. <http://www.stagebeauty.net/th-frames.html?http&&www.stagebeauty.net/arundale/arundale-s.html>

<sup>149</sup> ‘My Lady Molly: Delightful Comedy-Opera at Terry’s Theatre’.

<sup>150</sup> Front falls are a front fastening comprised of a buttoned flap concealing centre front buttons. They were retained in liveried and court wear until well into 20<sup>th</sup> century but falling from general usage in the early nineteenth century. see: Davis, R. I., and William-Alan Landes. *Men’s 17th & 18th Century Costume, Cut & Fashion: Patterns for Men’s Costumes*. Studio City, CA: Players Press, 2000.

<sup>151</sup> Holme, December 1903, Diary. VJH/6/01



Figure 20: Sybil Arundale and Decima Moore in 'My Lady Molly'.  
<https://gsarchive.net/british/ladymolly/cards.html> Accessed 20 February 2021





Figure 21: Vera Jack Holme in eighteenth century costume, c.1903-6. 7VJH/5/1/23.

Figure 22 shows Vera Jack posed with another female performer, costumed in full Edwardian morning dress consisting of a frock coat, waistcoat, trousers, high stiff collar and tie and both hold a top hat. The costume is comparable to the popular act and costumes worn by cross-dressing women when performing the “swell” or “masher” characters, which as Oram notes:

mimicked soldiers and poked fun at the ‘swell’, the man-about-town and his smug masculinity in songs such as ‘Burlington Bertie’. Adopting a masculine sexual swagger as the swell, and parodying masculinity and class power, they delighted audiences on many levels. The music hall was a place to be playful, a licensed space to break with convention and undermine authority by crossing the boundaries of gender and class.<sup>152</sup>

Vesta Tilley (1864–1952) is held up as the exemplar of this variant of male impersonator and was a spectacularly well-known international star. She was recognised for her professional attention to detail, in studying men and male mannerisms and characteristics to make her act successful.<sup>153</sup> It has been noted that her fame both inspired and overshadowed many others, such as Hetty King, Ella Shields and many hundreds of others whose names have not been recorded.<sup>154</sup>

It is evident that Vera Jack too, performed or at least promoted herself, as a male impersonator in this style. This type of act was cleverly fictionalised by Sarah Waters in the entertaining 1990s lesbian novel, *Tipping the Velvet*. Informed by her academic research of pornographic and same-sex fantasy literature at the turn of the twentieth century, and referencing late twentieth century lesbian culture, it once again linked the notion of cross-dressing women and expressions of lesbian sexuality.<sup>155</sup> It has been argued, as Laurence Senelick does, that the rise of the modern glamour drag artist grew out of an early homosexual subculture. He cites two male impersonators, Annie Hindle (c.1847–1904) and Ella Wesner (1841–1917), who lived openly in same-sex relationships. Hindle, did in fact marry her dresser, in 1868, by passing as a man.<sup>156</sup> However, there is scant evidence that women performing as male impersonators in general, were doing so to express lesbian sexuality or perform to like-minded audience members.<sup>157</sup> As has been discussed previously, equating

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<sup>152</sup> Oram, Alison. ‘Experiments in Gender: Women and Masculine Dress’. English Heritage. Accessed 21 May 2021. <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/histories/women-in-history/experiments-in-gender/>.

<sup>153</sup> Aston, ‘Male Impersonation in the Music Hall’.

<sup>154</sup> Rodger, *Just One of the Boys*.

<sup>155</sup> Waters, Sarah. *Tipping the Velvet*. London: Virago, 1999; Waters, Sarah. ‘Wolfskins and Togas: Lesbian and Gay Historical Fictions 1870 to the Present’. PhD thesis, Queen Mary University of London, 1995.

<sup>156</sup> Senelick, L: Glamour Drag and Male impersonation in *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-Dressing*. Ferris, Lesley, ed. London; New York: Routledge, 1993. 80-95

<sup>157</sup> Bratton, J. S. ‘Irrational Dress’.



Figure 22: Vera Jack with another performer in male impersonator costumes. 7VJH/5/1/03

masculine dress with same sex desire can prove to be an unreliable measure. Furthermore, this supposition fails to account for the widespread popularity of the innumerable female to male acts.

Bratton refutes the idea that individual performers were necessarily making radical or political statements. She argues, instead, that there were myriad reasons for undertaking cross-dressing, not least because it was popular with audiences.<sup>158</sup> Hetty King (1883–1972), interviewed in her eighties, spoke of her decision to try out performing as a male impersonator, in terms of it being a popular act which might give her the edge in obtaining work, a compelling reason in a competitive business (Figure 23).<sup>159</sup> It is certainly possible that Vera Jack saw it as a way to bolster her income, as an extension of her repertoire of speciality songs.

However, as an act of cultural production, the male impersonator, and other cross-dressed acts indicate how the boundaries and meaning of gender were being tested out and explored in the theatre. Of the fashions at the time, Cheryl Buckley and Hilary Fawcett suggest the “dominant female representation was so excessively gendered that it demanded an extreme counterpoint,” and this theatrical phenomenon provided a “a significant space for a radical negotiation of culturally defined gender roles.”<sup>160</sup>

Further, Bratton argues that there was “an increasingly sophisticated and very widespread consciousness of the politics of gender” and speculates that male impersonation acts at this time challenged the construction of gender itself.<sup>161</sup> She asserts:

If the actress has learnt to plane a plank, pick a pocket, tie a perfect cravat and sit astride a chair smoking a cigarette with an opera hat on the back of her head, and the audience loves and desires that construction of a male/female reality, then she has, indeed challenged something deeper: the gender division itself, and so the pre-existence of man.<sup>162</sup>

Vera Jack’s experience which remains unvoiced in her diaries are revealed in the photographs preserved from this time. We cannot know but it appears to suggest that the masculine style was significant to her.

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<sup>158</sup> Bratton, ‘Irrational Dress’.

<sup>159</sup> *Music Hall Star & Male Impersonator Hetty King in "Performer" (Documentary) Part 1*. Accessed 22 April 2020. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNx\\_n2uKiTk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNx_n2uKiTk).

<sup>160</sup> Buckley, Cheryl, and Hilary Fawcett. *Fashioning the Feminine: Representation and Women’s Fashion from the Fin de Siècle to the Present*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2002. 26

<sup>161</sup> Bratton, ‘Irrational Dress’. 85

<sup>162</sup> Bratton, ‘Mirroring Men: The Actress in Drag’. 248





Figure 23: Hetty King in a sailor costume. c.1906 Author's collection.

Perhaps, within this theatre framework and amid the limitations of economic necessity and demands of the industry, it provided Vera Jack with an opportunity to reinterpret Butler's "script."<sup>163</sup> Her adoption of a masculine nickname was significant to her, and she clearly prized the photographs of her masculine costumed identity. It is arguable that Vera Jack, was not exposing her feminine shape for male gratification but used the male impersonator act as a way to find alternative unfeminized expression.

