

Coatees and Crinolines – Costuming a Living History Museum

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Figure 1: A view of Sovereign Hill

Abstract

Sovereign Hill is an outdoor living history museum interpreting Ballarat in Victoria, Australia between the years 1850 and 1861 during the gold rush that established the town. The living history museum recreates the township of Ballarat during this period through original buildings re-located to the site as well as reproduction buildings and dwellings (Figure 1). Costume is one of the most recognizable and powerful interpretive tools that is utilised at Sovereign Hill and the necessity of using reproduction costume allows for some exciting ways in which visitors can be engaged in an immersive historical experience.

Contents: The Sovereign Hill Costume Department / The Costumed School / Red Hill Photographic Rooms / Punch Cartoon / Red Coats / Complexities and Difficulties / References

THE SOVEREIGN HILL COSTUME DEPARTMENT

Sovereign Hill is a relatively large cultural organization in Australia with a visitation of 500,000 in the 2014/15 financial year. There are 300 costumed staff and 200 costumed volunteers and it is the role of the Costume Department to ensure that staff and volunteers are appropriately costumed according to primary source research from 1850s Ballarat. Currently, the department consists of three staff who run an onsite made-to-measure workroom where historic costume is researched, produced and serviced. The Costume Department also educates and trains staff and volunteers about the particulars of their costume and the way to present themselves appropriately. Rare trades such as 1850s tailoring, dressmaking and bonnet making are also practised.

In a study completed in 2004 by Jane Malcolm-Davies, the three top priorities identified by visitors for a visit to a living history museum were:

1. to learn
2. to feel a sense of the past
3. to have fun

The study found that the living history museums that invested the most in costume and training their costumed interpreters rated the highest on these three criteria (Malcolm-Davies, 2004: 277).

Evidently, it can be said that costume and well trained costumed interpreters contribute significantly to a visitor's living history museum experience and it is important to quantify this. It is an expensive undertaking to costume and train 500 staff and volunteers and the management of these types of museums need to be able to see the tangible links between investment in costume and their costume department, and the satisfaction of paying visitors. For without the visitors, the museums very existence is called into question.

As an accredited museum, it is fundamental that Sovereign Hill presents costume correctly to visitors in order to tell a historically accurate story. Visitors trust that what they see at Sovereign Hill is the way it was in 1850s Ballarat.

The necessity of **using reproduction costume** allows for exciting opportunities in the way that we can engage visitors in their museum experience to meet those top three self-identified priorities: to LEARN, to FEEL A SENSE OF THE PAST and to have FUN.

The following are some examples of how Sovereign Hill utilises costume to engage visitors:

THE COSTUMED SCHOOL

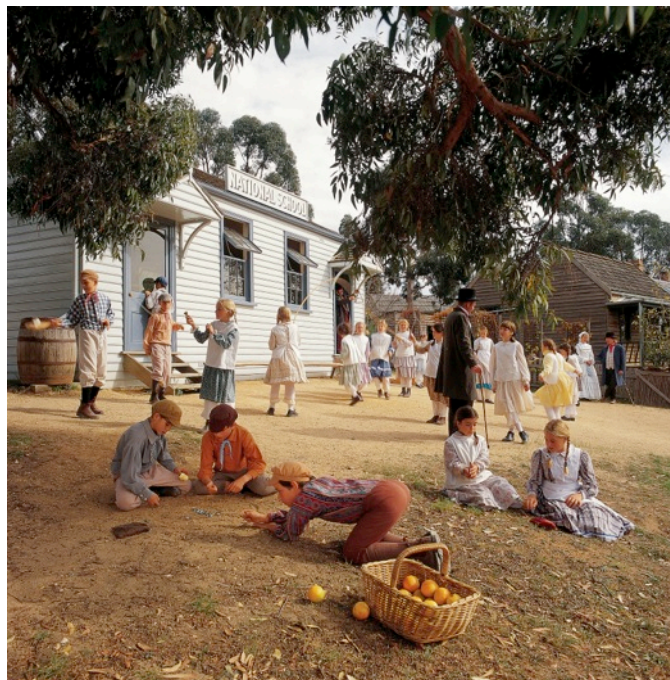


Figure 2

There are currently four costumed schools at Sovereign Hill and the popularity of the program has called for the establishment of a fifth school, which is in development.

The costumed school program utilises the technique of Affective Learning – that is – the involvement of a child’s emotions in the learning process. For students to get the maximum educational benefit from the program they need to fully immerse themselves in the role of a child living on the goldfields in the 1850s.

This includes the wearing of costumes as directed and behaving in the manner consistent with school children of the 1850s.

