



Three nineteenth century caps, two of crocheted lace and one of pink silk covered with lace gauze and trimmed with pink silk ribbons.



Group of nineteenth century Christening robes.



Colourful and lavishly decorated christening caps from the eighteenth century before it was customary to wear white, along with a garment that would have been worn by the swaddled baby inside the Christening bag or beneath a mantle.



To the rear robes from 1912, in front an example from 1930s, continuing the simpler style.



Christening bootees with raised embroidery and buttons, edged with fluted silk ribbon.



Elaborate late eighteenth century robes with lace flounces.



Christening robes in the twentieth century were simpler with less decorative detail. This one from 1912.



Christening robe 1850.



1886 blue alpaca and cotton Christening robe open at the back. An unusual design for this period.

## A history of Christening robes

by Zita Thornton

Christening robes are traditionally cherished items, handed down through generations. This means that there are plenty of surviving examples which allow us to appreciate the changing traditions and customs of the ceremony itself as well of the baby's garments.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with high levels of infant mortality, it was customary for babies to be baptised within a day or two of their birth. Therefore, it was the godmother rather than the recovering mother who would carry the newborn into church. The tightly swaddled baby would be wrapped in a bearing cloth which would be removed, along with the swaddling cloths, to allow the baby to be totally immersed in the baptismal font.

The swaddling cloths themselves were made from soft linen or flannel and gave little opportunity for embellishment so the bearing cloth along with additional items such as caps and bibs became important indicators of status and wealth. As a result they became opulent in the extreme. Made from the richest silks, satin, damask or velvet, they were heavily embroidered with decorative edgings of gold and silver. Bearing cloths became so large and heavy that it sometimes required several ladies to carry the infant into church.

Gradually throughout the eighteenth century swaddling became less popular. Rather than being wrapped from top to toe the arms were left free. The bearing cloth was replaced by a much smaller and more practical cape or bag, with or without sleeves and sometimes with space for a pillow. Matching undershirts and outer garments, which opened at the back and tied with ribbons could complete the set.

At this time the custom for total immersion declined and the baby was instead sprinkled with Holy water. So without the need for the easy removal of garments robes were introduced. They continued to be richly decorated, often including valuable pieces of embroidery, or colourful silks taken from ladies dresses, or fashioned from shawls. They could be quilted to keep out the cold, trimmed with bows and braid and richly embroidered with flowers, symbolic motifs or those which reflected the fashions of the day. The robes echoed the style of dress worn by infants at the time. A long flowing skirt fell from a short bodice. It is a style that has largely remained, with variations on the length and width of the skirt. The wealthy had family robes but others could hire or borrow the Christening robe from the midwife, priest or local gentry families. Christening sets survive which include bibs, headbands and bootees too.

By the late eighteenth century there had been a change in the design of Christening robes. White was chosen as a colour to represent purity and innocence. By the mid nineteenth century

white Christening robes were in common use, often made from an existing wedding dress or veil. Without the decorative opportunity offered by colour the robes relied on the beauty of lace work or intricate white on white embroidery such as Ayrshire to produce richness. Necklines featured frilled lace collars or edging. Bodices and sleeves were trimmed with lace flounces or adorned with pin tucks. As cotton became popular fine cotton lawn or muslin skirts provided a backdrop for lavish embroidery. A cap would usually have been worn along with booties and a shawl for warmth.

The fashion for lace Christening robes was especially in favour after Queen Victoria ordered a Honiton lace robe for the Christening of her eldest son, who later became Edward VII. As is customary in many families, this robe has been used by generations of Royal families ever since and is still used today.

In the twentieth century Christening robes were much less flamboyant. Skirts although very long, were simpler. They may be edged with pintucks, ribbons or decorative trimmings but there was much less embroidery covering the whole skirt length.

Christening robes were effected by the radical changes in ladies fashions in the mid century. Manmade fabrics were popular and colour was re-introduced albeit usually just for linings or ribbons. Crochet robes and shawls provided warm decorative alternatives. In Christening caps we see examples of the most exquisite needlework techniques. Complementing the fashions of the robes they match: they are highly decorative. The earliest examples had hanging silk ribbons to tie and were lavish with bows, gold raised embroidery, thin gauze laid over coloured satin linings and coloured embroidered flowers of every kind.

From the mid eighteenth century a round or oval crown, which could be edged with ruffles, and a wide front was popular. Muslin was embroidered and strips of this and other embroidered cotton were joined with lace inserts. Silks such as damask and brocade were used. Broderie Anglais provided a cut out lacy effect. Into the twentieth century crocheted lace caps are found threaded with ribbons.

By being largely unaffected by the changing whims of fashion, it is possible for Christening robes to be appreciated as heirlooms, used by successive families. However, if you are intending to choose an antique robe for a modern baby be aware that babies were generally smaller in the past.



Twentieth century robe with pin-tucking and embroidery on the bodice.



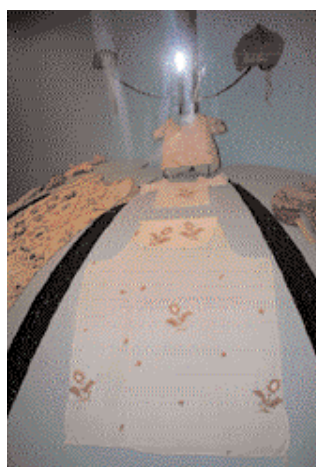
Lavish Christening set from 1780 landed gentry. The white satin robe has a short bodice with attached skirt embroidered with gold spirals, additional decoration is provided by white and gold lace mesh and coloured flowers fashioned from silk or chenille yarn. The undershirt is quilted in a rhomboidal pattern with different flowers quilted within. There is a boys cap and a girls cap in the set with silk ties and bows. The boy's cap has gold lace and the girls coloured flowers.



Embroidered silk damask Christening bag made from a lady's dress in 1784, used by friends and family until 1870.



Eighteenth century Christening mantle embroidered with posies of flowers, with matching undergarment and cap.



Christening set from 1801 from a Clergyman's family consisting of a cape made from white woollen material with coloured tamped flowers, possibly originating as a shawl, and space for a pillow. The under and outer shirts are simply cut with short sleeves and opening at the back. The under shirt is pink silk and the outer matches the cape.



Late eighteenth century silk Christening robe. The top is embellished with appliqué embroidered motifs. Further down is Chinese inspired embroidered motifs of flowers and birds. The robe is trimmed with gold and silver lace and the bottom has silver fringes.



Embroidered cotton bodice of a Victorian robe.



In the mid twentieth century colour had been re-introduced to Christening robes, as with the coloured ribbons of the 1974 crochet robe also lined in pale blue, the pink artificial silk ribbons of the woollen robe and the lilac lining under the nylon overlay. Caps were no longer in fashion.



Christening cape 1909.