This chapter has considered Vera Jack's experience as a performer in the theatre through her costumed appearance. The research shows she took advantage of a setting where the usual social rules governing acceptable gendered behaviour could be suspended. Her performances served a dual purpose, both pragmatic and whimsical, cross-dressing on stage provided both paid employment and a powerful opportunity for experiencing however briefly, alternative gender identities. Using the newly affordable technology of photography, she presents herself as pantomime principal boys, working class street wise lads and upper-class toffs and in doing so, she participated in pushing at the contemporary gender boundaries. In the next chapter, further changes to gender expectations for women are examined through Vera Jack's uniformed presentation, the suffrage movement and the First World War, and considers the significance of the uniform for public and personal identities.

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<sup>163</sup> Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution'.

### Chapter 3: Vera Jack and Uniform

*There was a young person called Jacko  
Whom the tabbies all wanted to smacko  
For she cut her hair short  
Had a passion for sport  
And absorbed quite a lot of tobacco!*<sup>164</sup>



Figure 24: Vera Jack in WVR uniform. c1915 7VJH5/3/05.

This chapter builds on the previous chapters to explore Vera Jack's uniformed presentation through her role as a chauffeur for the WSPU and her work on the Eastern Front during the First World War. It reflects on how Vera Jack's chauffeur uniform contributed to the dress practices of the WSPU and highlights the disturbance of gender roles caused by women adopting military uniform during the war. Through analysis of Vera Jack's photographs, her diaries, correspondence, and other archival material, it argues that the adoption of uniformed dress cannot be attributed to an outward sign of Vera Jack's sexual identity, rather it represents her desire to play an active role as a responsible citizen in the unfolding political and military dramas of early twentieth century.

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<sup>164</sup> Limericks about Vera Holme, 7VJH/4/2/12

The military has traditionally been a masculine institution and histories of warfare have been told primarily by and about men and the male experience. Recent publications of the First World War, for example, have analysed specific battles, such as Passchendaele, or the wider political and economic conditions and causes of war from a largely Western European male perspective.<sup>165</sup> Literature about uniformed dress is no exception as it has generally been associated with men, the military and warfare. While there is considerable interest in the detail of military uniforms and paraphernalia, memorialising the events associated with them, little is written about women in uniform. For example, the excellent series of illustrated books, tellingly entitled *Men-at-Arms*, details uniforms and equipment from antiquity to the present day. It includes 39 volumes dedicated to First World War alone, however, except for a few pages of nurses and Women's Royal Air Force uniforms, none address women's uniformed presence.<sup>166</sup>

Jennifer Craik has described the role of uniforms and standardised occupational clothing as opposite to that of fashionable dress, unsurprisingly then, uniforms are often excluded from fashion and dress histories.<sup>167</sup> However she is a notable exception, along with Claudia Kidwell and Valerie Steele, and Elizabeth Ewing, in acknowledging this form of women's dress as a significant social and cultural phenomenon.<sup>168</sup> There is scope for more research into women's uniform, occupational dress and their sartorial experience in war. This case study offers an insight into the material details of the uniforms worn by Vera Jack and adds to analyses of early twentieth century women's organisations use of uniform.

Uniforms played an increasingly important role in British society from the mid-nineteenth century. Decades of foreign conflicts building and maintaining Britain's imperial interests abroad, such as Crimean War (1853–1856) and Boer War (1899–1902), had resulted in a positive attitude to militarism and nationalism. This view, Ewing suggests, meant there was a “passion for uniform in the second half of the nineteenth century” which led she argues, to an association between masculine military style uniforms and the symbolic values of strength, discipline, and

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<sup>165</sup> See for example: Lloyd, Nick. *Passchendaele - a New History*, UK: Penguin Books Ltd, 2017; Lynch, E. P. F, and L. Will Davies. *Somme Mud: The War Experiences of an Infantryman in France 1916-1919*. London: Bantam, 2008; Sheffield, Gary. *A Short History of the First World War*. ONEWorld Publications, 2014; Olusoga, David. *The World's War: Forgotten Soldiers of Empire*. Paperback edition. London: Head of Zeus Ltd, 2019.

<sup>166</sup> Chappell, Mike. *The British Army in World War I. 1: The Western Front 1914 - 16*. Men-at-Arms Series 391. Oxford: Osprey, 2003; Cormack, Andrew, and Peter Cormack. *British Air Forces 1914 - 18. 2: Uniforms of the RAF*. Men-at-Arms Series 351. Oxford: Osprey, 2001. A section on WRAF.

<sup>167</sup> Craik, Jennifer. *Uniforms Exposed: From Conformity to Transgression*. English ed. Dress, Body, Culture. Oxford; New York: Berg, 2005.

<sup>168</sup> Craik, Jennifer. 'The Cultural Politics of the Uniform'. *Fashion Theory* 7, no. 2 (June 2003): 127–47. <https://doi.org/10.2752/136270403778052140>; Ewing, Elizabeth. *Women in Uniform through the Centuries*. Reprinted. London: Batsford, 1987; Kidwell, Claudia Brush, and Valerie Steele, eds. *Men and Women: Dressing the Part*. Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989

trustworthiness.<sup>169</sup> Furthermore, Margaret Vining and Barton Hacker assert that there was a strong association with the use of uniforms and good citizenship which was evident in organisations such as the Red Cross formed in 1864.<sup>170</sup> As they argue, “pervasive nationalism and a growing martial climate characterised many such organisations. The equation of military service with citizenship may have stimulated, at least in part, the rage for uniforms that swept Europe, one of the markers of militarising society.”<sup>171</sup>

In addition, the use of uniform could also denote belonging and rank within the organisation and authority of those wearing them. Craik notes, “Uniforms convey mutual recognition and identification, status and skills, and an internalised response to uniforms of authority.”<sup>172</sup> Thus, there were powerful reasons why many civilian organisations and commercial enterprises adopted tailored uniforms with recognisable military features, such as insignia denoting status, caps or helmets and leather accessories.<sup>173</sup> The railway companies were one of the earliest organisations to introduce distinctive uniforms, meaning that their officials were recognisable, and lent them authority to organise and move large numbers of travellers to set timetables.<sup>174</sup> Uniforms also began to be associated with types of occupations and carried visual messages about the skills or traits of the role. Fire fighters for example, became easily identifiable with their distinctive helmets and military style tunics.<sup>175</sup>

Wilson has noted that, by the end of the century, the use of uniforms had come to materially represent standardisation within the industrialised society. Uniforms categorised people into social rank and gender, stratifying the roles and tasks that men and women carried out.<sup>176</sup> As the prevalence grew, uniformed staff were seen in the public and private sphere. Occupations from omnibus conductors to housemaids were arrayed in distinguishing livery, including with relevance to Vera Jack’s experience, the chauffeur.<sup>177</sup> In this way, the liveried or uniformed staff symbolised the values and outward projection of the organisation or household they represented.

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<sup>169</sup>Ewing, *Women in Uniform through the Centuries*.

<sup>170</sup> *British Red Cross* was formed later, in 1908.

<sup>171</sup> Vining, Margaret, and Barton C. Hacker. ‘From Camp Follower to Lady in Uniform: Women, Social Class and Military Institutions before 1920’. *Contemporary European History* 10, no. 3 (November 2001): 353–73. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777301003022>. 357

<sup>172</sup> Craik, *Uniforms Exposed*. 38

<sup>173</sup> Ewing, *Women in Uniform through the Centuries*.

