

FROM

Victorian Lincolnshire

TO

L'Époque de Worth

IN

Paris

Albert J. Schmidt

The pre-demolition clearing of a sprawling estate house in the village of Horbling in the mid-1960s yielded among other things ‘a black lace evening cape with sequins’.¹

The consequences of this discovery were decidedly different from the sale of a related garment by the New York auction house of William Doyle Galleries in 2001. The Horbling piece ‘sold for very little’ while the Doyle gown brought a record sum of \$101,500, yet each bore the label of the house of Worth in Paris.²

The House of Worth refers, of course, to Charles Frederick Worth, its founder—the celebrated English fashion designer of Second Empire France and ‘father of *haute couture*’.³

The value of the Doyle piece no doubt reflected both Worth’s artistry and reputation as well as the glitzy *nouveau riche* culture he had tapped. Because Worth had enticed a clientele that included Princess Metternich, the Austrian ambassador’s wife, and the Empress Eugenie herself, and because he had won a first prize at the Paris Exhibition of 1855, he became a living legend in what became known as *l’époque de Worth*.⁴

Indeed, his fame was such that the Worth enterprise was continued by

successive generations of the family long after his death in 1895 and even today identifies with ►

Above: Young Charles Frederick Worth (from Rex Needle, A Portrait of Bourne, Charles Frederick Worth CD-ROM).



Fig 1: Wake House on North Street in Bourne, where Charles Frederick Worth was born on 13 October 1825. Photo from ‘A Portrait of Bourne’ © Rex Needle 2005. See also Needle, Bourne, Charles Frederick Worth, CD-ROM for a detailed history, as advertised on ‘A Portrait of Bourne’. Needle observes that Wake House was the seat of the local offices of the South Kesteven District Council until 1996. Having remained vacant for several years, it was refurbished by Bourne Arts and Community Trust and opened as a community centre in 1999 (ibid).

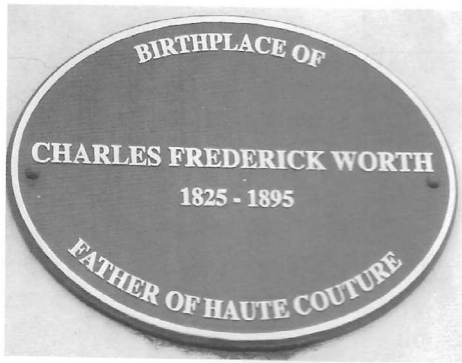


Fig 2: This blue plaque commemorating Charles Frederick Worth's birthplace was affixed to Wake House in December 2002.

websites www.houseofworth.co.uk and www.worthboutique.com.

What of the Horbling incident?

Why should a Worth cape, especially one found in a village on the edge of the fens in south Lincolnshire, pique our interest? It does because it is a poignant reminder of Worth's improbable origins. The house dismantled more than a generation ago had once belonged to the Benjamin Smiths, father and son solicitors and sometime partners of Charles Frederick's father and grandfather.

Although a great deal is known about the Parisian House of Worth, we know precious little about Charles Frederick Worth's English house, that is, the family environment from which he sprang. Shedding light on the couturier's origins can help to explain the anomaly of a rural Lincolnshire lad's pioneering Parisian



Fig 3: Memorial to William Worth Snr (1737-1812) on Horbling Parish Church. Photo A. J. Schmidt

haute couture and marketing.

Briefly stated, Charles Frederick Worth was born at Wake House, North Street, in Bourne, south Lincolnshire. (Figures 1 and 2) on 13 October 1825.⁵

The Worth family narrative properly begins with Charles Frederick's grandfather, William Snr (1737-1812), a country attorney.⁶ Worth began his legal career as a mere scribe in the firm of the senior Benjamin Smith of Horbling, mentioned above.⁷ Smith, a fairly typical country attorney, lived in sprawling Red Hall in Spring Lane (Figure 4). Early in his firm's history he had set up a rather primitive office in an outhouse where,



Fig 4: The Benjamin Smith mansion in Horbling, variously called Red Hall and Old Place. Razed in the 1960s. Photo given to the author by the late Harry Bowen, partner in the Smith firm.

presumably, he and his scribe worked.