In order to maximise the experience, students are asked to prepare an imaginative letter or story based on provided questions about how they came to be on the Ballarat goldfields. These letters are posted to Sovereign Hill prior to the schools visit and encourage preparation and discussion in the modern day classroom about the Ballarat goldfields before they arrive.

The children are in the care of the Sovereign Hill schools’ headmaster or head mistress during their experience, with up to three accompanying adults dressed in costume also. These accompanying adults are structured into the program with an allocated character – e.g. Mrs Jones – wife of the Criterion Store proprietor – looking for a student showing promise for a junior seamstress position.

Costume in this instance is absolutely crucial to the program’s success. It is part of that immersion process.

RED HILL PHOTOGRAPHIC ROOMS

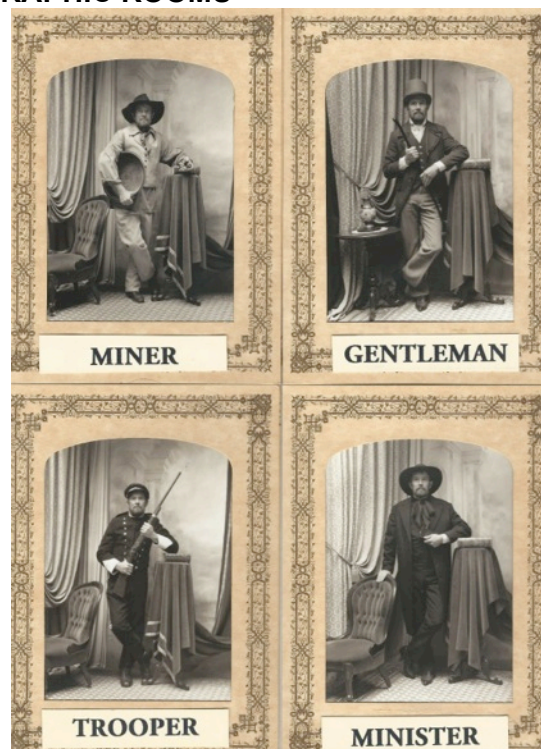


Figure 3

William Ellis operated Ballarat’s original Red Hill Photographic Rooms, on Main Road, around 1854. Today, visitors can dress in period costume for Victorian-style portraits and feel for themselves what it is like to wear a crinoline and dress or a frockcoat and top hat. In the last financial year there were over 7000 booked sittings

for this experience, which is a clear indicator that a personal costume experience is a priority for a significant number of visitors to Sovereign Hill.

The Red Hill Photographic Studio is based on early photographic studios from the period with a glass roof and a glass wall for lighting.

Costume for this purpose needs to work well in photographs, be quick and easy to put on and off – and fit a large variety of shapes and sizes. For this reason, garments are split up the back and fastened with Velcro (Figure 4). Some are bundled together – for example the gentlemen’s shirt, waistcoat and cravat is all sewn together to reduce the time in dressing.



Figure 4

PUNCH CARTOON

In a 2015 school holiday program, costume was used to recreate a scene from historical cartoon satire. In this case it was a Punch cartoon making jest at the size of the crinoline skirt.

The idea was that the scene or spectacle would draw the visitors’ attention and create an interaction that would generate questions – for example – were the crinolines really that big? This then creates a teachable moment where the costumed interpreter can have the conversation about the historical context of the costumes (Figures 5 and 6). In this instance, a lot of work went into engineering the crinoline and skirt – challenging the Costume Department to find the right materials to support such a structure. The idea had a lot of potential however it needed more in the way of supportive material to communicate to the visitor the intellect behind what

they were seeing. Yes – visitors were impressed and drawn to the scene and spectacle but the connection to historic satire needed to be made **explicit** to retain the integrity and authenticity of the intention.



Figures 5 and 6

RED COATS



Figure 7

The 40th Regiment of Foot was stationed in Melbourne at the time of the Eureka stockade in Ballarat – a civil uprising in 1854 against the laws imposed on the miners by the government of the time. The Red Coats were called in to support the local troopers and played a role in the Eureka rebellion. The Red Coats have become an iconic Sovereign Hill activation - every day at 1:30pm the Red Coats march through the streets and diggings, perform a drill & fire their muskets in rain, hail or shine.

During school holidays, the junior red coats program is offered where children learn about who the Red Coats were and what they did in Ballarat. The power of costume can be seen clearly in this image (Figure 8) - children are given three simple pieces of costume – a hat, a coat and a wooden musket. This is enough to fully immerse the children in the experience and join the Sovereign Hill Red Coats on their march and charge.