<sup>174</sup> Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*.

<sup>175</sup> Craik, *Uniforms Exposed*.

<sup>176</sup> Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*.

<sup>177</sup> Ewing, *Women in Uniform through the Centuries*.

Women increasingly wore uniforms as part of organisations and to denote occupational roles from the mid-nineteenth century. Craik divides women's uniforms into two groups: *feminised*, a version denoting domestic, caring and nurturing, such as nurses or maids, featuring plain dresses with white caps and aprons, and *quasi-masculine*, derived from military tailored uniform and associated with discipline, confidence and operating in the public sphere.<sup>178</sup>

Indeed, the trend for uniformed organisations formed on militaristic lines increasingly catered for women and girls. For example, the Girl Guides was formed in 1909 as an adjunct to Baden Powell's scout movement. It promoted the moral values of discipline and health, through drilling, marching and physical activity, which was represented by the unifying concept of the uniform. The earliest uniformed women's group associated with the armed forces was formed in 1907. FANY (First Aid Nursing Yeomanry) was established to provide mounted medical support to the wounded on the battlefield. They gained notoriety for their scarlet tunics based on masculine military styles, complete with frogging and peaked caps, but they continued to wear ankle length skirts. This mixed gender uniform would become the template for most voluntary women's corps.<sup>179</sup>

In recent years, scholars have begun to address the experiences of women in combat zones and on the home front including with a consideration of dress.<sup>180</sup> Once more the speculative connection between masculine dress and lesbian sexuality is evident in the literature. Just as Kisby has ventured to suggest that Vera Jack was dressing in a "masculine style" as an expression of "visible lesbian identity", Hamer in *History of Twentieth Century Lesbians* boldly claims: "the most obvious way of dressing like a lesbian was dressing mannishly. Before the mid-1920s the only way a middleclass woman stood any chance of wearing clothes that were not feminine, let alone trousers, was by wearing a uniform. ... Given this, it is not surprising that lesbians had more sartorial reasons for preferring to help the war effort via uniformed work than by knitting."<sup>181</sup>

The assumptions which underlie this statement are problematic; as already noted, it is doubtful that 'lesbian' was a concept with consensus of meaning or that women identified themselves as such, or indeed that there was a way of dressing which would render them visible to others.<sup>182</sup> Also, the masculinised upper garments of women's uniforms were still worn generally with ankle length

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<sup>178</sup> Craik, 'Uniforms Exposed'

<sup>179</sup> Ewing, *Women in Uniform through the Centuries*.

<sup>180</sup> Adie, Kate. *Corsets to Camouflage: Women and War*. London: Hodder & Stoughton: Published in Association with the Imperial War Museum, 2003; Noakes, Lucy. *Women in the British Army: War and the Gentle Sex, 1907-1948*. Women's and Gender History. New York, NY: Routledge, 2006; Wheelwright, *Sisters in Arms*; Hamer, *Britannia's Glory*; Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain*.

<sup>181</sup> Hamer, *Britannia's Glory*. 46.

<sup>182</sup> Doan, 'Passing Fashions'. Doan, *Disturbing Practices*.

skirts rather than trousers. But, as seen with Vera Jack's tailored ensemble of 1914 (Figure 15), there were already alternatives to highly feminised clothing.

In addition, Hamer's assertion supposes that these women had a monopoly on challenging restrictive expectations of femininity and disregards the many non 'lesbian' women who joined organisations and wore uniform, for example, Flora Sandes and Ishobel Ross. Sandes volunteered as a nurse with the Red Cross in Serbia and wishing to further aid the Serbian cause, took up arms and joined the Serbian army, later marrying a Serbian man. Ross served with the Scottish Women's Hospitals in Serbia as a cook. Her diary shows that she corresponded with her future husband throughout the war.<sup>183</sup>

Other writers have also treated the idea that 'lesbians' were drawn towards the masculine nature of uniforms as though it was a secure collectively understood link. Gould's exploration of public hostility towards women's military activities, for example, shows that there was vociferous concern expressed about traditional roles and moral welfare of women. However, the evidence she offers demonstrates it was the proximity to *men* and fear of (hetero)sexual promiscuity which was explicitly warned against.<sup>184</sup> Nonetheless, drawing on the idea that sexologists had linked same-sex desire and masculinity, Gould goes on to imply that there was "another less tangible dimension to the hostility toward militarism in women. During the First World War people drew links, either consciously or unconsciously, between displays of militarism and masculine women, feminism, and lesbianism."<sup>185</sup> I would argue that this analysis overstates the connection between masculine presentation and lesbianism. As Doan has shown, it is unclear how widely the work of the sexologists was read or understood, therefore, it is difficult to assume that women in masculine uniform were suspected of lesbian activity.<sup>186</sup>

Further, Doan noted that contemporary journalists and observers struggled to assimilate the new appearance and actions of the women ambulance drivers they encountered working on the Western Front. One journalist described them with a mixture of admiration and discomfort, commenting that their masculine appearance was both "charming and appalling", however as Doan notes, any inference that it was somehow unnatural or perverse is absent from the record.<sup>187</sup> She argues instead

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<sup>183</sup> Ross, Ishobel. *Little Grey Partridge: First World War Diary of Ishobel Ross Who Served with the Scottish Women's Hospitals Unit in Serbia*. Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988; Wheelwright, *Sisters in Arms*.

<sup>184</sup> Gould, Jenny. 'Women's Military Services in First World War Britain'. In *Behind the Lines*, edited by Margaret Randolph Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel, and Margaret Collins Weitz, 114–25. Gender and the Two World Wars. Yale University Press, 1987. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1cc2m97.12>.

<sup>185</sup> Gould, 'Women's Military Services in First World War Britain'. 121

<sup>186</sup> Doan, *Disturbing Practices*.

<sup>187</sup> Doan, *Disturbing Practices* 124

that there was a “cultural topsy-turveydom in the early twentieth century” and an “utter confusion over gender.”<sup>188</sup> It seems Butler’s constant process of gender deconstruction and rebuilding is clearly illustrated by the shifting gender boundaries brought about by the First World War.<sup>189</sup>

Vera Jack’s association with uniformed dress beyond the theatre, came initially through her political affiliation with the WSPU, which had formed to campaign for women’s suffrage in 1903. In 1909, Vera Jack was employed as a chauffeur to drive the WSPU leaders, Emmeline Pankhurst and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence to their speaking engagements and campaign tours. There are no surviving diaries between 1903 and 1914 in Vera Jack’s archive, however, other sources show she had become interested in suffrage politics while still performing at the Savoy Theatre as part of the D’Oyly Carte company, as this extract from Raeburn’s account shows:

Undercover of flippancy, Vera Holme took the suffrage question very seriously: They used to tease me about being a Suffragette, Rutland Barrington used to sing:

The policeman’s lot is not a -Happy one.

