

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

It Was Fascination

If one happened to miss the Kentucky Derby or the Preakness, he or she can still view the third and final leg of the Triple Crown, the Belmont Stakes, on June 11, 2011. For the Anglophile, however, there's always the Ascot Racecourse (located in the small town of Ascot, Berkshire). This course is approximately six miles from Windsor Castle, and owned by the Crown Estate. Royal Ascot, one of Europe's most famous race meetings (founded by Queen Anne in 1711), will be held on Tuesday, June 14, 2011, to Saturday, June 18, the highlight being the Ascot Gold Cup. Every year Royal Ascot is attended by Her Majesty, Elizabeth II, and various members of the British Royal Family, arriving at the start of each race day in a horse-drawn carriage with a Royal procession. It is a major event in the British social calendar, and press coverage of what the attendees are wearing often eclipses coverage of the actual horse racing. If one is special, he or she may be invited to the Royal Enclosure. But there are rules that must be obeyed.

The official "Royal Ascot" website spells out the dress code:

"Off the shoulder, halter neck, spaghetti straps and dresses with a strap of less than one inch and miniskirts are considered unsuitable. Midriffs must be covered and trouser suits must be full length and of matching material and colour."

"Gentlemen are required to wear either black or grey morning dress, including a waistcoat, with a top hat. A gentleman may remove his top hat within a restaurant, a private box, a private club or that facility's terrace, balcony or garden. Hats may also be removed within any enclosed external seating area within the Royal Enclosure Garden."

And most importantly, "Her Majesty's Representative wishes to point out that only formal day dress with a hat or substantial fascinator will be acceptable."

If one was ever confused by the “substantial fascinator” requirement, most of that mystery was cleared up at the recent royal wedding of William and Kate on April 29, 2011. There all eyes were upon the stunning fascinators of Princesses Eugenie, 21, and especially Beatrice, 22, cousins to Princes William and Harry and daughters of Prince Andrew and Sarah Ferguson. They chose popular London milliner Philip Treacy (who specializes in these towering toppers) to accessorize their outfits for the wedding at Westminster Abbey. His work has been seen in *Sex and the City*. Beatrice’s band-aid colored door wreath-sized headpiece (positioned above radiant raccoon eyes) was recently sold online for over £81,000, or roughly \$130,766. The princess donated the proceeds of the fascinator sale to benefit children’s charities such as UNICEF UK and Children in Crisis.

Princess Eugenie told *The Telegraph* that the sister’s individual styles couldn’t be more different:

“Beatrice loves her glamorous dresses and her hair being curly or big -- like Mummy's - and I hate volume.” Eugenie says she’s “more understated” while Beatrice “is more ‘Let’s do the glamour.’ We’re chalk and cheese.”

Now, just what is a fascinator? Originating in the 1750s, it is a fine headpiece, worn in one’s hair, made from flowers, beads, feathers and other adornments (sometimes a scarf made of crochet or lace). It can be a subtle to extremely frivolous head decoration, and fortunately worn almost exclusively by women. A fascinator can be worn any time one wants to add a bit of style, drama, or whimsy to one’s outfit. Or in the case of an earlier British attention-getter, a fascinator can be worn to create a bit of burlesque and humor.

This particular English stage star dazzled audiences on several continents, thrilled New Orleans with her singing and dancing and captivated the heart of a Russian Grand Duke named Alexis. Appearing in *Bluebeard* in 1872, she sang the Crescent City’s Mardi Gras anthem “If Ever I Cease to Love” the year Rex made his first triumphal appearance on the streets of New Orleans. Her name was Lydia Thompson.

Burlesque delights its audiences with laughter by caricaturing the manner or spirit of serious works, or by ludicrous treatment of its subjects. The word derives from the Italian *burlesco*, which derives from the Italian word *burla* – a joke, ridicule or mockery. It utilizes caricature, parody, irreverent over-emphasis and travesty to lampoon the social mores of the times. What better way to embody these paradoxes than with an outlandish fascinator?

Lydia Thompson posed wearing one in a popular *carte-de-visite*, the pin-up of its day. It was a thin paper photograph (patented in Paris in 1854), usually made of an albumen print, which was mounted on a thicker paper card. Each was the size of a visiting card, enormously popular and traded among friends and visitors. This special *carte-de-visite* pictures Lydia

garbed in a dress tailored in the male style with a monocle deliberately hanging out. She is sporting a taxidermied squirrel fascinator (tail and all), and carrying a riding crop. She is holding her long braid seductively as a symbol of desirability, while at the same time wearing an absurd mixture of *au courant* fashion. Lydia presented alternatives to the dominant presentation of desirable femininity, and used the term “awarishness” to describe the social and sexual audacity she embodied.



Lydia Thompson, nee Eliza Hodges Thompson (1838 – 1908), was a world-renowned British dancer, actress and theatrical producer. After starting as a child pantomime star at age 14 and dancing in Britain as a teenager and then in Europe, she became a leading dancer and actress in burlesques on the London stage. She was a huge sensation in Germany and Russia, wowing audiences with her flings and hornpipes. She introduced burlesque to America to great acclaim and notoriety (P. T. Barnum billed her troupe of chorus girls “Lydia Thompson and the Imported English Blondes”) and was the most popular entertainment in New York during the 1868–1869 theatrical season. “The eccentricities of pantomime and burlesque – with their curious combination of comedy, parody, satire, improvisation, song and dance, variety acts, cross-dressing, extravagant stage effects, risqué jokes and saucy costumes – while familiar enough to British audiences, took New York by storm.” Lydia, although drawing fierce criticism from those who felt her act transgressed the boundaries of propriety, was a big star for over twenty years. In the Baltic, her picture was “given equal prominence with

the Czar's". A lovesick member of the Russian dragoons, hoping to prove his love for the actress, placed some flowers and one of Thompson's gloves on his chest and shot himself dead through the heart.

How a lady with a stuffed squirrel mounted on the middle of her forehead could elicit such amorous attention continues to provide a "fascinating" tale we shall never "cease to love".

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