



# Peter Farrer

Tax inspector who loved taffeta skirts and became an authority on the history of cross-dressing

Peter Farrer enjoyed a long career as a senior tax inspector, but when, towards the end of his life, he featured in the "Liverpool Homotopia" season, it had nothing to do with fiscal matters. The season's highlight was the exhibition *Transformation: One Man's Cross-Dressing Wardrobe* at the Walker Art Gallery in the city, which showed a

small part of his collection of dresses, many of them made from taffeta. It was the culmination for Farrer of 75 years of wearing women's clothes.

"I longed to experience for myself the sensation of wearing a dress of rustling taffeta," he wrote. "Dressing in a taffeta frock did not make me want to be a girl, but it certainly made me understand

how much pleasure girls and women get from their party frocks and intensified my interest in fashion and in the history of costume."

Farrer would cross-dress mostly at home, when his wife was out — she was happy for him to pursue his inclinations, but felt uncomfortable about being around when he was doing it. After-hours visitors to the tax office might have been startled to come across Farrer in his full regalia.

Was he deliberately playing a dangerous game? Pauline Rushton, a senior curator at National Museums Liverpool, who staged the *Transformation* exhibition, knew Farrer for many years. "I asked him if deep down he wanted to be caught — was the danger

the thrill?" she recalled. "He said, no, he'd have been horrified for anyone to know that he was doing it. It wasn't a cry for help. Peter wasn't transitioning, and he wasn't doing it because he wanted to perform. His main reason was simply that he had a sexual fetish for taffeta, the tactile nature of it, and the noise it makes, rustling as it moves."

Farrer first became interested in women's clothes when he was 14 and tried on a ballgown belonging to his mother, Lilian. He had been born in Surrey in 1926, along with a twin sister, Sarah. His father, William, was a teacher and vicar, and the family moved several times. During the Second World War his father had a parish on the Isle of Man, and the twins attended King William's College, where Peter was head of the cadet force and captain of rugby.

He did his National Service in Trieste — "records show that he spent most of his time pursuing Italian women," his son, Jonathan, said — then studied philosophy, politics and economics at St John's College, Oxford. After graduation he went into the civil service, where he remained for the rest of his career as a tax inspector. It was a career

strange library in his study. In my two ties I had a fairly good idea of what I was up to, and when he remarried in 1982 he showed us his collections of dresses, but wouldn't admit to dressing up — although the size-12 gold sling backs were a clue."

Farrer's life was blighted in the 1970s by the decline and death of Joan from early onset Alzheimer's disease. He coped in part by turning to his love of women's clothing from the mid-19th and early 20th centuries, when the fashion for taffeta was at its height. He bought by mail order or in department stores, where he felt no pressure to explain that the clothes were for him.

He would visit Liverpool Museum in his lunch breaks to study Victorian dresses and corsetry, and joined the Costume Society and the Northern Society of Costume and Textiles. Through the Costume Society he met Anne Brogden, a lecturer in art and fashion — "a brilliant woman, far too good for him," according to Jonathan.

They married in 1982 and bought a house in south Liverpool, which they filled with their dress collections, textiles, books and magazines, fashion plates, illustrations and photographs.

When Farrer retired his serious collecting began. As well as his rapidly expanding collection of dresses and underwear, Farrer acquired complete runs of magazines such as *Vogue*, *Queen*, *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, other 19th and 20th-century publications and more than 8,000 books. He began producing his own books — 13 in all — drawing on his magazine collections, and he set up Karn Publications, which he ran from home (Karn had been his mother's maiden name).

There were such titles as *Confidential Correspondence on Cross-Dressing, 1911-1915*, *Cross-Dressing Between the Wars: Selections from London Life, 1923-1933* and *Men in Petticoats: a Selection of Letters from Victorian Newspapers*. He worked with the Kinsey Institute, which carries out research into sexuality, and when he died they paid tribute to his scholarship.

When Anne died in 2014 Farrer, who was approaching 90, began to think about what would happen to his collections. Rushton arranged to take many of his clothes, and with his books and magazines they will go to make up a permanent exhibition devoted to the culture of cross-dressing. In his final years, he and Jonathan were finally able



Peter Farrer in a taffeta skirt late in life and, above, during National Service before becoming a tax inspector

that, although pursued zealously, Jonathan said, "was really only a way of funding his interests."

He began dance lessons, and his teacher was Joan Winster, the daughter of a Preston ice-cream maker. In 1952 they were married by Farrer's father, and they had their only child, Jonathan. In the early 1960s the family lived in London, Barnsley and Kenya, when Farrer was seconded to the newly independent government to help to set up its inland revenue system. They eventually settled in Formby, near Liverpool, where Farrer was a senior tax inspector, dealing with large businesses such as the Littlewoods pools company.

Jonathan — who went on to set up a firm selling furniture — recalled his father's passion for collecting. "At my primary school in Barnsley my class was asked to collect and press as many local wildflowers as possible and a prize was offered. After two weekends, and miles of walking, he helped me to amass 135 species." Not surprisingly, Jonathan won — the runner-up had collected 15.

Farrer managed to keep his cross-dressing hidden from Jonathan, although his son did recall: "As a teenager I became aware of his slightly

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to discuss his predilection. "I began to appreciate the guilt and the pressure that he must have suffered carrying his secret," said Jonathan.

The *Transformation* exhibition ran at the Walker until February 2017, then transferred to Sudley House in Aigburth, where it will run until next year. At the Walker show, Post-it notes were left on the wall. "So happy to see I'm not the only tranny in the world," one read, while another said: "We need more people like him, because there's not enough fun these days."

Peter Farrer, tax inspector, fashion historian and collector, was born on May 20, 1926. He died on February 10, 2017, aged 90