That Attorney Smith was an extraordinarily enterprising fellow had broad implications for the two of them. Much involved in conveying, leasing and drawing up wills and trusts, as evidenced by his sizable legacy in business papers, Smith was as often on the road as in the office attending these matters and related copyhold estates of

which he was either steward or manager for an affluent client.

He also clerked for drainage, turnpike, and enclosure commissions, for charities, and even for an association prosecuting felons. Not least, Smith was a banker of sorts, carrying on a profitable business in the City of London where he facilitated the investment of his Lincolnshire clients' money.⁸

Despite these multifaceted undertakings Smith maintained a one-person operation. Having neither a partner nor a managing clerk from the founding of the firm in about 1760, he simply relied on scribes to copy important documents relating to his ventures. William Worth Snr was

hired as just that, a copyist, when he entered the Smith employ in the late 1780s.⁹

Worth's principal and perhaps initial task in the firm was that of recording precedents of cases that at one time or other had engaged Smith. While the substance of these documents clearly delineates the kinds of situations in which a country attorney and his aides found themselves,¹⁰ they are notably unin-



Fig 5: Smith and Worth law office built in Donington market place in 1814, early in William Worth II's partnership. Photo A. J. Schmidt.

formative about William Worth as a person.

They reveal only that he had a graceful and legible hand, glimpse his work environment, and suggest that he had a high tolerance for boredom. Only in 1793, after the scribe was elevated to articulated clerk, did the nature of his tasks appreciably change.¹¹

From at least the end of 1794 he began attending meetings—those re-



Fig 6: Smith and Wilkinson law office built in Spring Lane, Horbling, 1825. William Worth II worked here copying precedents in the late 1820s and early 1830s. Photo A. J. Schmidt.

garding drainage, turnpikes, charities, land tax, copyhold manorial courts, and the association for the prosecution of felons—and running errands to individual clients and the like.

He went to meetings most often in the company of the aging Benjamin Smith, sometimes with Benjamin

Smith Jnr, and on occasion with both father and son.¹²

On rare occasions Worth dined with one or other of the Smiths; but generally he seems not to have ventured socially from his proper role as clerk. Although he had served out his apprenticeship by the late 1790s and was senior in experience to the younger Smith, attorney Worth could entertain small likelihood that he would rise above the position of managing clerk in the firm.¹³

Despite what was probably a very minimal remuneration before his formal clerkship, Worth Snr had married. He did so on 3 July 1788 to one Ann Tyler.¹⁴ Residing in Horbling, the couple had three children, two sons and a daughter. The eldest of these was William Jnr, born on 18 September 1789. The genealogy in Marly shows a second son Henry who figured only briefly in the known family saga, and a daughter Elizabeth.¹⁵

When Benjamin Smith Snr settled the business on Benjamin Jnr about 1800 nothing changed. Only after the elder Smith died in 1807 did his son invite the long-serving Worth into partnership, a quarter one.

Certainly this promotion must have improved the family's quality of life as well as status. In 1807 his portion of the firm's profits was £277-10-0. The next year it increased to £552-8-0. Although it dropped to £277-10-0 in 1809 it rose to £663-3-9 in 1810. His earnings for 1811 and 1812 were £480-10-5 and £459-1-6 respectively.¹⁶

William Worth senior's partnership with Benjamin Smith junior proved of short duration, for he died just five years into it, in January 1812. By that time William Worth II (who would be the father of Charles Frederick) had become a clerk in the Smith firm.