And he always used to stand in front of me and sing it. Workman -he was the second in command- also used to tease me. He would say ‘How much will you give me if I say, “Votes for Women” and I used to say ‘I’ll give you a week’s salary’. ‘Ho! Ho! Can’t be done for that!’ We used to have this private conversation up at the top of the stage.<sup>190</sup>

WSPU meeting minutes from July 1908, also show Vera Jack was chair of a committee promoting the sales of the newspaper, *Votes for Women*. As Naomi Paxton notes, it was Vera Jack’s initiative to sell the publication on the street, making it a much more visible activity than it had been previously.<sup>191</sup> Vera Jack became involved in more militant actions, including stone throwing, window breaking and disrupting political meetings.<sup>192</sup> She was arrested on 22 November 1911 and sentenced to five days in prison. According to Paxton she:

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<sup>188</sup> Doan, *Disturbing Practices*. 133

<sup>189</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

<sup>190</sup> Raeburn, A. *Militant Suffragettes*. 101. Rutland Barrington was a veteran stage performer. He had made his name in Gilbert and Sullivan operas in the 1880s and returned to the D’Oyly Carte company for one season in 1908. A *Policeman’s Lot* is from the comic opera *The Pirates of Penzance*.

<sup>191</sup> Paxton, *Stage Rights!*

<sup>192</sup> Raeburn, *Militant Suffragettes*.



was charged with breaking through a police cordon and trying to take hold of the mounted men's horses to pull them around. Holme said that, 'as the Government would not accept them as citizens no one could blame them for acting as outlaws'.<sup>193</sup>

As scholars have noted, suffrage campaign organisers were acutely aware of how visual imagery and spectacle could enhance the cause.<sup>194</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, uniforms did not form part of the WSPU, despite, it being run in a quasi-military manner, according to Angela K. Smith.<sup>195</sup> However as Wendy Parkins argues, the use of fashionable feminine dress was a primary strategy for public representation, to create and normalise the concept of a conventional woman as a political and public entity, which she dubs the "dissident female subject."<sup>196</sup> Wahl observes, "perhaps nowhere was the subversive potential of fashionable dress better expressed than in the highly organized and orchestrated marches of the suffrage movement," as the WSPU encouraged hundreds of women to take to the streets dressed alike in their colours of purple, green and white.<sup>197</sup>

While conventionality served the purposes of the movement in some ways, Parkins acknowledges there were other less common dress practices at play. There are examples of women who disguised as boys to evade the authorities or dressed in men's clothes to gain entry to official buildings. This idea invites further consideration in relation of Vera Jack's chauffeur dress. Parkins cites Vera Jack amongst those who adopted a military-style dress, and notes: "these women enacted dissident citizenship and represented an alternative embodiment of the suffragette subject that co-existed with the fashionable suffragette."<sup>198</sup> And in doing so Vera Jack "represented the freedom from both conventional feminine appearance and behaviour [that was] potentially available to suffragettes".<sup>199</sup> Vera Jack once again took the opportunity to dress according to her tastes exploiting the social changes available to her.

Vera Jack's archive holds several photographs of herself as the WSPU chauffeur which appear to be for publicity. Postcards and photographs of well-known activists were produced for sale and were

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<sup>193</sup> Paxton, *Stage Rights!* 125

<sup>194</sup> Tickner, Lisa. *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907-14*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1989; Parkins, Wendy, ed. *Fashioning the Body Politic: Dress, Gender, Citizenship*. Bloomsbury Publishing (UK), 2002. <https://doi.org/10.2752/9781847888723>. Wahl, 'Silencing Fashion in Early Twentieth Century Feminism'. E-version

<sup>195</sup> Smith, Angela K. *British Women of the Eastern Front: War, Writing and Experience in Serbia and Russia, 1914-20*. Manchester, United Kingdom: Manchester University Press, 2016. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/hud/detail.action?docID=4773376>.

<sup>196</sup> Parkins, *Fashioning the Body Politic*. E-version.

<sup>197</sup> Wahl, 'Silencing Fashion in Early Twentieth Century Feminism'. E-version

<sup>198</sup> Parkins, *Fashioning the Body Politic*. E-version

<sup>199</sup> Parkins, *Fashioning the Body Politic*. E-version

perhaps, the suffrage equivalent of theatre celebrities. She is sometimes posed in the driving seat of the car, with passengers hold placards publicising the organisation and sometimes standing as the main subject. Figure 25 shows one such postcard showing a three-quarter length portrait of Vera Jack dressed in her chauffeur uniform. She wears a double-breasted dark overcoat, in the style of a military great coat, with collar and rever. The coat has large, flapped pockets and the collar and cuffs are in a contrasting material, possibly leather. At the neck, a stock tie with pin. Her cap bears a badge of the WSPU. Her long hair is held back in a low chignon. And on the rever another insignia of the RAC as cited in Parkins in *Votes for Women*: “a striking uniform in the colours with a smart peaked cap decorated with her Royal Automobile Club badge for efficiency.”<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Parkins, *Fashioning the Body Politic*. E-version.



Figure 25: Vera Jack Holme dressed in WSPU Chauffeur uniform. 7VJH/5/2/01



Figure 26: Vera Jack and two others in the WSPU car, c.1910. 7VJH/5/2/03



Figure 27: Vera Jack in the WSPU car with Emmeline Pankhurst, Edith Craig and two others  
Inscription reads: Vera L Holme Leaving London for Scotch Tour, August 13<sup>th</sup> 1909. 7VJH/5/2/04

Further photographs (Figure 26 and Figure 27) show her posed at the driving wheel. It is difficult to determine what she is wearing beneath the long coat besides lace up boots. However, in Figure 26 she is seated and the skirt beneath is just visible at the knee where her coat has opened. As discussed with early uniformed organisations such as FANY, a masculinised tunic or coat was commonly worn with a conventional skirt, although it is possible, she wore breeches as she appears to have worn with a long coat of her riding habit (Figure 28).

Vera Jack's presentation in a masculine style of clothing, in addition to her taking up activities which were culturally associated with men, caused some confusion about Vera Jack's gender. She recalled being invited to dine with Christabel Pankhurst at the home of Lady Sybil Smith before chauffeuring them to their meeting. As this extract shows she seemed to enjoy the confusion:

I had gone past the fanlight in the front door when Lady Sybil's chauffeur came up and thinking I was a chauffeur too, he caught me by the arm: 'Like to bring the bugger round to the yard, mate?' 'No – er!' I said, I think not.' Just at that moment Lady Sybil came out in her white dress and said: 'Come in Miss Holme, and have some dinner,' Her chauffeur nearly went dotty. I must say the chauffeurs were always awfully nice to me and the maids used to get into the most frightful state of joy thinking a man was coming when they saw me.<sup>201</sup>

The unusual situation of being the chauffeur (of lower social standing than her passengers), and a colleague (equal to them) also muddied the legibility of her class status. The chauffeur's surprise could be accounted for by the assumption that anyone in that role would be a man. His greater upset however, appeared to be that she was crossing the class boundary, literally in this case, by stepping through the front door.

