

If you do head out to the sunshine during this summer, it is important to dress for the weather, though it's unlikely your outfit plans would include an ugly. And yet items like this blue "ugly" from our collection were an essential part of many women's wardrobes in the early nineteenth century. Made from blue silk and stiffened with five cane hoops, the ugly would neatly attach to women's bonnets providing that vital protection against the sun and elements. It folded out almost like a convertible car hood. It was a necessary addition to any woman's wardrobe who wanted to maintain a fashionably pale complexion (or just not be blinded in the sun). Indeed it featured in the closet of none other than the writer Charlotte Bronte and the American traveller Jane Anthony Eames, who described wearing this device while visiting Sidon in the 1850s.



Ugly, woman's; 1848-1864; 8551/60. Depicts blue "Ugly" on a mannequin head, it is made of blue silk and has rigid hoops to keep it in shape.

Yet despite its practicality, the ugly was described as frankly just that. It was frequently insulted in print, particularly in the latter half of the century. A "coal scuttle" or "oyster shell" was how the Victorian writer Charles Ford described these bonnets while he celebrated their demise in favour of the more flattering hats. They appear to have been a particularly English wardrobe item, as one writer unfavourably described it "Nothing more disfiguring can be conceived; only an Englishwoman would venture to assume it. A Frenchwoman would die at the stake than appear in an 'ugly'". Harsh words indeed for this

quite practical item.



Women's Sun bonnet, 1880-1920; 5941, Example of a sun bonnet on a mannequin head. It has a wide stiffened brim and flap to protect the neck. It is tied under the neck with a bow and made from a white cotton printed in blue and orange.

However these 'uglies' are not the only items within the collection that were designed to protect from the summer sun. These simple cotton bonnets were also popular in the nineteenth century, particularly amongst working-class women. Made with a long flap and a wide brim stiffened with cords, these were perfect for protecting the eyes and neck. Often made from cotton in all sorts of patterns (lilac paisley and pink and blue spots are just some of the examples in the collection), these sunbonnets were often popular with agricultural workers from the 1840s to the 1910s. Working long hours in the harvest, it is little wonder you would need protection.



Black and white photograph of a group of workers in a lavender field dated circa 1900. Group depicts four women and two men. Women dressed in smocks and aprons and the appear to wear either scarfs or flat caps on their head.

In Hitchin, it seems fashion habits had already started to change as this picture of the lavender harvest from around 1900 shows with young ladies sporting men's flat caps and scarfs. Later still, these 1920s lavender harvesters have completely left behind the sunbonnet, instead opting for straw hats, though still with wide brims for protection. However you choose to dress in this summer (whether you are wearing an ugly, a bonnet or a baseball cap), take care in the hot weather and look after yourself.



Black and white photograph of three women working as lavender harvesters, not dated. The women are dressed with wider brimmed straw hats and carry bundles of lavender.

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