At the elder Worth's death the son may have succeeded on the same terms that his father had enjoyed.¹⁷ That William Worth II had

apparently become junior partner in Smith and Worth in his twenty-third year would seem to auger well for

Fig 7: Benjamin Smith II (1776-1858), senior partner in the Smith firm from c1800 until he was felled by a stroke in 1854. Picture courtesy the late Harry Bowden.



the young man. Moreover, his marriage to Mary Ann Quincey the daughter of Jeremiah, gent. of Threekingham, in 1816 was assuredly a good match.¹⁸

Regarding the firm, he was the beneficiary of his father's work routine and whatever good will he had garnered. Significantly, these first years of the new partnership were fruitful ones for the firm; the partners even built in 1814 a new law office (Figure 5) in the market place in Donington.

Worth junior shared personally in the firm's profitability: his quarter of the annual profits for 1813 was £618-16-4½; in 1814 it was £670; and averaged about £550 over the next three years. In 1818 Worth's share, despite his relinquishing the partnership, was £576-14-9.

The profits for 1819 were divided among Smith, Worth, and the new partner, Benjamin Wilkinson. The



Fig 8: Charles Frederick Worth. According to Needle, taken by Nadar, pseudonym for the famous French photographer Gaspard-Felix Tournachon (1820-1910). From *A Portrait of Bourne, Charles Frederick Worth*, CD-ROM and 'Portrait of Bourne' ©Rex Needle 2005.

ledger shows that Smith settled with Worth for £1,521-19-4½.¹⁹ William junior took up residence in Bourne.

Although Benjamin Smith II (Figure 7) proved far more amenable to advancing the Worths than his father had, the partnership with young Worth was a troubled one from the

outset. Smith recorded in his diary disapprovingly on 12 May 1813 that Worth had got drunk at the Folkingham fair, lost his money, and had gone off to Edinburgh. This episode necessitated his brother Henry's finding him and bringing him back.²⁰

By 1817 the senior partner was complaining incessantly about Worth's behaviour, notably his drinking. On 26 September he noted in his diary that Worth 'went off in drunken fit Monday... I must part with him.'²¹ In October the partnership, as advertised in the *London Gazette*, was dissolved. William Worth II would remain simply as clerk.²²

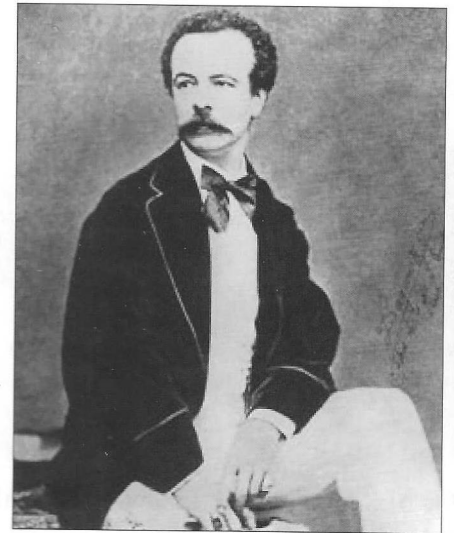
Worth worked in the firm for another year—apparently without a major altercation—but he did express a desire in November 1818 to leave Horbling. Smith, not surprisingly, did nothing to discourage him. He recorded succinctly in his diary: 'I wish he was gone.'²³ Similarly, he penned on 13 December: 'Note this morning from WW that he wished to leave me wch I am glad of & wish was done.'

But Worth did not go, at least not immediately. On 30 December he went to London 'after a situation'. Then he told Smith on 9 January that he should fix at Donington which, Smith added, 'I hope will not annoy me.'²⁴

No doubt Worth's proximity caused Smith to worry as much for business as for personal reasons. On 9 January Smith informed Worth that 'as he was going to Donington... he could not come again into my office.' On the 13th they 'had words' when Smith requested the 'key to his office'.

Only at the end of March, on the 24th, after Worth had sold his house in Horbling did matters quieten down. On 5 April Smith even called on the Cracrofts who had moved into Worth's former dwelling.