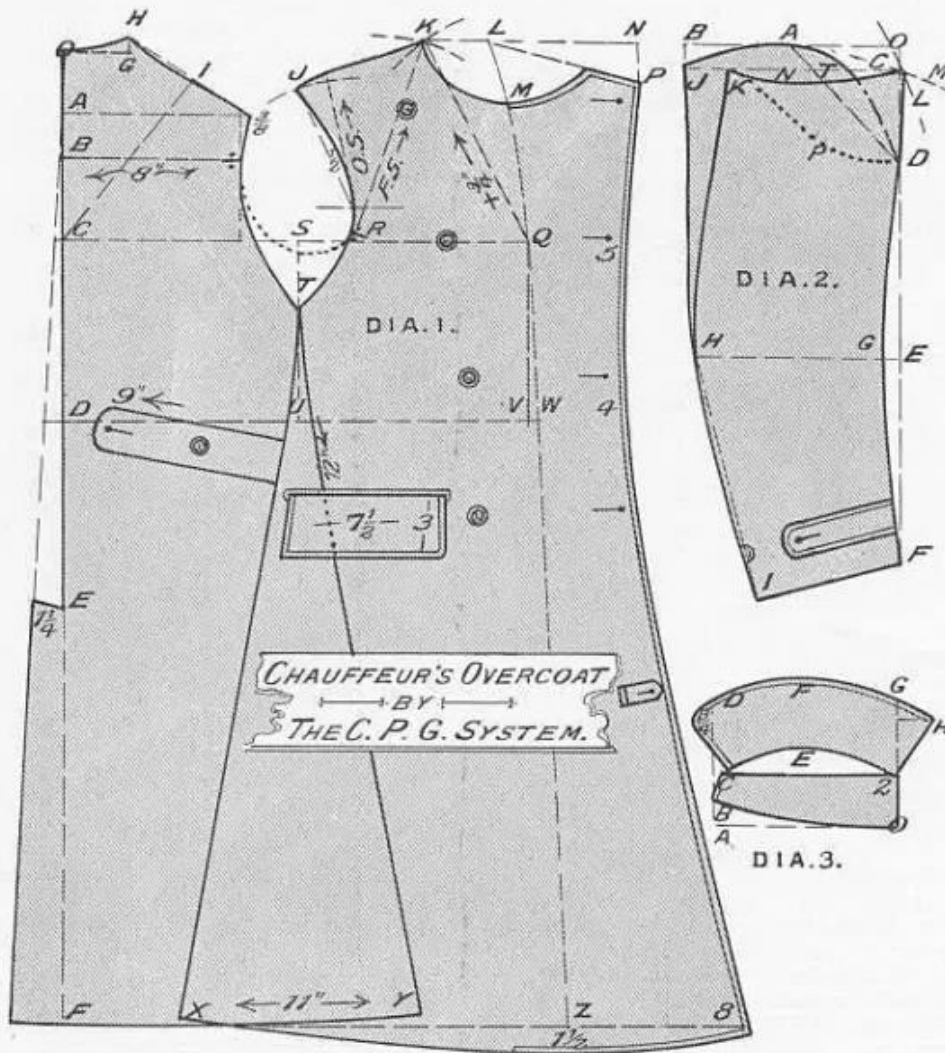
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<sup>201</sup> Raeburn, *Militant Suffragettes*. 110





Figure 28: Vera Jack riding astride, in riding habit. c1900. 7VJH/5/1/52



CHAUFFEUR'S OVERCOAT.

PLATE 7.

Figure 29: Chauffeur's overcoat draft diagram. W.D. Vincent, The Cutter's Practical Guide. 1911. LCF Tailoring Archive



Figure 30: Chauffeur's suit. W.D. Vincent, *The Cutter's Practical Guide*. 1911. LCF Tailoring Archive

Male servants had previously taken the role of coachman and as motor cars became more popular, chauffeuring was also undertaken by men. Men's chauffeur attire had developed along with the increasing use of motor cars. Wilson notes the chauffeur effectively became the motorised version of the coachman and their clothing style followed the pattern.<sup>202</sup> However, as can be seen in the description found in Vincent's pattern cutting guide for tailors, of 1911, a distinguishing livery is recommended, comprised of a hip length double-breasted tunic, breeches, and long overcoat (Figure 29 and Figure 30).<sup>203</sup>

Chauffeur's suit: The rapid increase in popularity of the motor car has either displaced or changed coachman into a chauffeur; and as this servant requires a different style of livery to his predecessors, we give an example of the suit that is now almost universally adopted

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<sup>202</sup> Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*.

<sup>203</sup> Vincent, W.D. "*The Cutter's Practical Guide to the Cutting and Making of All Kinds of British Military Uniforms*," 1911, The John Williamson Company Limited, © London College of Fashion Tailoring Archive, London, England.



Chauffeur's overcoat: Made in heavy tweed, Melton, leather etc and lined heavily. D.B. (double breasted) with plastron front, slit back with belt, full skirt with flaps across hips. ...The sleeve is cut on the pivot principle at the undersleeve in order to obtain entire freedom for our movements.<sup>204</sup>

While the adoption of breeches is comparable with the development from horses to machine, the feature of the plastron suggests that the male chauffeur already had a distinctive uniform identifying this occupation as distinct from the coachman.

The overall effect of Vera Jack's chauffeured dress is reminiscent of a masculine liveried employee, in particular the peaked cap with the insignia. However, a close inspection of the images shows that while it reflected the conventional male livery, it did not entirely mimic it. The heavy overcoat is double breasted and can fasten up to the neck as shown in Figure 26, but it does not have the characteristic plastron of the Vincent's cutter's guide.<sup>205</sup> The coat seems based on a military overcoat and it is unclear what she wears beneath the coat but the necklines in the photographs do not suggest she wore a jacket, like the chauffeur's suit. The stock tie at the neck is often worn with riding habit attire rather than military uniform (Figure 28). It is interesting to note that Vera Jack's partner, Evelina, endorsed a similar coat made by the bespoke and military tailoring firm, Samuel Brothers. In an advert from *Votes for Women*, dated July 1911 (Figure 31), she praises the weatherproof properties of the 'Omne Tempus raincoat for town, country and campaigning'.<sup>206</sup>

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204 Vincent, *The Cutter's Practical Guide* 55

205 A plastron is a form of double-breasted closure. The overlap is shaped to fit around the neck and fastened near the shoulder and is usually worn fastened. The buttons from (originally a breastplate or protective layer in fencing).

206 *Votes For Women*, October 27, 1911. Accessed 9 June 2021.

<https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:zep895gaq/read/single#page/3/mode/1up>.

July 7, 1911.

*A well-known Suffragist Leader,*

**THE HON. MRS. HAVERFIELD,**

*writes as follows about her*

**'Omne Tempus' Raincoat**



*"I shall have much pleasure in recommending your raincoats. They are not only perfectly rainproof, but the cut and make, being perfectly smart, enable them to be worn in all kinds of weather."*

**The Ideal Coat  
FOR  
Town, Country,  
OR  
'Campaigning,'**

*because, although devoid of rubber, every one bears*

**THIS UNQUALIFIED  
GUARANTEE:—**

*"If your 'Omne Tempus' fails to keep out the rain, we will take it back."*

**SLIP-ONS,**

*from*

**52/6.**

**ULSTERS,**

*from*

**63/-.**

*Ready for Wear or made to Order.*

**PATTERNS FREE.**  
*Coats on approval.*

**Samuel Brothers**  
LIMITED

65 & 67, LUDGATE HILL, LONDON.

Figure 31: Advertisement in Votes for Women, July 7, 1911. Omne Tempus Raincoat. Samuel Brothers <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:cov226huw>. Accessed January 20, 2021.

