

## **Sir John Turner Dryden's Waistcoats**

We are absolutely delighted to have three of Sir John Turner Dryden's waistcoats now on display in the Tapestry Room.

Sir John Turner Dryden (1752-97), was the younger son of a prosperous London merchant, and as such he inherited a substantial but not enormous amount of money, his older brother having inherited the bulk of the family fortune. In his youth Sir John made the Grand Tour of Europe and, despite having limited financial means, gained a reputation as a spendthrift, who 'shone in convivial circles'. Sir John developed a taste for the finer things in life, especially fine dress, and according to one contemporary, he 'became one of the most fashionable young men about town; in short, he dissipated a large sum of money'.

At Canons Ashby we have very little to show for his extravagant lifestyle, other than his collection of very fine 18<sup>th</sup> Century gentleman's costume, all made with the finest of fabrics and most exquisite workmanship. The waistcoats in the collection demonstrate the varying cuts and shapes that became fashionable at this time, and are made from silk, linens and velvets, many of which are highly embellished. They would have been extremely expensive to purchase, the finest in our collection being estimated at costing £75, equivalent to a professional man's annual salary in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Sadly the waistcoats have been in permanent storage for many years, as due to their vulnerable nature and conservation needs, we have not had the means to be able to display them safely to visitors.

Textiles form one of the most sensitive parts of our collection. They are particularly vulnerable to light damage, which can fade and bleach fabrics, and at its worst can cause fabrics such as silks to break down irreversibly. Fluctuations in relative humidity can cause warping and embrittlement of textiles, and of course, textiles can be very easily damaged accidentally when on display. All these factors have meant that Sir John's costume collection has been too vulnerable to display safely to our visitors.

Through a very kind donation from Rugby National Trust Association we have been able to commission custom-made mounts for three of Sir John's waistcoats. These mounts have been carefully tailored to fit each waistcoat, so that their fabric and embellishments are properly supported for display.



**A waistcoat arriving back from the conservation studio on its new mount**

The waistcoats have been installed into the linen press in the Tapestry Room, which has also been given a makeover to ensure that the waistcoats are displayed in the best possible environment. Special UV filtering Perspex has been fitted to the front of the linen press, meaning that all harmful light is filtered out before it is able to reach the waistcoats and potentially cause damage. The Perspex also creates a microclimate within the linen press, which shelters the textiles from harmful changes in relative humidity. LED lights have been installed within the linen press to softly light the waistcoats. These lights are very dim (well below the threshold of 50 lux, above which fading can occur to fabrics), and also emit no harmful UV, therefore they are completely safe for display, and highlight the beautiful decorations and embellishments on the waistcoats.



**Our textile conservator installing the waistcoats on their new mounts within the linen press**

We are very fortunate that Sir John's costume collection is in astonishingly good condition, with their rich colours and fabrics showing little damage from wear or exposure to light. The latter is in part due to his grandson, Sir Henry Dryden, who recognised their worth even in the Victorian era. Sir Henry catalogued the costumes and preserved them for future generations to enjoy, despite the fact that their purchase contributed towards nearly bankrupting the Canons Ashby estate!

**We are incredibly grateful to Rugby National Trust Association for their generous support in funding the waistcoat mounts, without which we would not be able to have the waistcoats on display today.**