Twice, once in April and on another occasion in May, Smith men-



Above: Charles Frederick Worth as a young man in Paris.

tioned Worth. The first was of no consequence, but the second showed that Worth still rankled with him: he 'had some words with Buckberry censuring him for his deceitful conduct as to William Worth in Frank's [Smith's brother's] concern.'²⁵ Yet by the end of 1819 Worth no longer caused Smith anxiety: This year W. Worth left me & went to Donington & I have felt much more comfortable in my office since he went.²⁶

Worth practised in Donington for only a short time before relocating to Bourne. *Clarke's Law Directory*



Fig 9: Portrait of Charles Frederick Worth. From Needle, *A Portrait of Bourne, Charles Frederick Worth*, CD-ROM.



Fig 10: Charles Frederick Worth as a successful and prosperous businessman. From Rex Needle, *A Portrait of Bourne, Charles Frederick Worth CD-ROM*.

places him there in both 1826 and 1835, although the accuracy of the latter date may be questioned.²⁷ In any case Worth's law business in Bourne foundered.

That he elected in 1828 to return to the Smith firm to copy precedents as his father had done years earlier is indicative of the Worths' financial stress, especially after the birth of their fifth child and third son, Charles Frederick, in 1825. Evidently Worth swallowed his pride and contritely returned to menial clerk's work in the firm where he had once been a partner.

Benjamin Smith on the other hand apparently had no compunction about using his former colleague when it was advantageous to do so. Indeed, aside from his work as a copyist, Worth may even have conducted routine legal business for Smith.²⁸

On these occasions Worth the copyist worked not in a shed but in the firm's new law office opposite the Smith residence in Spring Lane, Horbling (Figure 8) or in the Donington office built early in his partnership with Smith.²⁹

According to Charles Frederick Worth's biographer the years 1835-

36 were critical ones for the dysfunctional family.³⁰

Reputedly William lost the family savings through speculation or gambling. No doubt too habitual drinking played in this debacle and his eventual desertion: he left his wife, Mary Quincy Worth, to care for young Charles Frederick.³¹ Apparently the lad harboured a loathing for his absentee father and no great fondness for his native Lincolnshire after such an embittered childhood.

In later years he rebuffed all attempts by his father at reconciliation. Whether Charles Frederick ever returned to Bourne is uncertain.³² As biographer Marly put it: 'Charles Frederick supported both his parents financially, but the father who abandoned wife and son in 1836 was never received by that son again and... died in 1878—unforgiven.'³³

Yet it seems possible that Charles Frederick Worth's unhappy childhood in rural Victorian Lincolnshire may have motivated him to 'make something of himself' with his energetic pursuit of *haute couture* in Second Empire France. His career is engaging moreover for the light that it casts on cross-Channel relations when differences between England and France were at times still fractious.

NOTES

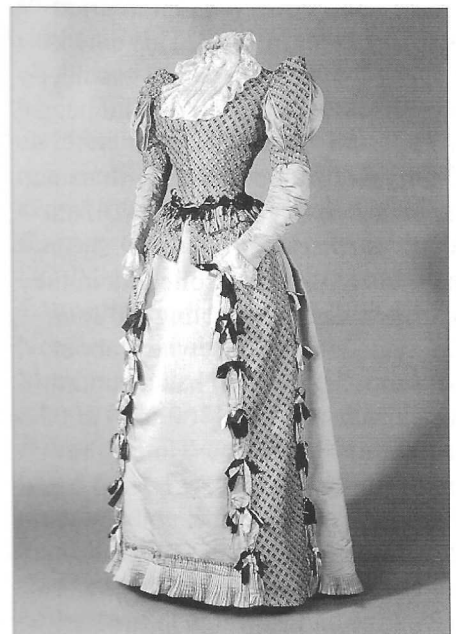
¹ The account of the Worth cape at Red Hall is that of Alice (Mrs Harry) Bowden, widow of the late partner in the B. Smith & Company firm (letter of 21 November 2005).