In addition, a small advertisement in *The Vote* dated June 20, 1913, promoted a tailor named Yanover Mauduel, based in Ebury St London, who used Vera Jack and Evelina to endorse their products.

HABIT MAKER, LADIES' TAILOR, COSTUMIER, and FURRIER. Highest workmanship. Fit guaranteed. Recommended by Hon. Mrs Evelina Haverfield, Miss Vera Holmes [*sic*], and other members.<sup>207</sup>

Vera Jack was one of very few women professional drivers at this time, therefore it is reasonable to assume that the uniform was built up perhaps according to what Vera Jack owned or could obtain. In addition to her experience of sourcing costume items, she clearly had an association with a tailor or possibly used Evelina's contact with Samuel Brothers. The overcoat varies, in one of the photographs, it appears to close the conventional men's way (left over right), and in another she wears a white or pale coat, perhaps in line with the campaign's encouragement to wear white to symbolise purity. These variations indicate it was, to some extent an improvised costume which evolved over time.

*Votes for Women* published articles challenging the gender restrictions of the period by reporting for example, on the opportunities for women in various professions, such as solicitors, aviators and chauffeurs, and the attendant prejudices against them.<sup>208</sup> Given this initiative and Parkins' assertion that the visual strategy of the WSPU was thoroughly planned to create maximum impact, it can be presumed the organisation was making a conscious political statement by employing a woman to drive for them.<sup>209</sup> It is interesting, therefore, to speculate on why Vera Jack or the WSPU chose to dress 'the chauffeur' in a quasi-masculine uniform. Kisby attributes the choice of dress to Vera Jack as part of her "developing lesbian identity", however, it is not clear whether it was a policy decision or personal to Vera Jack.<sup>210</sup> Indeed, it seems unlikely to have been left to Vera Jack alone as there is considerable visual impact of the leaders of this organisation being chauffeur driven, and as the postcards show it provided a valuable publicity opportunity.

In choosing to be driven to their appointments by a liveried driver, it could be argued the WSPU leaders were using the established social class structure and Craik's "internalised response to

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<sup>207</sup> *The Vote*, June 30, 1913. Accessed June 9, 2021. <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:qos682qiz/read/single#page/8/mode/1up>.

<sup>208</sup> *Votes for Women*, April 13, 1914.

<sup>209</sup> Parkins, *Fashioning the Body Politic*. E-version

<sup>210</sup> Kisby, 'Vera "Jack" Holme

uniforms” to bolster the authority and legitimacy of the campaign.<sup>211</sup> Just as the liveried servants of an upper-class establishment or large house reflected the status of the occupants, so Vera Jack’s role of the chauffeur helped to create their stage picture. Erving Goffman’s analogy of the stage is perhaps apposite here. He suggests clothing, such as uniform, forms part of the performance of self, as we enact different roles depending on the social setting. Vera Jack’s uniformed identity as chauffeur could be considered then, as a theatrical representation, complete with costume.<sup>212</sup> Vera Jack’s physical aptitude and competence at driving and mechanical know-how were of course genuine, however, the incident at Lady Sybil’s shows how the organisation were consciously creating a visual image which, once they were ‘backstage’, that is, in the private setting of Lady Sybil’s home, could be dropped, and she was free to dine with them as an a guest. Whether the costume was a collaborative design, or Vera Jack’s invention, she was a willing and able player in the drama.

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<sup>211</sup> Craik, *Uniforms Exposed*. 38

<sup>212</sup> See: Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Repr. London: Penguin Books, 2007.



Figure 32: Vera Jack in Women's Volunteer Reserve Officer's uniform, 1916. 7VJH/5/3/01.

At the outbreak of the First World War quasi-military women's voluntary corps burgeoned and as Vining and Hacker have noted, most of these organisations had a uniform of varying degrees of formality.<sup>213</sup> Whether it was taking up roles in industry, on the land or in transport, thousands of women signed up to volunteer in the war effort, and a uniform showed "an outward and visible sign of their purpose."<sup>214</sup> Many suffragettes agreed to stop campaigning for the vote, to support the national war effort and as Paxton asserts, it was no coincidence that the earliest organisations promoting women's potential to contribute were initiated by prominent suffragettes. They had the experience of organising and mobilising groups of women, and politically, believed women were capable of physical, practical, and intellectual activities beyond traditional domestic tasks.<sup>215</sup>

Vera Jack was closely associated with two such organisations; the Women's Volunteer Reserve (WVR), founded by Evelina, and the Scottish Women's Hospitals (SWH) established by Dr Elsie Inglis. Inglis was a medical pioneer from Edinburgh, who also had close links with Scottish suffrage groups.<sup>216</sup> Both these groups were set up with military structures and were no exception to the adoption of ranked uniforms.

Vera Jack joined the WVR 1<sup>st</sup> London Battalion and completed her training gaining the rank of Major in October 1914. The range of training provided included signalling, driving, nursing and more controversially, shooting at rifle ranges. Evelina sent a weekly report to the War Office detailing numbers of women available to the state for these tasks. However, there was considerable resistance in the British government to the idea of women's auxiliary units, and despite this lobbying, the WVR was to remain a civilian volunteer service, funded by donations. In fact, it was not until 1917, when devastating numbers of casualties had caused severe manpower shortages, that the government was finally forced to consider employing women. The Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC) then formed the first state sanctioned women's unit of the armed forces.<sup>217</sup>

Figure 32 shows Vera Jack wearing the WVR khaki uniform. The requirements were stipulated in the organisation's rules, and a design drawing was provided (Figure 33):

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<sup>213</sup> Vining and Hacker, 'From Camp Follower to Lady in Uniform'.

<sup>214</sup> Ewing, *Women in Uniform through the Centuries*.

<sup>215</sup> Paxton, *Stage Rights!*

<sup>216</sup> Adie, *Corsets to Camouflage*.

<sup>217</sup> Adie, *Corsets to Camouflage*

# ● Women's Volunteer Reserve

## OFFICERS' UNIFORM.



Skirt 100 inches round the hem, and 10 inches from the ground, Rank Badges to be worn above the left breast pocket, Buttons of Brown Leather.

VOI  
2/34

Figure 33 Women's Volunteer Reserve Officer's Uniform. 1915. Imperial War Museum. VOI2/32



Officers: Gaberdine Norfolk coat and skirt, khaki colour, flannel shirt with tie, leather belt, brown shoes, spat puttees, felt hat and doeskin gloves. Price about £5

Privates: Norfolk coat and skirt of same colour, brown shoes, spat puttees, felt hat. Price £2 12s 6d.<sup>218</sup>

Vera Jack largely conforms to the description: her tunic (Norfolk coat) is long, to mid-thigh with four bellows pockets, although she wears a cravat rather than the suggested shirt and tie. The skirt appears to have a front opening, not discernible in the drawing but is perhaps a concealed button opening, allowing a flexibility to be worn open over breeches for riding astride. The puttees are visible beneath her skirt ascending from the lace up boots.<sup>219</sup> As Ewing notes, this design served as a prototype for many later women's army corps, including the WAAC and its sister unit the Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF).<sup>220</sup>

It seems possible that Evelina's association with Samuel Brothers continued after her endorsement of the *Omne Tempus* raincoat, as Elizabeth Crawford has speculated that they were commissioned to make the uniforms for the WVR.<sup>221</sup> Indeed, according to Ewing, Samuel Brothers were engaged to supply the SWH uniforms, as Inglis was less than impressed with the quality of their work, complaining that, "the uniforms were shoddy and badly made by a London firm called Samuels."<sup>222</sup>

In June 1915, Vera Jack signed up to the Scottish Women's Hospital.<sup>223</sup> Like Evelina, Inglis, had been repelled by the War Office after offering her medical unit. However, the French Government accepted her offer and over the course of the war, the Scottish Women's Hospitals provided medical support units in France, Belgium, Russia, and Serbia, all staffed by women.<sup>224</sup> Vera Jack's unit was initially sent to Kragujevac in Serbia, one of four field hospitals which included an operating theatre and typhus treatment area.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Rules for the WVR, 1915, leaflet, Archives and Collections, Library of Birmingham. LF75.7-530975

<sup>219</sup> Puttees consisted of a strip of fabric wound around the lower leg to provide protection.

