

Before conservation, the bonnet was discoloured and its shape distorted



Crowning glory

One of many intriguing artefacts owned by Kew is a 150-year-old lacy bonnet made from Jamaican tree bark – Mark Nesbitt and Emily Brennan tell the story of its conservation



Emily Brennan carried out the conservation, carefully cleaning and reshaping the bonnet

PHOTOGRAPHS: EMILY BRENNAN, ANDREW MEROBE/RBG KEW

This showy confection of red ribbons and pale lace embodies a remarkable story of botanical providence, and the emergence of a distinctive Jamaican culture despite the appalling conditions of slavery. Enabling the bonnet to tell its tale has involved many months of work by Emily Brennan, a recent graduate from the world-renowned conservation programme at London's Camberwell College of Arts, working in collaboration with botanists at Kew and the Institute of Jamaica, Kingston.

What appears at first to be a high-quality handmade lace is in fact the inner bark of the Jamaican lace-bark tree, *Lagetta lagetto*. When freshly stripped off the tree, the inner bark can be teased apart into a white, regular rhomboidal mesh that is strong and can even be washed. The inner bark fibres of many species of tree are used around the world, including in West Africa, the homeland of the slaves brought by Spanish and British settlers to the Caribbean. Costume historian Steeve Buckridge has plausibly suggested that early slaves may have brought the tradition of using barkcloth with them. As a freely available material, lace-bark was used by Jamaican slaves and Maroons (escaped slaves).

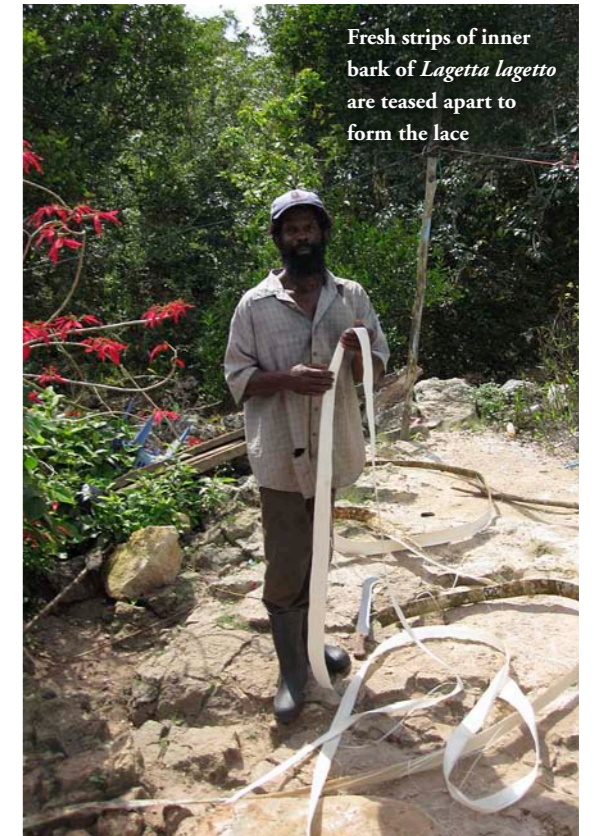
Having chosen to work on the bonnet for her undergraduate dissertation, Emily's first step was to look at costume plates at the Victoria & Albert Museum. The short, high brim and aniline dyes used in the silk suggest a date of about 1860, just 22 years after slavery ended on the island. Careful scrutiny of the bonnet showed that the lace-bark was supported by badly distorted wires wrapped in silk and plant fibres, with clusters of seeds and moss attached.

The bonnet may have been made as a cottage craft exhibit, but it shows signs of use, hinting that it may have been worn as 'Sunday best' by a black Jamaican.

The bonnet was dirty and badly distorted, so its physical conservation was a complex process. Emily's first step was to clean the surfaces with a special vacuum cleaner and fine brushes. Then the lace-bark was humidified to ease it back into shape, with a combination of damp blotters and cold water vapour from an ultrasonic humidifier. One of the most delicate tasks was bending back the wires to recreate the original shape of the bonnet. Once done, various high-tech materials were used to support the bonnet as invisibly as possible.