² Anna Rohleder, 'The Art of Collecting Vintage Clothes' on www.forbes.com/2001/08/22

³ The most important works treating Charles Frederick Worth are Diana de Marly, *Worth: Father of Haute Couture; second ed* (New York/London, 1990), and Edith Saunders, *The Age of Worth: Couturier to the Empress Eugenie* (London/New York, 1954). Philippe Perrot calls Marly's work 'adulatory and gossipy but valuable for its photo-

graphs of Worth dresses' (*Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century* [Princeton, NJ, 1994], note 53, p250). The Bourne historian, Rex Needle, has issued a CD ROM entitled *A Portrait of Bourne*, which contains a biography and several excellent portraits of Charles Frederick Worth. Needle also has a short biography of Worth in his web article *Prominent People Past and Present* [of Bourne].

Several museums have featured their Worth gown collection in special exhibits and in the process have issued catalogues. Reference to the Museum of the City of New York exhibit (early 1980s) may be found on its website, www.mcny.org/Collections/costume/worth/worth.htm



Above: 1880s Worth dress

The booklet published in conjunction with it, JoAnne Olian, *The House of Worth: The Gilded Age, 1860-1918*, is also available on the website. Worth dresses in the Metropolitan Museum in New York may be viewed on www.metmuseum.org

In 1962 the Brooklyn Museum also held a Worth exhibition; its accompanying commentary was Robert Riles, *The House of Worth*. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance rendered by Liz Larson of the Irene

Lewisohn Costume Library of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Phyllis Magidson, curator of the costume collection of The Museum of the City of New York.

⁴ Not only did Worth achieve fame in *grande* (later *haute couture*), but he readily borrowed marketing ideas from the ready-to-wear industry. In his shop at 7, rue de la Paix he realised his ambition, the creation of designs no longer unique but reproduced in limited numbers' (Perrot, *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie*, p184).

⁵ Marly, *Worth*, p1, which cites Worth's baptismal records of St Peter and St Paul, Bourne, Lincs. This is certainly a more reliable date than the casually mentioned 1826 date elsewhere.

⁶ Marly includes a useful Worth genealogy; however, according to this Worth family tree William married one Ann Tyler in 1788. This date is suspect, for William would have been over fifty when he married and began both a family and a career.

⁷ Marly does not cite the Smith name; rather she observes that the William Worths, father and son, were 'partners in a firm of solicitors in the nearby village of Horbling' (*Worth*, p2). I have written elsewhere about the Smith firm, which had a continuous existence from c1760 until 2002. See 'Partners and their Times: the Smith firm in History,' *Lincolnshire History & Archaeology*, vol. 37 (2002), 34-43 and Lawyer Professionalism in Rural England: Changes in Routine and Rewards in the Early Nineteenth Century, *Ibid* vol. 32 (1997), 25-39. In both these pieces I have touched upon the Smith-Worth partnership in larger context.

⁸ I have written about the Smith firm's London affairs in 'From Provincial to Professional: Attorney Robert Kelham (1717-1808) in Eighteenth Century London', *London Journal*, XXV, no.2 (2000), 96-109. Kelham was Smith's agent in London. See also my 'The Smith-Kelham-Langdale Nexus: Country Attorneys, Family Connections, and London Business in the Early Nine-

teenth Century' in *Lincolnshire History & Archaeology*, XXIX Vol. 29 (1994), 17-27.

⁹ This would have been at least 1788, when he first began recording precedents, but possibly earlier. Very likely Worth Snr continued this practice until he died; certainly the work was undertaken by William Worth II for the Smith firm into the late 1820s, even after he had severed all other business ties with the firm.

¹⁰ The precedents that Worth copied invariably had to do with copyhold property whether wills and trusts, deeds, promissory notes, notices to quit possession, conveyances, covenants and agreements, matters regarding stewardships, mortgages, coverture, dower, bastardy, letting of turnpike tolls, charges to a bailiff to give notice of a special court baron, and even Benjamin Smith's asserting his right as lord of Monks Hall in Gosberton to appoint a gamekeeper.