<sup>220</sup> Ewing, *Women in Uniform through the Centuries*.

<sup>221</sup> Crawford, Elizabeth. 'Suffrage Stories: Mrs Evelina Haverfield And The Campaigning Raincoat'. *Woman and Her Sphere* (blog), 21 January 2013. <https://womanandhersphere.com/2013/01/21/suffrage-stories-mrs-evelina-haverfield-and-the-campaigning-raincoat/>.

<sup>222</sup> Ewing, *Women in Uniform through the Centuries*.87

<sup>223</sup> Kisby, 'Vera "Jack" Holme'.

<sup>224</sup> Adie, *Corsets to Camouflage*.

<sup>225</sup> Adie, *Corsets to Camouflage*.



Figure 34: Dr Elsie Inglis by Lady Balfour, wearing Scottish Women's Hospital uniform. Wellcome Collection.

The SWH uniform, as worn by Inglis in Figure 34, followed similar lines to the WVR. The tunic and ankle length skirt were imbued with Scottish signification, flashes of tartan on the epaulettes and collar, and the square buttons echoed traditional highland dress.<sup>226</sup> The fabric chosen was ‘Hodden grey’, a coarse Scottish woollen associated with the London Scottish Rifles regiment, leading to the nickname ‘Little Grey Partridges.’<sup>227</sup> Inglis believed that the uniform was a key factor, in marking them out as a recognisable and united front and facilitating a positive reputation in Serbia.<sup>228</sup>



Figure 35: Vera Jack (front left), Dr Inglis (standing centre left) and other members of SWH after their release from internment, 1916. Zurich. Imperial War Museum BRCS 24.6/25.

From Vera Jack’s archive photographs, it appears that she, Evelina, and others in the transport unit continued to wear the khaki WVR uniforms or other uniform-like dress, rather than the Hodden grey. Figure 35 shows a diversity of uniformed dress within the SWH, the differences may denote rank or status, however there is significant variation of fabrics and design. Indeed, because there were a range of independently funded groups travelling to Europe to aid the Allied troops, there was a multiplicity of uniformed and non-uniformed groups. As Smith and Smith have observed, the

<sup>226</sup> Chappell, Mike. *Scottish Units in the World Wars*. Edited by Lee Johnson. 1. publ. Osprey Military Elite Series 56. London: Osprey, 1994.

<sup>227</sup> Ross, *Little Grey Partridge*.

<sup>228</sup> Smith and Smith, *British Women of the Eastern Front*.

uniform not only “represented a significant patriotic gesture denoting citizenship” but it also had a defining effect on the women, bonding them as a unit and enabling them to shed their culturally prescribed feminine identity and present themselves as participants of war.<sup>229</sup>

Figure 36 shows Vera Jack and another woman, cigarettes in hand, similarly dressed, with Evelina in the centre. Vera Jack and her companion’s ensemble has strong Scottish significance most noticeable from the calf-length tartan kilt. However, the jacket cut with pronounced curved fronts and other details such as, the silver square buttons and prominent cuffs with stylised braided buttonholes, denote elements of highland dress and as with the SWH uniforms, echo military dress uniforms of Scottish regiments.<sup>230</sup> The photograph was taken after the war c.1919–20, at the orphanage established by Evelina. It is unclear whether the staff of the orphanage continued to wear the uniforms of the SWH or WVR and this constituted part of it, or whether it was for a special occasion, nonetheless they continued to wear elements of military inflected uniforms. As Vera Jack wears her medal ribbons, it is clear the notion of military service is significant to her.

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<sup>229</sup> Smith and Smith, *British Women of the Eastern Front*.

<sup>230</sup> Chappell, Mike. *Scottish Units in the World Wars*. Edited by Lee Johnson. 1. publ. Osprey Military Elite Series 56. London: Osprey, 1994.





Figure 36: Vera Jack (*right*), Evelina (*centre*), and one other colleague. Serbia, Orphanage c1919. 7VJH5/6/1

In contrast Figure 37 shows Vera Jack, Evelina and three other women in a relaxed moment, all wear breeches, a shirt, and tie and apart from Evelina, a pale overall coat belted at the waist. They also wear long socks and flat sandals or shoes. Vera Jack, grinning, her exuberance never far from the surface, wears a wide brimmed straw hat and a narrow belt rather than the wide leather belts worn by the other women. The overalls and breeches worn by the group are comparable to the Women's Land Army uniform established in 1917, which included a loose-fitting coat with a self-fabric belt, worn with a necktie, over breeches and gaiters.<sup>231</sup> This suggests that there were some shared influences across organisations.

Noticeably, all the women have cropped hair, as Vera Jack recounted in a letter to Alick Embleton, "I have my hair cut short and it is awfully wavy and curly and I look like an impresario - Eve says - and she loves it."<sup>232</sup> Kisby again interprets this action as a step towards expression of her lesbian identity and while her comment may have represented a frisson for Evelina, it was not exclusive to Vera Jack, indeed many women cut their hair short. Doan discusses the attention given to these displays of gender alteration by British newspapers. She cites two women working as nurses and ambulance drivers on the Western Front, Mairi Chisholm and Elsie Knocker, known as 'The Two'. They were described in terms of their dedication and patriotism and their short hair was regarded as the "ultimate sacrifice, constituting a rite of passage to a kind of female manhood." Doan asserts this act was seen both by papers and the two women as transformative, freeing them from femininity and changing them into soldiers. Their close relationship likewise was framed in terms of comradeship rather than romantic.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Toplis, Alison. 'The Smock Frock: The Journey from Fieldwork to the Pages of Vogue'. *Textile History* 49, no. 1 (2 January 2018): 71–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00404969.2018.1436245>.

<sup>232</sup> Holme to Alick Embleton and Celia Wray, 12 Sept 1915, 7VJH/2/5/06

<sup>233</sup> Doan, *Disturbing Practices*. 146



Figure 37: Vera Jack (far left), Evelina (far right), and three others. c.1915, Serbia. 7VJH/5/6/1

This chapter has examined Vera Jack's uniformed identity during the turbulence of suffrage militancy and war. It has considered the importance of uniform in British society and questioned the assumption that lesbian identity was expressed through masculinised uniform. The research suggests that in addition to the use of feminine dress, the WSPU used the role and occupational uniform of the chauffeur, to strengthen their influence and challenge gender expectations. Analysis of Vera Jack images of the Eastern Front evidence the diversity of dress and point to a lively dialogue about what the uniforms should consist of. In addition, it adds weight to the assertion that the use of military style uniforms was instrumental in creating the female participant of war.



