

The Queen's Kirtle

by Lionel Cust, *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, Vol. 33, No. 189 (Dec., 1918), pp. 196+200-201.

EMBROIDERY is an art which from time to time has been specially connected with England. From the earliest days women, often of the highest rank, have found in such work an occupation and distraction which for many generations was so needful in view of their restricted lives. In the 16th century, when the Reformation came and put an end to the copious demand of the Church, costume became the chief object for the embroiderer's art. Throughout the long series of portraits belonging to the Tudor period the amount of embroidery used on the clothing of the nobility and gentry is most remarkable. Queens, princesses, and in fact most ladies of consequence, plied the needle to good purpose, and embroideries were not only useful for actual dress, but were also applied to furniture and domestic decoration. In the fashionable world of that day embroidery figured as a commonplace material, altered or discarded as fashion demanded, and indeed Elizabeth was in herself such a monument of capricious fashion, that a study of her innumerable costumes involves to some extent a study of embroidery. Specially noteworthy are the embroidered dresses in the portraits of Queen Elizabeth, probably all painted by Marcus Gheeraerts', such as the small full-length portrait at Welbeck Abbey, the great full-length portrait at Hardwick Hall, the so-called "Rainbow" portrait at Hatfield, and the beautiful portrait at Cobham Hall. What became of all these wonderful dresses? Many were found in her wardrobes after her death, and Queen Anne of Denmark was fain, willingly or unwillingly, to go on wearing Elizabeth's dresses, so long as they lasted. In all probability a certain part of Elizabeth's discarded costumes became the perquisites of her own ladies-in-waiting, and were adapted by them for their own purposes. Chief among these was Mistress Blanch Parry, the queen's most trusted friend and servant, who had attended Elizabeth from her childhood until her own death.

Blanch Parry was born at Newcourt, a house still existing in the parish of Bacton, in Herefordshire and died on February 12, 1589 (90) in her 82nd year. She never forgot her birthplace, and a contemporary monument to her memory, one of special interest, still remains in Bacton Church. This is, however, not the only memorial of Mistress Parry, for the church still possesses a precious piece of embroidery presented to it by her. This piece of embroidery is clearly a strip from a skirt or kirtle, though at some period, through misguided piety, the piece has been cut up into fragments and sewn together to drape the altar. It was quite consonant with the practice of pious persons to devote embroidery and other rich stuffs to make frontals for altars, but to cover the altar more extensively with embroidery points to an age when the adornment of the altar had become an aesthetic amusement, devoid of any special significance.

This piece of embroidery represents sprays of flowers, some very realistic and not at all conventional, and scattered about are animals, monsters, insects, snakes and other figures, introduced without any apparent plan or scheme. They resemble the floral and other decorations in the margins of illuminated books of devotion, and possibly may have been derived directly therefrom. The use of emblems and symbols was, however, very prevalent, although most of this symbolism was of extremely obscure significance and ephemeral interest. The ground is white silk woven with silver, and the patterns are worked in bright colours, with closely packed knots which begin to appear in English embroidery about this time, and were probably derived from Chinese sources. This combination of flowers and animals is especially remarkable in the great portrait of Queen Elizabeth at Hardwick Hall, and it is quite reasonable to suggest that the embroidery given by Mistress Parry to Bacton Church is a piece of an actual kirtle worn by Queen Elizabeth, though it can hardly be as early in date even as the Hardwick portrait. Local tradition attributes the embroidery to Mistress Parry herself, but although she must, like all other ladies, have been expert

with her needle, it is quite as likely that she obtained it as a perquisite due to Her Majesty's principal gentlewoman. She was moreover quite blind at the time of her death. In any circumstances this embroidery remains as a precious relic of the great reign of Elizabeth.