Besides depicting the agrarian community in which the Smith firm operated, these documents refer to Smith's clients and patrons—farmers, graziers, even merchants, and of course, gentlemen—south Lincolnshire power brokers like the Heathcotes, Tollers, Browns and Wynnes (LAO, Smith 11, Firm's Business, Worth's Precedents, 1-11a). LAO *Archivists' Report* 13 (1961-62), lists a curious account book in the Smith archive 'clerk probably W. Worth in account with Ben. Smith re clients money out at interest etc 1773-1806.' Although I have been unable to locate this document, its title suggests that Worth may have entered Smith's employ earlier than the late 1780s (p48).

¹¹ LAO, Smith 11, Firm's Business, William Worth, Articles of clerkship, 1793. For his part of the clerkship Worth committed himself to serve Smith for the usual five years and receive in return instruction 'in the business and practice of an attorney' and 50 guineas annually.

¹² For such details see LAO, Benjamin Smith Diary, 1794-1799. Specifically, these were Black Sluice Drainage, Cowley and Barnes charities, Monks Hall and Thurlby copyhold courts, the Folkingham Association for the Prosecution of Felons, and the South End Turnpike Commission—all of which the Smith firm had either responsibilities of clerkship or, in the case of copyholds, those of lordship. Commission meetings or court sessions took the Smiths and/or Worth usually to Donington and Folkingham and occasionally to Boston, Swineshead and Sleaford.

¹³ LAO *Archivists' Report* 13 (1961-62) refers to 'papers re partnership and/or qualifications: William Worth 1793-1808' (p48) presumably includes the 'solicitor's papers admission as attorney, etc. 1805-8.' Regarding these documents I found only William Worth's articles of clerkship (p47). Rex Needle states (*A Portrait of Bourne, William Worth, Sr. CD-ROM*) that Worth was an attorney before joining the Smith firm, but that could not have been the case considering the articles of clerkship and other aspects of the Smith firm's history.

¹⁴ There is no record of his salary, although he received 50 guineas in his formal induction as a clerk in 1793. Records in the Smith business archives show frequent references to Tylers in the Horbling area; however, I have been unable to make any precise connection. It should be noted that the mid-1790s were hard times for farming in south Lincolnshire. Benjamin Smith spoke of them in his diary, 1794-99. Cf also T. L. Richardson, 'The Agricultural Labourers Standard of Living in Lincolnshire, 1790-1840: Social Protest and Public Order,' *Agricultural History Review*, 41 (1993), I, 1-18.

¹⁵ According to Marly, Elizabeth married Seth Deane in 1808, and Henry, Elizabeth Ward in 1812. Both spouses' names are familiar ones in the Horbling area. See also *Horbling Registers* (Henry Peet, Liverpool and

London), 1895, pp161-174.

¹⁶ LAO, Smith 11/Firm's Business, Ledger A-B, Receipts/Payments, 1807-19. It is unclear whether the year 1813 is a reference to William Worth, Snr or Jnr. I have dealt with firm profits in 'The Smiths of Horbling: Country Attorneys', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 54 (1991), 156 and 'Lawyer Professionalism in Rural England', *Lincolnshire History & Archaeology*, Vol.32 (1997), p33.

¹⁷ Although Worth Jnr may have been taken into partnership upon his father's death, details of his apprenticeship and admission as an attorney are lacking. He had been clerking in the

Ledger A-B, Receipts/Payments, 1807-19, and Ledger A-B, Receipts/Payments, 1819, 1820, 1821. Again, the reader is referred to this author's 'The Smiths of Horbling', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 54 (1991), 156.

²⁰ Although the Smith diaries from 30 April 1799 to 29 June 1817 are missing, J. J. Cooper, the mid-twentieth century managing clerk, did have access to those diaries from 1811 and cited this incident in his sketch, *B. Smith & Co.* (typescript).