## Conclusion

The photographs and papers of Vera Jack, provide a unique insight into aspects of life in the early twentieth century. The changing position of women allowed Vera Jack to take advantage of greater freedom of movement, to work outside the domestic setting, travel and engage in sporting activity. These wider social changes, her political affiliations and social networks all had an influence on Vera Jack's style of dress. Her dress in some ways represented the past, present and future. Her photographs show traces of earlier changes in attitudes to dress such as the reform movement, and the 'New Woman'. At times they reflected the contemporaneous social anxieties through the gender play of cross-dressed costumes and in some cases, they predicted the changes which would become commonplace in decades ahead.

This thesis contends that masculine dress as an indicator of lesbian representation in the early years of the twentieth century is an insecure measure, whether through everyday dress, theatre costume or uniform. The origins of a modern lesbian identity are much debated and as Oram notes, would have been for many a "puzzling notion" at this time.<sup>234</sup> We know Vera Jack had intense relationships with other women and records some romantic and potentially sexual moments but beyond that, we do not know what she thought about it. It seems unlikely that she defined herself by her sexual preferences. Perhaps instead, she would describe herself through her active service, political affiliations, or her musical ability, or even her general bonhomie and good friendship.

Vera Jack also left very few clues to her feelings about dress. It is difficult to attribute any conscious presentation of her identity through dress. The reasons for and influences on dress choice, it has been shown, are untidy and mutable with numerous possible readings of individual items and whole outfits. Homosocial settings were clearly important to Vera Jack, and it is significant that aside from theatre costumes, if she was pictured with other women, she often wore the same or similar style. Vera Jack wore both masculinised and feminised clothing, sometimes her more masculine outfits were unusual, such as the chauffeur's livery but they were more or less socially acceptable within the setting where she wore them. This contradicts the assumptions some scholars have made in retrospect about her self-presentation of this period.

As discussed, while women may have been criticised for appearing too masculine, the mannish woman was not connected with same sex desires, in the minds of the public until well into the twentieth century, when it would become a cause of censure for some and a reclaimed symbol of

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<sup>234</sup> Oram and Turnbull, *The Lesbian History Sourcebook*.

pride for others.<sup>235</sup> The appeal of reclaiming figures from the past to provide role models and a sense of heritage has strong traction. As Doan has noted while this ancestral genealogical approach may be undertaken with valid political intent, to promote the positive role models for modern marginalised communities, it could serve to narrow further readings of the historical record.<sup>236</sup> This enquiry has sought to look beyond current notions of lesbian dress codes to interrogate what is to be found from the visual and textual evidence.

By studying Vera Jack's photographs of her theatre costumes and researching their context, this enquiry has been able to place Vera Jack in the world of music hall and musical comedy, revealing her pictured in a number of popular cross-dressed roles of the period. Drawing on the approach outlined by Davidson, my implicit knowledge of making and embodied understanding of clothing as a costume maker has informed the analysis and interpretation of the images and in doing so, contributes new detail to the archival descriptions.<sup>237</sup> Scrutiny of Vera Jack's diary entries provides further detail of the shows, songs, and possible acts she performed. The diaries also offer hints of the process of acquiring costumes, some were provided through the production company, however, Vera Jack also shopped for costume items and accessories for her own independent performances. There is more research and analysis that can be undertaken and what is presented here opens up further lines of enquiry into costume production, her experience as an actor at the time or indeed her connections to other notable performers of the period.

Vera Jack's use of the camera and the photographs she kept, show her to be playful and self-aware, dressing up with friends on afternoons off, and perhaps trying out alternative identities. By the end of the nineteenth century, there was a lively debate about the role of women in society, gender conventions and boundaries. The male impersonator can be seen as a reflection of this discourse with some performers going to great lengths to take on the dress, gesture, and demeanour of masculinity, breaking down and reconfiguring gender constructions by playing with these notions. Vera Jack was able to exploit this environment, taking the opportunity to experiment with masculine dress.

Two settings where Vera Jack wore uniform for a sustained period of time have been considered in this thesis. Both were influenced by a growth in popularity for occupations and organisations to use uniforms signalling attributes of authority, trustworthiness, and a corporate identity. Vera Jack cut a striking figure dressed as a uniformed chauffeur and acknowledging the importance of a strategic

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<sup>235</sup> Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*.

<sup>236</sup> Doan, *Disturbing Practices*.

<sup>237</sup> Davidson, *The Embodied Turn*.

visual presentation to the WSPU, I argue that Vera Jack's image complemented the wider dress practices undertaken by the suffragettes. Not only did it provide a positive female role model in a traditionally male position, but the organisation was also enhanced by the cultural capital of having a liveried driver which lent further authority to its leaders. As such, it is suggested that Vera Jack performed a theatricalised costumed role within the suffrage campaign.

The unprecedented circumstances of the First World War facilitated significant stretching of gender boundaries to meet societal, industrial, and military needs. Accordingly, the conventions of gendered behaviour and dress shifted in parallel. The numerous women's voluntary organisations that appeared in Britain, at the outbreak of war used masculine style military uniforms to signal their discipline and serious intent to participate as committed citizens in the face of stiff resistance from the state. While nothing they had experienced previously could prepare them for the exhilarating and at times horrendous events ahead of them, the uniforms provided a bonding element for the women's voluntary organisations and to some extent served to neutralise the usual limitations of gender.

The research has exposed the variety of uniforms and military inflected dress of two specific organisations. It is difficult to ascertain how these organisations made policy on uniforms or whether the leaders of different women's organisations shared strategies of dress. However, a range of influences were visible in Vera Jack's uniformed appearance, which suggests there was some evolution and debate about uniformed presentation. Additional analysis of the archive in this area has been frustrated by the restrictions on access and travel due to the recent COVID pandemic but it would provide an interesting direction for further research.

Vera Jack Holme has been a fascinating subject to research. The case study has revealed a woman (and by association her network of friends and colleagues), who did not fit into the stereotypical gender roles at the time but navigated a path and used the changing social events and politics to 'do' gender in a different way. In examining the archival evidence, this research has challenged familiar fashion narratives, which overlook personal dress histories such as Vera Jack's, as she did not partake in high fashion and overly feminised conventions. Consequently, it provides a fresh perspective on the diversity of women's dress that was present in the first two decades of the twentieth century and adds further nuance to debates about emerging sexual identities. Close inspection of the visual and textual evidence of Vera Jack's archive offers a response to Entwistle's call for more research based on actual dress practices, and in doing so adds texture to the sartorial experience of women involved in warfare, suffrage, the theatre and in everyday dress. By viewing

the archive and Vera Jack's experiences from the perspective of dress, it raises many more questions and opens up further areas for research about women's experiences and lives lived.



Figure 38: Vera Jack and friend swimming in a river. 7VJH/5/1/11

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