

The Wilson Art Gallery & Museum

Information Sheet



Edward Wilson's Fur Suit

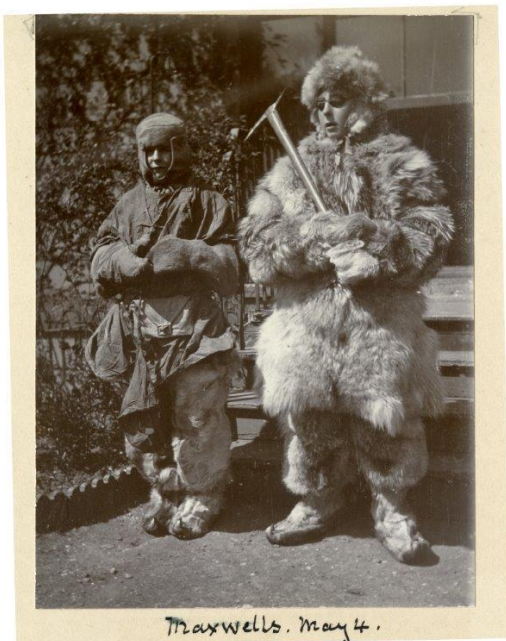
Edward Wilson's fur suit is one of the treasures of the Art Gallery & Museum's collections. The officers on *The Discovery* expedition (1901 – 1904) were all issued with a suit, either of reindeer – skin or of wolf-fur, but this is the only one of either type believed to survive.

What does the suit consist of?

The outfit consists of three main garments: a tunic with hood, a pair of trousers and some very long boots. There is also a pair of mittens, sensibly attached with straps to avoid loss down a crevice in the ice! With temperatures as low as minus 60 degrees frost bite was a real danger to exposed fingers. The museum model is also dressed in a knitted vest, Jaeger brand pants, and a cotton cloth balaclava with knitted inner.



Edward Wilson trying on his fur suit at Westal, the Wilson's home.



Two young relatives playing at dressing up in the garden of Westal, the Wilson's home in Cheltenham

Antarctic Clothing

Expedition members were issued with an array of cold weather clothing besides furs, but the Antarctic was virtually unknown territory and little was known about which garments or fabrics would be most suitable. Synthetic fabrics were only in their infancy so all the explorers' clothes were made of natural fabrics. These tended to be heavy and did not 'breathe' in the same way that modern fabrics are able to. The concept of layering was largely unknown, though Scott's expeditions did much to establish this principle. By the second expedition aboard *Terra Nova* (1910 – 1913), furs had been replaced by a wind-proof outer layer and lighter under- layers.

Struggles with fur clothing

The idea of using animal skins for clothing during the *Discovery* expedition was adopted from the Inuit, the indigenous people of the Arctic. Scott's men were not used to managing fur and they found it heavy and difficult to handle. In particular they struggled with the skins once they were wet.

In 1902 Wilson wrote in his diary that 'One is in a chaotic state of dampness at night when one gets warm. In the morning one puts on frozen socks, frozen mitts, and frozen boots stuffed with frozen damp grass and rime, and one suffers a good deal from painfully cold feet until everything is packed up again and strapped on the sledges The Burberry suit of overalls which one wears from crown to heel is wet and frozen so that every movement makes it crackle like a suit of armour, and one must stand rigidly still to hear one's neighbour speak.' It wasn't just the British who had trouble

with furs during Antarctic sledging. Amundsen, the Norwegian explorer, who reached the South Pole before Scott in 1912 found his furs hot and there are records of him skiing in his undergarments!



Publicity photograph of Roald Amundsen skiing in fur clothing

How the fur suit came into the museum

Oriana Wilson, Edward Wilson's widow, gave the suit to Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum in 1924; and it has been considered one of our star objects ever since. In 2013 we redisplayed the suit, cleaning each piece before placing it onto a new purpose made dummy.

To find out more about the collections held by the museum contact:
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Tel: 01242 387488 **Email:** collections@cheltenhamtrust.org.uk

Visit our website: <http://www.cheltenhammuseum.org.uk/>

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