

HULL FOLK WHO MADE THEIR MARK**EMILY CLAPHAM, DRESSMAKER**

Image courtesy of Hull City Council

Imagine that you are a very fashionable lady of the late Victorian or Edwardian era and your daughter is to be presented at Court during the 'coming out' season. Or perhaps that same

daughter is getting married and you want the bridal party to be immaculately dressed. Who do you turn to for stylish, high quality dresses?

In Hull and the East Riding, but increasingly across a much wider area, the person to turn to was Emily Clapham. Born in 1857, Emily McVitie undertook a dressmaking apprenticeship at the Marshall and Snelgrove store in Scarborough (yes, there was a branch there but it closed in 1973) and subsequently married a man called Haigh Clapham. In 1887 the Claphams bought No 1 Kingston Square in Hull – premises now occupied by Kingston Theatre Hotel – where they opened a high class dressmaking salon. Right from the start she set out to attract rich and fashionable clients from the East Riding and further afield – her customers included women from the Wilson family of shipowners, the Duchess of Norfolk and even a crowned head in Europe – Queen Maud of Norway. This is perhaps not quite what it seems - Maud was the daughter of Edward Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) and frequently returned to England to visit. On these occasions Madame Clapham – as she now called herself - would travel to Sandringham to meet the Queen and present her with more dresses. Maud was very possibly the only customer she would wait on personally – otherwise you went to her. Her customers though would generally not have known how much they were spending – the practice was to send the bill to the husband without the lady getting involved. In 1901 she added the title 'Court Dressmaker' to the salon's labels in recognition of her increasing prestige.

She employed around 150 women at the turn of the century and was a hard taskmaster. You lost money for being a minute late, and the rooms were freezing in winter. At the time she was entitled to demand staff stay late without extra pay, and is reputed to have hidden younger ones – who by law were not expected to do this overtime – in cupboards when the Factory Inspector called.

Business boomed and in time the Claphams expanded into No 2 and then No 3 Kingston Square. But the market was changing – more women were demanding simpler, more practical styles – and Madame Clapham did not really change with it. The first world war and subsequent depression further eroded the business but Emily carried until she died in 1952 at the age of 96. Thereafter the business was run by her niece – also called Emily – finally closing in 1967.

Her dresses can still be seen in the Hands on History museum in Trinity Square.

Don Knibb 27 June 2024