



*Miss Faithfull's dress exhibit in the Australian Journeys gallery
Photo courtesy of David Jones Archives.*

FROM FINE WOOL TO HIGH FASHION:

the story of Miss Faithfull's dress

In January last year the National Museum of Australia opened its new permanent gallery, *Australian Journeys*. The gallery explores the passages of migrants, traders and travellers to, from, and across Australia, and traces how people and objects connect Australia with other places in the world.

Among the 42 exhibits – more than 750 objects – visitors can engage with a display containing a wonderful example of 19th-century costume. Dating from about 1885, a beautifully tailored bodice of petite proportions and a voluminous bustled skirt in an eye-catching shade of pink creates a striking silhouette. With the dress as the centrepiece, the exhibit also features photographs, hand-coloured postcards and wool samples exploring the interconnected relationship between the Australian wool and British textile industries of the 19th century. The display also introduces Miss Faithfull, a young woman who, despite being born and raised on a sheep station in rural New South Wales, embraced the marvellous impracticalities of the latest fashion from Britain and Europe.

Miss Faithfull's dress was manufactured from wool characteristic of the fine Australian merino wool that, by the 1870s, had become the country's most important product and export. By the 1880s, when the dress was made, most of Australia's finest wool was shipped to London and sold to manufacturers throughout Britain and Europe. In the county of Yorkshire in England mills were thriving, producing great quantities of fine woollen textile. In Bradford, Leeds and Halifax bales of Australian merino wool were scoured, carded and combed, spun, dyed, woven into cloth, and in the case of our wool dress, sold back to an Australian market in want of fine textiles and clothing.

While we are uncertain whether the dress arrived in Australia as a bolt of pink woollen cloth or as a ready-made garment, we know Miss Faithfull purchased her dress from David Jones, as the company's label is attached to the inside of the bodice.

David Jones played a significant role in providing Australian colonial society with access to the latest international fashions. While Miss Faithfull's dress and many fine wool garments were the products of the successful

symbiotic relationship between Australia and Britain, it was David Jones & Company – a global business – that brought fashionable clothing into the lives of 19th-century Australians.

Welsh-born, London-trained merchant David Jones arrived in Australia in 1838. He opened a store on the corner of Barrack and George Streets in Sydney and immediately began importing a range of goods from Britain, introducing Australians to the European idea of the department store. The furnishings, costume, millinery, glove and even parasol departments were kept well stocked by regular shipments from London. In Basinghall Street, London, David Jones established a large office where, as the Company advertised, 'several lady and gentlemen buyers carry on the work of selecting and forwarding to our Sydney establishment the latest and most approved fashions of the day'.

David Jones department store,
George Street Sydney, 1880s
Photo courtesy of David Jones Archives.



Miss Faithfull could have purchased her dress ready-made from David Jones or had it custom-made by a tailor in the costume department. David Jones not only imported fashionable clothing, he assisted with the migration of experienced dressmakers from Britain and Europe. On display with Miss Faithfull's dress is an advertisement placed in the British papers in 1887, calling for a dressmaker for a 'high-class business in Australia'. The successful applicant was a Welsh dressmaker, Harriet Ann Dixie. The exhibit also includes a letter from one of David Jones' agents mentioning Miss Dixie's departure from England, and her employment contract confirming she was hired for a period of 12 months at a salary of £300.

Miss Faithfull need not have visited David Jones to purchase her fashionable dress. By the 1880s the Company had established extensive postal departments and it is possible Miss Faithfull – as a rural customer – took advantage of this service. Seasonal fashion catalogues complete with coloured postcards and fabric samples – examples of which are on display – were sent to settlers living in and around country towns.

So who was the young woman who had a taste for fine wool clothing and a fondness for the colour pink and layers of lace trimming? There were actually three Miss Faithfulls: Florence, Constance and Lilian, born in 1851, 1854 and 1859 respectively. All were born and raised on *Springfield*, a pioneering merino sheep station south of Goulburn, in New South Wales. While it is possible that the dress could have belonged to any one of the girls, the narrow fit of the bodice and skirt waistband suggests the owner was Lilian, who was of a slighter build than her sisters.

The girls' father, William Pitt Faithfull, established *Springfield* in 1828. He began exporting wool to London during the 1830s and in 1844 he married Devonshire migrant and teacher, Mary Deane. As well as three daughters, they had six sons. By the mid-1880s, when Miss Faithfull's dress was made and worn, William Pitt's youngest son Lucien had taken over the management of *Springfield* and was growing wool of an exceptional quality and yield. *Springfield* merino wool was exactly the type of wool sought after by the British textile industry to make quality clothing like Miss Faithfull's dress.

During the 1880s wool was a popular and fashionable fabric for clothing, and would have been an ideal choice for the style Miss Faithfull desired. The fine wool absorbed the pink dye evenly and achieved a close fit for the bodice and a soft drape for the skirt. Moreover, it would have offered warmth in winter but was the type of fabric that could 'breathe' in summer months.

Miss Faithfull's dress is of a style fashionable between 1883 and 1885. During this period an elaborately decorated voluminous skirt was the most outstanding feature of women's clothing. The distinctive shape was achieved by wearing a bustle – a cage-like structure consisting of a series of semi-circular hoops and fabric tape that throws the skirt out horizontally from the back of the waist. Miss Faithfull's bustle would have emphasised her narrow waist, as well as supporting and showing off the layers of fine fabric and lace frills.



The matching yet contrasting bodice was also a popular choice. It is exceptionally fitted, features tight pleats and a high collar, and was characteristic of a fashion period beginning to favour more tailored, suit-like styles for women's clothing. The bodice would have been a perfect fit for Miss Faithfull; and here she was greatly assisted by the use of a corset – next to the bustle, the most important undergarment of the 1880s. A tightly laced corset stiffened with whalebone would have cinched her waist and ensured excellent posture at all times.

While Miss Faithfull's dress was modelled on fashions of Britain and Europe, it also communicated information about the owner's position in Australian colonial society. By the 1880s *Springfield* was a prosperous and well-established sheep station. Florence, Constance and Lillian were the daughters of one of the colony's most successful pastoralists, and their choice of dress had to reflect their class and social status. The quality of the fabric and the expertise of the dressmaker would have been recognised as costly to procure. The fitted bodice with tight, narrow sleeves and the extravagant skirt restricted movement and made strenuous activity difficult. The owner of this dress was clearly of the leisure class; she could afford not to work.

The Faithfull girls may have lived on a property that was a two-hour carriage ride from the closest town and a lengthy train journey from Sydney, but Florence, Constance and Lillian were active members of the Goulburn region and Sydney society. Stepping out in this day dress, Miss Faithfull could have been attending an afternoon tea, calling on a friend, or perhaps shopping in Sydney. She would have accessorised appropriately with pointed walking shoes or boots and a pair of short kid leather gloves. A coarse straw hat and perhaps a parasol would have shaded her clear complexion from the bright Australian sun.

Miss Faithfull's dress can be found alongside a closely related exhibit exploring the invention of the shearing machine. About the same year Miss Faithfull was wearing her wool dress, Irish migrant Frederick Wolseley was establishing a company that would revolutionise the Australian wool industry – but that is yet another fascinating Australian journey.

Cheryl Crilly, Curator, Australian Journeys

Left: Miss Faithfull's wool dress, about 1885

Below: Lillian Faithfull of Springfield station, about 1883

