

# Downton Abbey Visits the Biltmore

By Sandra Chambers

Fans of the popular PBS television series *Downton Abbey* don't have to travel to Highclere Castle to experience firsthand what life was like at *Downton Abbey* or to view original costumes of their favorite characters. The Biltmore House, the grand 250-room Vanderbilt estate in Asheville, North Carolina, is showcasing 47 costumes from the show during its exhibition: *Dressing Downton: Changing Fashions for Changing Times*, which runs from February 5th through May 25th, 2015.

"The day-to-day running of the (Vanderbilt) house was surprisingly similar to that of *Downton Abbey*," explains Biltmore Director of Museum Services, Ellen Rickman. "Just like *Downton* has a Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes, Biltmore had its own cast of fascinating characters. Displaying these fabulous costumes from the show gives us an unparalleled opportunity to delve into Biltmore's stories."

The award-winning costumes, created by London costume house Cosprop, Ltd., were designed with inspiration from photographs and historic patterns. Some are original pieces from the period while others incorporate antique decorative elements that inspired the overall costume design.

## Reflecting an Era of Change

The post-Edwardian era in which *Downton Abbey* is set was a time of change both in the U.S. and abroad, and these period costumes reflect that history. The costume collection begins in 1912 with the sinking of the *Titanic* and moves into the years surrounding World War I and then into the Jazz Age of the early 1920s. Themes in the exhibit include: the evolution of fashion, nuances of etiquette and the changing roles of women.

Before visiting the Biltmore exhibit myself, I spoke with Leslie Klingner, Curator of Interpretation at Biltmore, about this fascinating pairing of the lives of the fictional Crawley family and the real-life Vanderbilt family. "The *Downton Abbey* costumes we have on display are so similar to the one's we have of Edith and Cornelia (Vanderbilt) wearing at Biltmore during this time period," Klingner said. "America and England were looking to each other when it came to fashion. The fashions you see on *Downton Abbey* were very much in line with what Americans were buying in Paris, London and Washington, DC.

"Dowager Countess of Grantham's (Violet) outfits are in keeping with the tradition of the 1880s and

1890s Edwardian silhouette of a nipped-in waist and bustle. But Violet's granddaughters have really embraced the modern silhouette of the 1920s with the dropped waist dresses, slim busts and generally more athletic-looking lines. As the series progresses, we see raised hemlines and the characters splashing out a bit more. Also, as women become more independent,



The Biltmore House in Asheville, NC. (Photo courtesy of The Biltmore Company).



Violet Crawley's coat made of cotton ribbon lace

RIGHT  
A footman's uniform made of wool and cotton (Photo courtesy of Exhibit Development Corp.)



Cora and Robert  
Crawley (Photo  
courtesy Carnival  
Films).

we see tailoring that would be considered more masculine.”

The indoor picnic scene (Season 3) highlights many of the social, cultural and generational differences of the era. We see Martha Levinson, a rather brash American’s costume in contrast to Violet’s traditional outfit and also that of Edith’s sleeveless, drop-waist modern dress.

**Men’s Changing Fashion**

Although there is a move towards more casual attire, men’s fashions don’t change as much as women’s fashions do during this time period. The change from the required white ties and tails to the more casual tuxedo for dinner is an example of a change that was too much for the traditional Violet. She snidely compared Lord Grantham’s appearance at dinner in a tuxedo to “coming down in pajamas.”



Rose's silk velvet evening dress (Photo courtesy The Biltmore Company)

In the early 20s, "plus fours" became popular for men's sportswear. These shortened trousers go down four inches below the knee for hunting, giving them more physical flexibility. There were also changes in the tailoring of men's suits. The more casual "country tweed" look was popular on country estates versus what men were wearing in London.

"What sets the aristocratic class apart, particularly in England, was the fact that both men and women had different outfits for different activities during the day," Klingner said. "There was an outfit for breakfast, for going into town, for afternoon tea, for hunting and for dinner, so they ended up changing outfits five or six times a day. Also, the investments they were making in their clothing weren't for longevity, but for fashion. Most were only wearing their outfits for a season and then it would be time to get the latest fashions from London or Paris."

### The Servants' Outfits

Edwardian period footmen were hired for their good looks and height, with the taller footmen earning a higher salary. Their uniforms would be provided by the house at great expense. The maids

were not so fortunate. They had to cover the cost and make their own uniforms of two dresses: a print dress with a plain apron for cleaning in the morning, changing into a black dress with a more decorative pinny for the afternoons and evenings.

What's unique about the exhibit at Biltmore is that the house still has the original servant's quarters and kitchen. At Highclere Castle the kitchen has been renovated, so the downstairs scenes are filmed in a studio separate from Highclere. Some of the servants' outfits on display at The Biltmore include Mr. Carson presiding over the banquet hall; Mrs. Hughes; Mr. Barrow; Mrs. Patmore and Daisy in the kitchen and Anna and John Bates.

"What's been fun for me is to see the costumes close up in the correct settings," Klingner said. "They are so eye-popping in person with their exquisite details. The exhibit is bringing Biltmore to life in a way we haven't seen before and also bringing Downton Abbey to life for our visitors."

### If You Go

A behind-the-scenes guided Upstairs—Downstairs Tour takes visitors to the domains of the butler, head

housekeeper and the lady's maid, and to a suite of upstairs guest rooms not seen on the regular house tour.

Guests can enjoy a special English Sunday Brunch at Cedric's Tavern. Also enjoy 20th century-themed cocktails on the estate's restaurant menus and sweets at The Bake Shop.

Select weekend evenings in April and May, guests can book the Rooftop Sparkling Wine Reception. A guided behind-the-scenes rooftop tour will provide stunning views of the estate from various balconies. Following the tour, guests will enjoy canapés and Biltmore wines.

Dressing Downton hotel package at The Inn on Biltmore Estate (Feb. 5—May 22). Includes accommodations, chef's breakfast buffet daily in The Dining Room, afternoon tea in the Library Lounge, admission to the Biltmore House and estate valid for length of stay, audio guide to Biltmore House, Biltmore souvenir guidebook, valet parking at the Inn and complimentary estate shuttle service.

For more info on the exhibit see: [www.biltmore.com/events/dressing-downton-1](http://www.biltmore.com/events/dressing-downton-1)



Curators at Biltmore prepare Downton Abbey fashion exhibit (Photo courtesy of The Biltmore Company).



Maids in afternoon.  
(Photo courtesy of Photo  
courtesy of PBS)

BELOW  
Mrs. Hughes' dress with  
keys. (Photo courtesy of  
The Biltmore Company).



A maid's typical  
afternoon and  
evening uniform  
(Photo courtesy of  
Carnival  
Films).



Cora's velvet,  
drop-waist  
evening dress  
(Photo courtesy of  
Carnival  
Films)



Outfits worn by sisters Mary, Edith  
and Sybil (Photo courtesy of Exhibits  
Development Group)