Figure 8

The uniforms are currently being updated and with around twenty-five years since they were originally made, the initial research found was patchy and there was only one incomplete set of patterns. Primary research needed to be undertaken to ensure that what is produced going forwards is as correct as possible having consulted historical military uniform experts and seen original coatees from the period. For with what we do, it is not simply the outside design that needs to be studied, but the interior structure and finishes. The research ascertained that the design and specifications originally used at Sovereign Hill in the 1970s were predominantly correct, however there were some details that could only have been discovered through the study and observation of an original coatee of the time period which have been added to the new uniforms.

After research has been completed, the patterns need to be developed (Figure 9) which requires detailed front and back technical illustrations (Figure 10) and measurements.



Figure 9

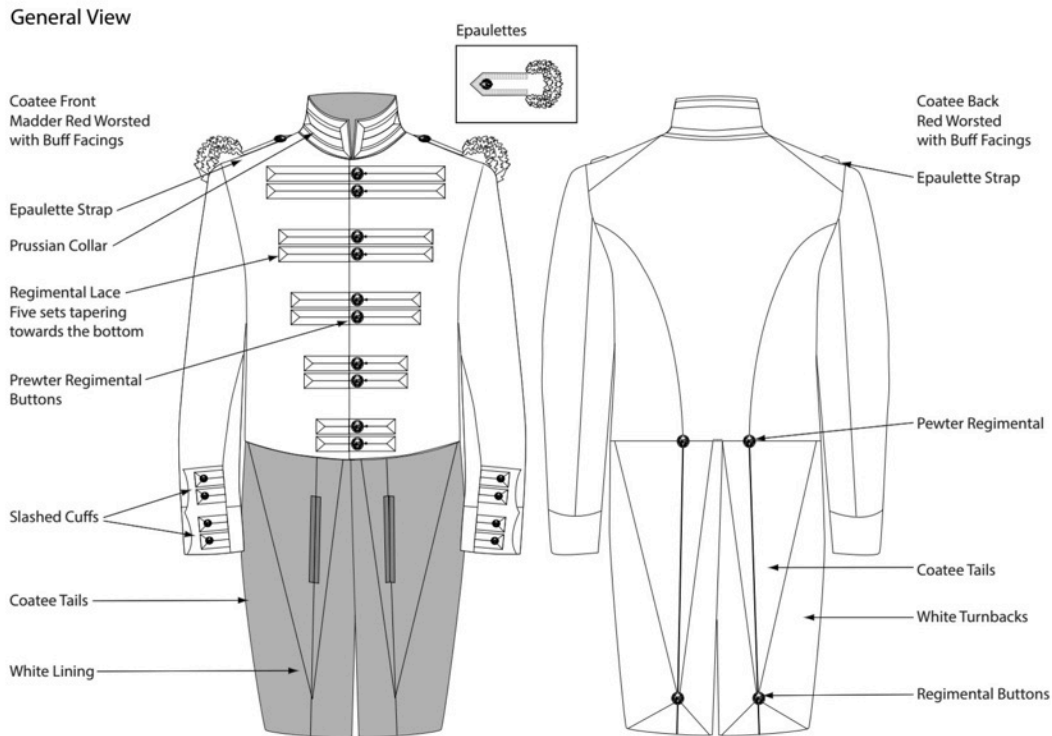


Figure 10

The historical military uniforms have been approached as historical museum replicas as opposed to a costume interpretation – and with this commitment to historical correctness followed a worldwide search to source the right materials and components and the crafting of components by Sovereign Hill’s rare tradesmen working from written descriptions and primary source imagery to produce components that simply are not made anymore.

COMPLEXITIES AND DIFFICULTIES

There are many complexities and difficulties in costuming the staff and volunteers for Sovereign Hill and its various programs:

- The Costume Department needs to be able to fit anybody that walks through the door which requires producing and holding stock of a vast size range for men, women and children. This requires an immense amount of investment in patterns and manufacturing to cover this range of sizes.
- The other difficult aspect of manufacturing is balancing quantity with a large variety of colours, fabrications and prints. Sovereign Hill interprets a town and as such, staff and volunteers must be as individually dressed as possible.
- The comfort of staff and volunteers along with Australian occupational health and safety legislation must also be taken into consideration and like any other organizational department – budget constraints apply.

The other complexity of the Costume Department’s role is that at some point, a line has to be drawn in the research and a costume needs to be produced. Historical garments, photographs, drawings, paintings and lithographs are studied, written accounts and books are read and experts consulted – but there are not endless resources that allow complete interrogation into all garments and sometimes

compromises have to be made – whether they be as a result of limited resources, budget, time or modern workplace health and safety requirements. The challenge is how to communicate this to our visitors – to ensure that they understand what they are seeing and where the reproduction differs from the original.

REFERENCES

Malcolm-Davies J. 2004. "Borrowed Robes: The Educational Value of Costumed Interpretation at Historic Sites." In *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 10:3, 277-293