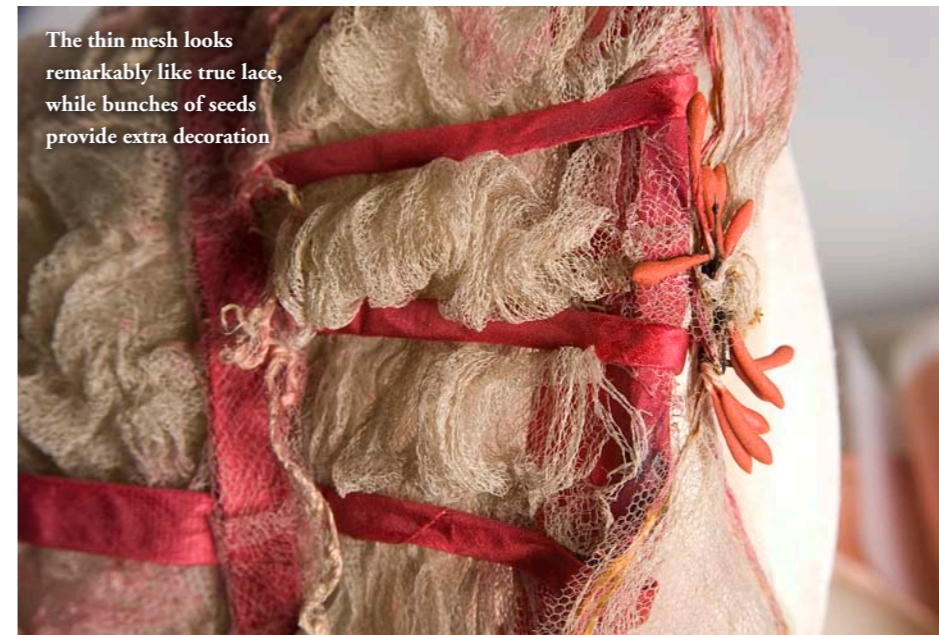
The most immediate benefit of the conservation project has been seen at Kew, where the bonnet is now a star object that highlights Jamaica's cultural heritage and demonstrates the role of conservation in unlocking the indigenous knowledge embodied in Kew's collections. But the project raised questions that, it became clear, could only be solved in Jamaica. The lace-bark tree is now rare – how did past populations support large-scale production? How was lace-bark made, used and marketed?

With generous support from the Pasold Research Fund, Emily spent a productive month investigating these questions at the Institute of Jamaica, working closely with



Fresh strips of inner bark of *Lagetta lagetto* are teased apart to form the lace

The thin mesh looks remarkably like true lace, while bunches of seeds provide extra decoration



one of the Institute's botanists, Lori-Ann Harris. They found records of an attempted revival of lace-bark craft in the 1980s and were able to talk to a hat maker who used it then. Following up a chain of contacts, they visited a former harvester of lace-bark in Maroon country, who walked into the forest and came back with a long strip, freshly harvested, to show them.

Emily and Lori-Ann's work raised a lot of interest in Jamaica. Although lace-bark has strong associations with slavery and Britain's colonial role in Jamaica, it's an important part of Jamaican culture, with economic potential for the future. The greatest obstacle to a revival of lace-bark probably lies in the ecology of the tree, which is now very rare on the island. It's unclear how it was managed so successfully in the past. Comparing Jamaican lace-bark to other inner barks around the world is likely to be a fruitful avenue, which Emily is following up. As so often in the Economic Botany Collection, the act of opening a box and enquiring about its contents has led to a fascinating and complex story – and the potential for many more years of research. ♣

Mark Nesbitt is curator of Kew's Economic Botany Collection. Emily Brennan is a trainee textile conservator at Textile Conservation Ltd, Bristol

For more about the Economic Botany Collection, see p24 and go to www.kew.org/collections/ecbot/