²¹ On 3 October he noted that he had sent Samuel Portman [a clerk?] instead of Worth to attend a meeting of the Black Sluice Drainage Association. Two days later, on the 5th, he declared to Worth 'my resolution respecting his recent drunken conduct.'

²² Smith's diary entry recording the dissolution was 7 October; the *London Gazette* carried the notice on 18 October.

²³ Smith's diary entries regarding Worth—from dissolution of the partnership until 18 November 1818—dealt mainly with routine matters. On 19 November 1817 Smith 'expostulated with WW on taking papers to his house' (LAO, Smith, Benjamin Smith Diary).

²⁴ In his diary summary of 1818 Smith, evidently aware that the London 'situation' had not materialised, recorded that 'W. Worth left me &... is going to Donington yet I am heartily glad to get rid of him.'

²⁵ LAO, Smith, Benjamin Smith Diary, 13 May 1819.

²⁶ *Ibid*, end of year summary, 1819.

²⁷ *Clarke's New Law List: Being a list of the Judges and Officers of the Different Courts of Justice... and a complete and Accurate List of Certified Attornies...* (London, 1826) p141 and (1835) p165. Worth's name appeared in William White's *Directory for 1826*, but not the one for 1842.

²⁸ Three references to Worth appear in Smith's diary, one in 1826 [11

August] and two in 1831 [2 and 8 June]. Although inconsequential in content, they do suggest by the wording 'called on', 'saw' and 'William Worth here' that the two did business with one another. (LAO, Smith, Benjamin Smith Diary).

²⁹ LAO, Smith 11/Firm's Business, Precedent Books, 1788-1828.

³⁰ Diana de Marly, *Worth*, pp2-3.

³¹ *Ibid*. About the time of his father's abandoning his family, the eldest son, William III, began his legal apprenticeship [*ibid* p2]. Rex Needle (*A Portrait of Bourne, Charles Frederick Worth, CD-ROM*) again is at odds with Marly: for he fails to mention both a William (b1819) and a Sarah (b1821). Marly and Needle are in agreement, however, that there was a daughter Harriet (b1821) and a son Charles (b1824) who did not survive.

Although Mary was left destitute when William deserted her and the children, she had Billingborough relatives who hired her as a housekeeper (Marly, *Worth* p3 and Needle, *Bourne, Charles Frederick Worth CD-ROM*).

³² Worth biographers, Marly and Needle, are in disagreement here. Mary maintains that Charles Frederick never returned to Bourne (Marly, *Worth* p205); however, Needle believes that he returned 'several times' and enjoyed visiting with boyhood friends (Needle, *Bourne, Charles Frederick Worth, 'Brief Encounters' CD-ROM*).

³³ Marly, *Worth* p205. Marly tells how Worth invited his mother to stay for long periods at his home in Suresnes, France. He even had his Lincolnshire relatives come as well. He was especially adoring of his own family, in ways that he himself had not experienced from his own father. Needle maintains that William Worth resided in London before returning to Horbling in the 1840s and finally by 1860 taking up residence one last time in Bourne (Needle, *Bourne, Charles Frederick Worth, CD-ROM*).



Above: Worth evening dress 1887

firm from probably 1807 at presumably the 50 guineas annual rate (*LAO Archivists' Report* 13, (1961-2) p47).

Rex Needle appears to suggest (Needle, *Bourne, William Worth, CD-ROM*) that he was never a partner; however, he clearly was one when the partnership was dissolved in 1817 and he was demoted to clerk. He did, moreover, continue receiving his deceased father's one quarter partnership remuneration in 1812 and in subsequent years.

¹⁸ Marly's genealogy accounts for five children from this union: William III (b1819), Harriet (b1821), Sarah (b1822), Charles (b1824) and Charles Frederick (1825-95).

¹⁹ LAO, Smith 11/Firm's Business